

The Ballad of Birdsland

The Dandenong Ranges Music Council ran a unique community music event called The Ballad of Birdsland in May this year. This musical project explored environmental issues to celebrate the Dandenong Ranges and Yarra Valley. John Shortis, the composer, and Bev McAlister, the Coordinator of the Dandenong Ranges Music Council, tell the story of the project from their different perspectives.

John's story

In 1983-4 I was composer-in-residence in Campbelltown NSW, working in schools and community for a year full-time. One of the locals who joined in almost everything I did in that year was a bright enthusiastic 8-year old called Catherine Threlfall.

Seventeen years later I get a call from Bev McAlister at Dandenong Ranges Music Council. She tells me that this very same Catherine is now working in community music in the region, inspired, she says, by her involvement in my project way back then. Not only that, but she's told Bev, 'you've got to find John Shortis to direct that Ballad of Birdsland project you've been talking about.'

Well, she found me, and next thing I know I'm navigating my way through the winding forested roads of Sherbrooke Forest, looking for Bev's house.

My brief was to involve a number of groups, mostly from primary schools, in the creation of original music to celebrate the environment of the district, with the Birdsland reserve being the focal point. The end-product would be a performance in Birdsland, featuring all those who made up the music with me.

There would be about four visits with each group.

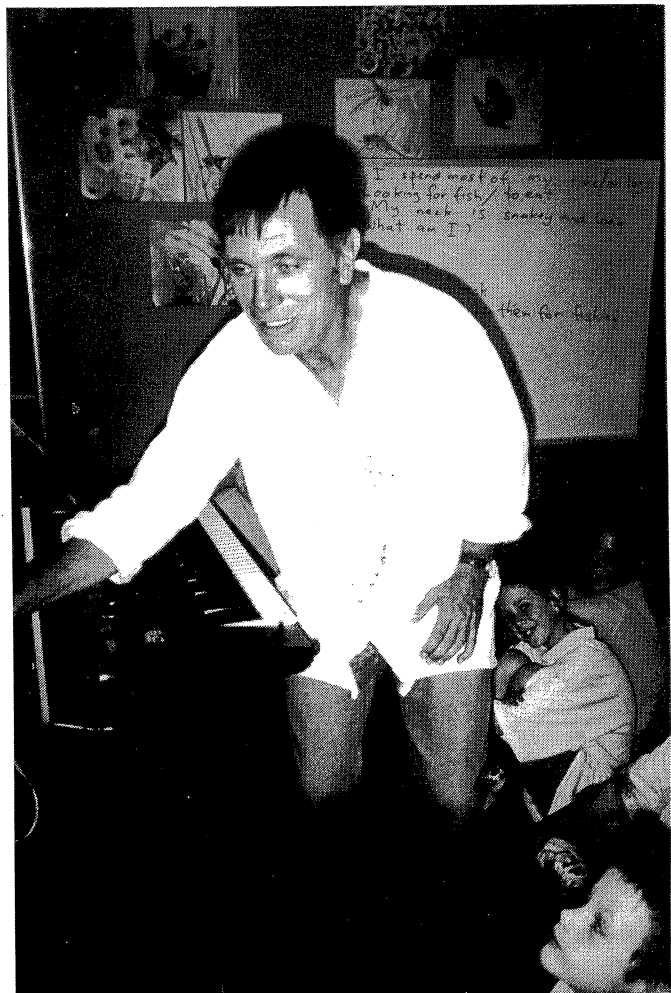
Early in the piece I met with some local residents who were active in the fight for Birdsland, and other environmental battles. I taped the conversation, and asked them if they minded me using their words in the performance. I filed the tape away, and began to formulate ideas for song topics.

In the first round of visits, I presented each group with an aspect of the theme, and off we went. My approach in projects like this is to get all lyrics and melodies, and some of the arrangement, from the participants in the workshops. Then I complete the arrangement at home. In this case I decided to use computer sequences as the backings for all the songs, with recorded voices as back-up to live voices as the performance was going to be outdoors.

