

Evolution of 'Bush Dance' part 5 - The Nariel Factor and Consolidation of Upbeat Seventies Bush Bands and Bush Dance

by Peter Ellis



In 1962 members of the Victorian Bush Music Club and the Folklore Society of Victoria (later disbanding and handing its archives over to the VBMC) as a result of collecting folksongs at Benambra near Omeo had been referred to the Klippel family as a source of information for the collection of traditional old time dances and music 'over the Gibb' (mountain range separating Gippsland from NE Vic.) at Nariel near Corryong in NE Victoria.



*Con Klippel (1960s),
photograph courtesy Keith
Klippel*

The result was an exchange of information, dances, tunes and songs between those from the city organisations attempting to foster an Australian tradition which included the bush type dances and tunes, and that which had survived in the 'real tradition', if I can use that term, by the rural bush communities. In this regard they couldn't have been introduced to a better couple than Mr and Mrs Con & Beat Klippel.

The Corryong Courier Thursday January 31 1963 p3 'Old-Timers Note'

"Australian Bush Music Club and Folk Lore Society of Victoria to visit Corryong to revive and preserve old-time dances and music, the above Clubs will visit here during the long week-end (April 23-25 –sic) to learn further of this district's ability to give first hand information regarding Old Time dances and music.*

It is understood many car loads will make the journey from Melbourne which will include musicians, dancers, recorders and reporters. The object is to gipe and gain information to and from the people of this district in old time dances.

It is hoped a good number of local musicians and old time dancers will attend, and be at a practice night on Monday next in the Presbyterian Hall.

Information can be obtained from Mrs. Mary Lloyd or Mr. Con Klippel. The "Big Night" is on 23rd April, but practice on Monday next."

* (April was a typographical mistake, it was February, a special long weekend owing to a visit by the Queen to Melbourne. A correction made in the next issue of the Courier.)

Musicians and dancers indeed gathered from Corryong, Colac Colac, Towong, Nariel, Biggara, Thougla, Walwa, Lucyvale, Berringama, Khancoban and Mitta Mitta to interact with the Melbourne visitors. It catalysed the establishment of Victoria's first folk festival, the second in Australia and the longest continuous running Australian folk festival, celebrating 50 years recently. As there was a time when two festivals were held annually, the original on the March long weekend and then again over Christmas-New Year which survives today, it's actually over 70 festivals. The Nariel Hall had been built after World War 2 as a recreational venue, particularly for the workmen of the timber industry at the nearby mill. Old time dances were revived there and prior to that dances were held in the district schools although Thougla had the luxury of a hall as early as the 1920s and so dances were regularly held there.



Above L. The Nariel School closed in 1954 and was later moved into Corryong. Dances were held in little country schools all over Australia until Public Halls were built. Photograph courtesy Maureen Simpson

Above R. The Nariel Hall was built after World War 2. Photo by P. Ellis



Old Time Folk Festival Dance in Nariel Hall 1980s

When the district musicians and dancers combined as a result of the Melbourne folk club visitors the locals taught dances including First Set and Lancers, Manchester Galop, Berlin Polka, Princess Polka, Uncle Ev's Barn Dance, Varsoviana, Polka Mazurka and many of the popular old time repertoire of dances. Their programmes included other sets such as Exion, Caledonian and Fitzroy quadrilles. MC Charlie Fardon had an extensive knowledge of these sets including the older Circassian Circle. Also Kate Masterman now in her nineties, daughter of Nariel district violinist Mrs McNamara, told me she remembered dancing the Circassian Circle as well as a version of the Stockyards that concluded with the musicians converting for a 'waltz the hall' as the finali. One of her mother's set tunes was Merrily Danced the Quaker's Wife (simple English & Scottish version, not the Irish folk scene tune).

The Upper Murray Old Time Dance Band (later becoming Con Klippel's OTDB) played the tunes and the visitors hosted a concert on the Nariel Green and introduced folk songs, recitations and 'bush type' dances such as Galopede.

