

The Evolution of 'Bush Dance' part 4 - The Revivalist Bush Band & Mould



In the last two sections the development of the dances in the revived bush dance scene was outlined as well as a choice of some of the tunes. Here we look at the origins of the bush band and their contemporary instrumentation.

The (Heathcote) Bushwhackers Band had initiated the formation of the Bush Music Club in Sydney in 1954 and as variety between the performances of songs they introduced some 'folk dances' for light relief, things like the Bridge of Athlone, Serbian Kolo and so on. Also in the Primary School scene and I remember this first hand (Bendigo Vic.) - Physical Education teachers used a Queensland Education Department publication to teach folk dancing on rainy days. The dances included Virginia Reel, Circassian Circle part 2, Picking up

Paw Paws and a four couple long set danced to Waltzing Matilda.



Image courtesy *State Library of South Australia. Point Pass Collection B46694* The Bush Band at Point Pass circa 1910:
L-r. sitting: Arthur Michalk; Garrie Michalk; Herb Obst; Eddie Michalk; Arthur Handke. Standing: Adolph Kost

Coupled with the introduction of British and European folk dances by the National Fitness movement at the time (Lott is Dodd, Strip the Willow etc.) an association with the Bush Music Club and Bushwhackers Band developed and John Meredith felt this is how the term Bush Dance may have evolved. Also his band was involved with the 1953 Reedy River play when it moved from Melbourne to Sydney in the December and the ‘bushband’ outfit of old clothes (later consolidating to moleskins, waistcoat, fob watch and chain), imitation beard and old bush hat along with the instrumentation of bush bass (tea chest bass), lagerphone, guitar and squeezebox had by 1954 been taken up to set the bush band cast.

In the past musicians in the bush usually wore their Sunday best and only played push pull squeezeboxes and fiddles, sometimes whistle, mouth organ, piano or even cornet or other brass instrument, as illustrated with the Point Pass ensemble pictured on page 1.



Bushwhackers Band Sydney in the *Reedy River* play Dec.1953 to 1954.

Photo courtesy of Rob Willis – LR Chris Kempster, Brian Loughlin, John Meredith and Jack Barrie – the originals!!!! What a contrast to the Point Pass Bush Musicians.

The lagerphone was introduced to the Bushwhackers by John Meredith after his brother Claude modelled one on an instrument entered in a talent quest by a rabbit poisoner at Holbrook. Likewise Merro introduced the tea chest bass after a friend saw one played at the Sydney wharf and drew a sketch of the instrument.



South Coast Bush Band circa 1954. Photograph courtesy Rob Willis.

LR – Norm Mitchell, Merv Haberly, Jack Wright, Jeanette Cain, Wally Watt, Lola Troy (Wright) and Jack Chalmers.

Following the success of Reedy River articles on how to make lagerphones and tea chest basses soon appeared in popular magazines throughout the nation and numerous bush bands spawned in the path of the Bushwhackers. The Bush Music Club's 'Singabout' journal also featured write-ups on things like "How to Rattle Your Bones" i.e. learning to play the bones as well as collected bush songs and dance tunes with some folk dance instructions. Genuine pioneer performers of 'bush song and music' were

also profiled in this field - icons such as Duke Tritton, Sally Sloan and Fred Holland. This in turn had led to the publication in 1967 of *Folk Songs of Australia* by John Meredith and Hugh Anderson.

The emergence of the tea chest or bush bass and lagerphone was not necessarily new; there'd been an occasional instrument before its mass appearance following the Bushwhackers. These instruments had been known in ship's skiffle groups or the earlier foo foo bands; also the late Stewart Robinson of St. Arnaud spoke of black faced minstrel bands in the 1930s using tea chest basses with the string made from tennis racket gut and the pole from window blinds. Campbell Holmes also of the Wedderburn Oldtimers recalled a lagerphone type instrument in use in a band during World War Two when he was stationed at Darwin.