Although I use a number of methods to encourage the invention of group songs, my main method is this- after a brainstorm of ideas, one-liners, phrases, useful words and the like I ask them to tell me again about the idea we're working on. Whatever one of them says first is the first line of the song. I then continue this process, steering the patterns of lines away from the obvious, and not being obsessed with rhymes. Then I say 'what's the song about in a word or two?' The answer to that question becomes the lyrics of the chorus.

Next is the tune. I pick up the guitar, and say 'could someone sing me the first line'. The response to this request can be anything from stunned silence to a symphony of possibilities, but no matter what, something always emerges. I went away from most of the first sessions with the basis of the song.

Over the next two visits I got extra verses, bridge sections where necessary, rewrites of any dubious bits, and arrangement ideas. I set up the computer/synthesiser with each group and got the participants to play in drum ideas,



John Shortis on the job, [Photo: Kate Bilson]



Ballad of Birdsland. [Photo: Aniko Heart Gerrish]

sometimes melodic bits and pieces. For instance at one school one of the kids was playing a boogie-woogie piece on the piano. I got her to play the bass line into the computer and that became the basis to one of the sections of their song. At another the drum feel they came up with set the mood for the whole arrangement.

The final arrangements I did at home, and sent a practice tape back. In my final visit I recorded the voices onto my ancient 4-track, mixed them on to CD in a studio, with the voices in one channel and the backing in the other, allowing for on-the-spot blending of the recorded and live voices.

One very live moment was a drumming segment which I devised in two sessions with the drum tutors, setting up a story of conflict between the parties in the environmental debate. Another was a classical composition by a local resident who was a student at the VCA.

To create the final script I went back to the tape I'd made in the first week when I recorded an initial conversation. I picked out the relevant bits, verbatim, and worked them into the songs. The day of the performance it snowed, hailed and poured, so the outdoor performance idea went down the gurgler. By default the costumes became scarves, jumpers and gloves, but somehow it seemed right in a piece about the environment. Nature was well represented that day, but the strength of the

music, the relevance of the words and the commitment of those hundreds of songwriters and performers rose above the weather.

In a way this process began in 1983, with an enthusiastic 8-year-old. Community music at work.

Bev's Story

Five months after the completion of the Ballad of Birdsland project I find myself busy organising 80 children to perform the Ballad of Birdsland Theme Song and the Platypus Song for the Governor of Victoria at the Birdsland Environmental Education Centre for a Shire of Yarra Ranges community reception.

It is interesting to measure the community ownership of the text and music and the number of times the various works have been performed again and again. Three songs were performed at the lighting of the Olympic Cauldron in Healesville, by the Yarra Ranges Children's Choir and the Yarra Valley Singers. Emerald Primary School performed the Puffing Billy Song at the Olympic Torch Ceremony at Emerald. Children from Belgrave South Primary School have performed their song and dance, the Platypus Song, as part of their cultural tour performances in Japan. The music and text are well established in the repertoire of performing ensembles.

The success of a composer residency

rests squarely with the administrative, artistic and organisational support that the host organisation provides to the artists. Dandenong Ranges Music Council values artists highly for their creativity and for their ability to be responsive to community needs.

Composer John Shortis, assistant Jeannie Marsh, visual artist Rebecca Foster, choreographer Rosemary Sims, and drummers Chris Lesser and John Ackland, were a formidable team and worked very professionally in a community context. Of huge significance was their ability to work in partnership with resident professional artists and a cast of 300 adults and children.

It is really interesting to review the text, the symbols, issues, hopes, memories and messages that the composer captured in the workshops. The powerful links to the environment and the sense of place, sounds and images which were then transformed into visual art and dance. The "drum battle" representing the struggle to save the Dandenong Ranges was impressive and meaningful.

There were many challenges for me as the project manager. I needed to create opportunities for the many performing ensembles, conservation groups and individuals to enable them to tell their stories to develop the text and music. Then to establish rehearsal schedules, while the art works were

being interpreted and the dance created. Meanwhile there were all the logistics of outdoor performances, including an evacuation plan for Melbourne Water, who is responsible for Birdsland Reserve, which is actually a retarding basin. A wet weather plan was developed and, as if on cue, the heavens opened days before the show requiring Plan B to be implemented.