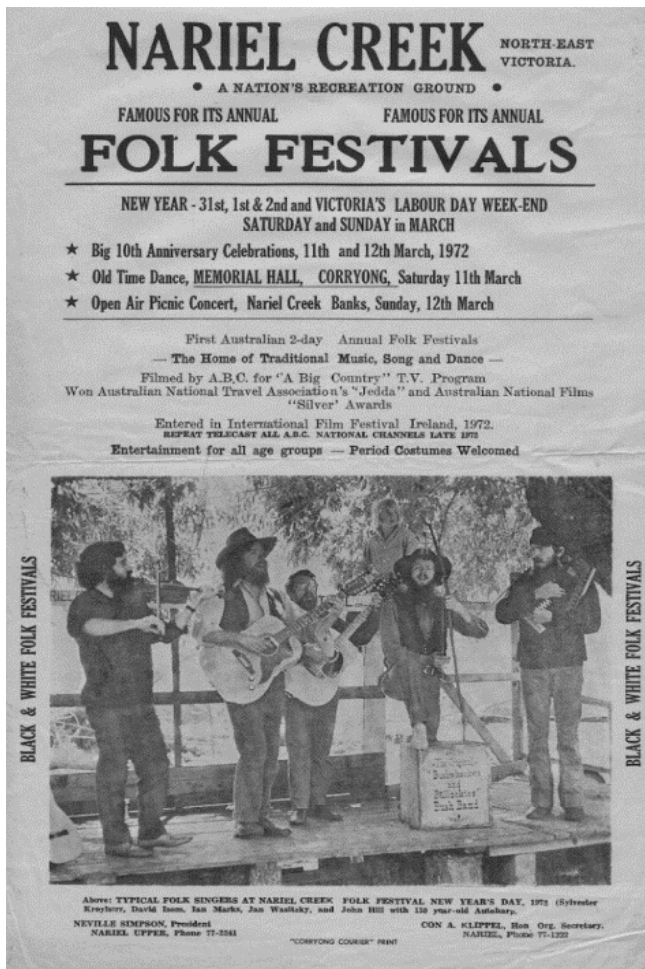


Correlating with this an Old Time Dance Club formed initially based at Towong - later becoming the

Shirley Andrews and Noel Nickels dancing a Waves of Tory, Illustration courtesy Marion Nickels & David Thiessen.
Late sixties or early seventies.

Charlie Ordish Memorial OTDC in Corryong. The annual Folklore concerts that resulted provided a platform for new groups such as the Original Bushwackers and Bullockies Band from Melbourne. This was in 1972 following the ABC presentation of 'A Big Country' on Television of the previous year and which caused a visitor explosion from a hundred or so to over two thousand. In that year they only had a donkey engine running on the green with a couple of lights causing some people during dances to stumble into the creek. There were only two toilets. Although the dances and concerts were advertised as

old time and folklore, it is likely that again the association of the dances, particularly the folk style variety and the 'bush bands' nurtured or fostered the concept of contemporary 'bush dance'.



Whilst an exchange and development of traditions occurred between Nariel and the Bush Music and

Left. The Bushwackers and Original Bullockies, Nariel 1972, Illustration courtesy Beat Klippel

Folklore Societies in Melbourne the evolution of folk gatherings also occurred in the entertainment and pub scene. When Al Musgrove interviewed Dave Brannigan about how this started in the 60s it revolved around Frank Traynor's Jazz and Folk Club in a hotel premise in Melbourne. The venue had many small rooms and you could commute from one to the other to follow the singer or musician of your choice as there was a non-restricted mix and interchange of jazz, blues, folk, sometimes including sea shanties and the odd bush song. Some of the key performers on the folk side included Martin Wyndham-Read, Brian Mooney, Graham Squance, David Lumsden, Danny Spooner,

Graham Dodsworth and Glen Tomasetti. At this time Dave Brannigan, Chris Wendt, Tony Hunt and John Fitzgerald were involved in sessions and occasional gigs that eventuated in the formation of a Colonials bush band and produced an excellent LP of music – 'Waltzing Matilda'. They performed at different venues including coffee lounges and the Eureka Stockade Tavern. Subtle influences on their music came from the likes of the Dubliners from overseas, Declan Affley in Sydney and the songs of Harry Robertson. They also joined in sessions at the Dan O'Connell Hotel where Foggarty's had Saturday afternoon of mainly English orientated singing in harmony. Young Irishmen from overseas were attracted to this venue and the repertoire gradually changed to a more Irish component.

The Bushwackers formed as a result of one long afternoon session at the South Morang Pub, then taking off through the La Trobe Uni Folk Club.

Dave made the point that with the Colonials there was a desire to be proud of their Australianness and to look in keeping with the era from where the songs had derived, from that golden age before World War 1 and where the lyrics were all about the Bushmen – shearers, bushwhackers, drovers and so on. They

bought the finest made moleskins, long leather boots and the best vests. Over the same period of time it was just as active in NSW and an LP in 1970 of mainly bush songs – ‘From Glenrowan to the Gulf’ - was released by the ‘Wild Colonial Boys’ (formed 1968) and in which Jacko Kevans and Bob McInnis were key performers. The Bush Music Club in Sydney had always maintained good performance of Australian songs and collected dance tunes as well as having original players from the bush like Clem O’Neal.