Reedy River is likely the source of the emergence of the 'bush band' and from that 'bush dance', although the latter perhaps not directly. The play was first presented in Melbourne in 1953 and Jim Buchanan was a key 'performer' in the cast. Brian Loughlin and Jim were the lagerphone players with the Sydney Bushwhackers, swapping over between these and other instruments. Jim Buchanan made the point the Bushwhackers introduced the serrated stick to the lagerphone which added a rhythmic nuance previously unknown with the forerunner instruments such as the Jolly Jingler and the German Teufelsgeige or Stumpf Fiddle.



Picture by courtesy of Shirley Pierce of Bendigo and reproduced from *Collector's Choice* vol 3 p84.

A Miner's Highland Band at Costerfield Vic. 1925. On the far right is a 'Johnny Jingler' type instrument. The kettle would have stones in it to rattle in time while striking the ground when marching. It also appears to have some added percussion on the upper section of the pole.



Mehner's Orchestra, Wedderburn Vic. circa 1910, courtesy Campbell Holmes and the Wedderburn Historical Society. Note the German Stumpf Fiddle far right (Teufelsgeige), a type of equivalent of the French Johnny Jingler.



Photograph left courtesy Rob Willis. **John Meredith** demonstrating the original style **Bushwhacker Lagerphone**. Note the serrated stick, a Bushwhacker introduction to improve rhythmic effects.

Reedy River had a piano in the pit and a simple supportive orchestra including clarinet, violin, trombone & drums in the original 1953 production and then at Sydney the Bushwhackers band joined the cast. When Rob Willis in a 1989 interview with Jim Buchanan asked, 'what was the name of the Melbourne bushwhacker's style band in 1955?' - he replied, we didn't have a name; it was simply 'The Bushband' and in 1956 took the name Billabong. Jim Buchanan provided details of the orchestra in the original 1953 play as well as the bushwhacker type bands from 1954 and 55.

The Unity Dancers in Melbourne presented some dances in Reedy River and the *Old Bush Barn Quadrille* was especially choreographed and arranged as distinct from normal quadrilles in that nobody in the 'lead-up' had their backs to audience. It is noted the Unity Dancers also performed at Williamstown in relation to Communist Party delegates: -

Williamston Chronicle Friday 15 May 1953 p2

"Unity Dance Group – New Theatre – Unity Singers Programme of Dances and excerpts from Reedy River [The outstanding Australian Musical Play] Newport Library Hall, Mason St. Friday May 15 at 8pm. This function is organized by the Williamstown branch of the Communist Party to assist the sending of delegates from Reedy River cast to the World Youth Festival at Bucharest. Supper. Folk Dancing Collection All Welcome."



Left. Unity Dancers early 1950s, Rae Dowdle & Shirley Andrews back row 2nd & 3rd LR. Reprinted from *Take Your Partners* by Shirley Andrews. Margaret Walker (another key folk dance organiser) is also possibly pictured.

After Sydney, Reedy River was then performed in Adelaide and Brisbane in 1955 as well as returning to Melbourne. Another Bushwhacker styled group the South Coast Bush Band (NSW) formed in 1954 as a direct result of seeing the Bushwhackers in the play. Subsequently Frank Nickels and Joy Durst had formed the Melbourne styled Bushwhacker's Band to provide the appropriate music after consultation with Sydney.

The Victorian Bush Music Club didn't form in Melbourne till a few years later in 1959 - although the Folklore Society of Victoria which later merged with the VBMC had been in

existence since 1955. Various musicians shifted between these groups and other bands such as Barcoo and 'Barcoo Rot' and continued to perform in those early years. Some of these performances with Billabong were at Emu Bottom Homestead. Thus by the 1960s bush type dances were being held in Melbourne and Sydney under the 'folk dance' umbrella, to music by a bush band.

(Further historical photographs follow on pages 7 and 8)



VFMC Bush Band at Fitzroy Gardens Melbourne Aust. Day circa 1971, photo courtesy Andy Orr.

LR John Lahey, Andy Orr, Frank Nickels, Shirley Andrews, Ian Marks, Geoff Upson, Noel Nickels.



Barcoo Rot at Emu Bottom Homestead circa 1976

LR Noel Nickels, Ian Marks, Andy Orr, George Levick, Jim Buchanan