Performance day, 28 May, was the coldest May day on record. Snow, hail, sleet, rain in abundance! Given that there is no performing arts space in our region large enough for performance and audience of this scale, and particularly because the community gets very upset when performances are taken "off the mountain", we found a remarkable space at the Belgrave Heights Convention Centre.

Imagine gently sloping wood-chip covered ground, 1500 miscellaneous seats, a corrugated iron roof, large window openings all around covered by canvas, large stage, and huge timber beams, which were just great to suspend huge colourful birds created by Rebecca and the children. Add 300 cast, two performances, audience of 1000, rugs, thermoses, lighting and sound, a sense of humour, and a large dose of goodwill and we had a success. Even the thunder claps came at an appropriate time during one song!

Arts Victoria, the Community Cultural Development Fund of the Australia Council were the funding partners and Dandenong Ranges Music Council warmly acknowledges their courage and confidence in supporting this project. The Shire of Yarra Ranges provided in-kind support while Melbourne Water provided cash and in-kind. We are very grateful for this input.

It would be fair to say that all of the professional artists were appreciated and valued for their ability to collaborate with the wider community while pushing artistic boundaries. John Shortis is a master in his field. Dandenong Ranges Music Council has commissioned him again to work on the Centenary of Federation project, along with Stephen Leek, Brian Hogg and Mark Puddy.

The Ballad of Birdsland project demonstrates that community music programs can provide a wealth of stirring and creative arts experiences and really contribute to community cultural development. ☺

Indent

Rock for youth

MusicNSW is a non-profit organisation that was established in 1998 to represent the contemporary music industry in NSW. This year it has conducted an indigenous music project called Whichway, partnered with Gadigal to give emerging indigenous artists skills development and practical experience, and All Hands on Dex, a series of women's DJ workshops in regional areas with the cream of Sydney's women DJs.

The third project for Music NSW, Indent, was launched in October by Premier Bob Carr with a \$750,000 commitment to youth entertainment in NSW over the next three years.

Indent will see 60, all ages events, staged around the state in the first year - 40 in regional areas and 20 in metropolitan, plus a number of one off events.

The events will be driven by young people who will form a committee within their community and develop a partnership with a local support organisation to stage four events in twelve months. Assistance will also be available for a number of one off events.

The Indent strategy was developed in consultation with young people to best assess their needs. The first Indent Forum was conducted in Sydney last year and brought 120 youth entertainment experts together from a range of diverse backgrounds to exchange information.

As Mark from Nybodia Shire said at last year's forum, "It's really hard for young people to get a gig happening, to find the right door to walk through, to get access to the facilities and the resources to do that, to have the confidence to come forward in their community..."

As well as providing financial assistance, Indent will conduct workshops in marketing and promotion and all aspects of event production, and cre-

ate a network of like-minded people to share information and ideas.

The Indent Forum will be an annual event and in 2001 will also incorporate the inaugural Indent Awards night.

Speaking about Indent, Carr said "This is a terrific program by MusicNSW because it provides all the training and skills required to mount a successful local entertainment event...organised by young people for young people, with job opportunities for local musicians and DJs."

Anyone with an interest in Indent can join by emailing their name and contact details to inbox@indent.net.au. Detailed information about Indent including the committee kit and application forms can be downloaded from the website at www.indent.net.au. Alternatively questions can be directed to Indent coordinator Andy Kelly at Music NSW (02) 9247 7540. ☺

Triumphs

Country Arts SA has announced funding for Regional Arts Events, including \$5,000 to the **Centenary of Federation Choir** in Melbourne for a professional composer/musician to write works for performance by local musical groups, and \$8,000 to **Riverland Greek Festival 2001** for a cross-cultural project involving dance, music and drama.

The Cyrenes — Canberra Choir of Women, featured in past issues of Music Alive, are the Art and Culture ACT state winner of the National Australia Bank's National CommunityLink Awards. The Country Music Club of Boynup Brook won in WA. Congratulations! ☺