I can’t yet determine when or who introduced the ‘bush dance’ term, but know that the Cobbers were certainly conducting dances as bush dance during the seventies. When the National Library’s online digitised newspapers include the seventies and eighties, all will be revealed I’m sure.

John Meredith had felt it was through the association with the Bush Music Clubs and Rob Willis relates the following story:-

“I have often told the tale of being at an early festival in Newcastle with John Meredith and Alan Scott watching a very energetic bush dance. One leant over to the other and said “we bloody created this” with a wry smile (both had wry smiles).”



Mulga Bill's Bicycle Band 1975. LR Barry Golding, Chris Bettel, Geoff O'Connell, John Langmead, Elizabeth Eager, Clive Willman (kneeling), Tony Britz

There is a band, often perceived as a bush band and certainly in the style and as it formed one year earlier in 1970 and therefore just ahead of the Melbourne Bushwackers. It was certainly co-existent with the Bushwackers and Cobbers throughout the early and mid-1970s and is **Mulga Bill's Bicycle Band**. That name in itself has the bush band connotation. Mulga Bill travelled the breadth of Australia with outstanding performances of bush song and recitations. They did include dance to receptive audiences and this was a general mix of old time such as Pride of Erin, Varsoviana, Highland Schottische and Maxina and a few folk dances such as Haymaker's Jig, Brown Jug Polka and Virginia Reel. Twice at Eaglehawk Town Hall I recall impromptu with mobs of people galloping up and down the aisles



Mulga Bill's Bicycle Band was 'big' in the 1970s and the concert crowd at Sunbury Rock Festival 1973 typifies the numbers that Bush Bands attracted in this era.

Clive Willman, sound mixer and performer with Mulga Bill's Bicycle Band says they were a very important group in promoting Australian folk music and dance to a wide audience in the early 70s.

"The extensive touring and lots of television work reached lots of ordinary people in Australia. The ABC film on MBBB on the Big Country series was pivotal in this. It was shot in 1973 and went to air I think early 1974 - immediately we noticed the difference that type of exposure gives you.

Dance was a very important component of their performances. MBBB did 3 main types of performances. 1. Concerts were the main format when touring and during each concert it was

common to demonstrate the Varsoviana or Maxina etc. In some concerts we would clear the chairs in the last 30 min or so and transform the concert into a dance. 2. School shows - again dances were demonstrated to kids. 3. Private functions such as weddings, footy club socials etc. In these functions dance was central to the night. For a period we held monthly dances at the Horticultural Hall in Victoria Pde Melbourne - these were entirely dance based events. When we represented Australia in the opening ceremony of the 1974 World Cup Soccer Finals we even did a little dance number during one of the instrumentals. A bit weird bringing the Polka back to Germany! So in summary I think dance was quite important to the group.”

The **Cobbers Bonanza Bush Band** forming late 1960s were conducting extremely popular bushdances in Melbourne through the seventies and in the beginning Jim Buchanan was their caller. Rob Willis in sourcing the history of Cobbers through an interview with John Armstrong makes the following comments:-

“The Cobbers had a large influence on us when we formed our ‘bush band’, ‘Blackridge’ (the original name of Forbes) in the 1970s. They seemed more traditional to our ears and this was the sound we were after. I remember attending a New Year’s concert in the forecourt of the Sydney Opera House where Cobbers were playing and being most impressed.

In later years I managed to interview many of the early members of Cobbers for our NLA collection and gleaned the following information from John Armstrong, one of the founders of the band.

The name of the band was changed from Cobblers to Cobbers in 1972 – they had been playing quite a few gigs before the name change and appeared on the television show New Faces where they came second. Even in their previous guises before Cobbers the members of the band had sought Australian material and had been influenced by Mulga Bill’s Bicycle Band but retained their individuality.

After turning professional the band had a strong work ethic and toured extensively both in Australia and overseas and had a great rapport with their audiences. Indeed John Armstrong made the comment that they considered the audience as part of the band.

The band can be summed up by a comment that was once made to John. “You never tried to be anything else but Cobbers” ”



Cobbers Bush Band. Back row John Armstrong, Chris Armstrong. Front row Christy Cooney, Ron Howard 1980. Illustration courtesy John Armstrong

The new **Bushwackers Band** (without the h – *The Original Bushwackers & Bullockies Band*) had formed in Melbourne in 1971. Shirley Andrews related to me these new ‘bushwackers’ had individually been either members or attendants of the Bush Music Club or Victorian Folk Music Club (VFMC). Jan Wositzky clarified this point by saying

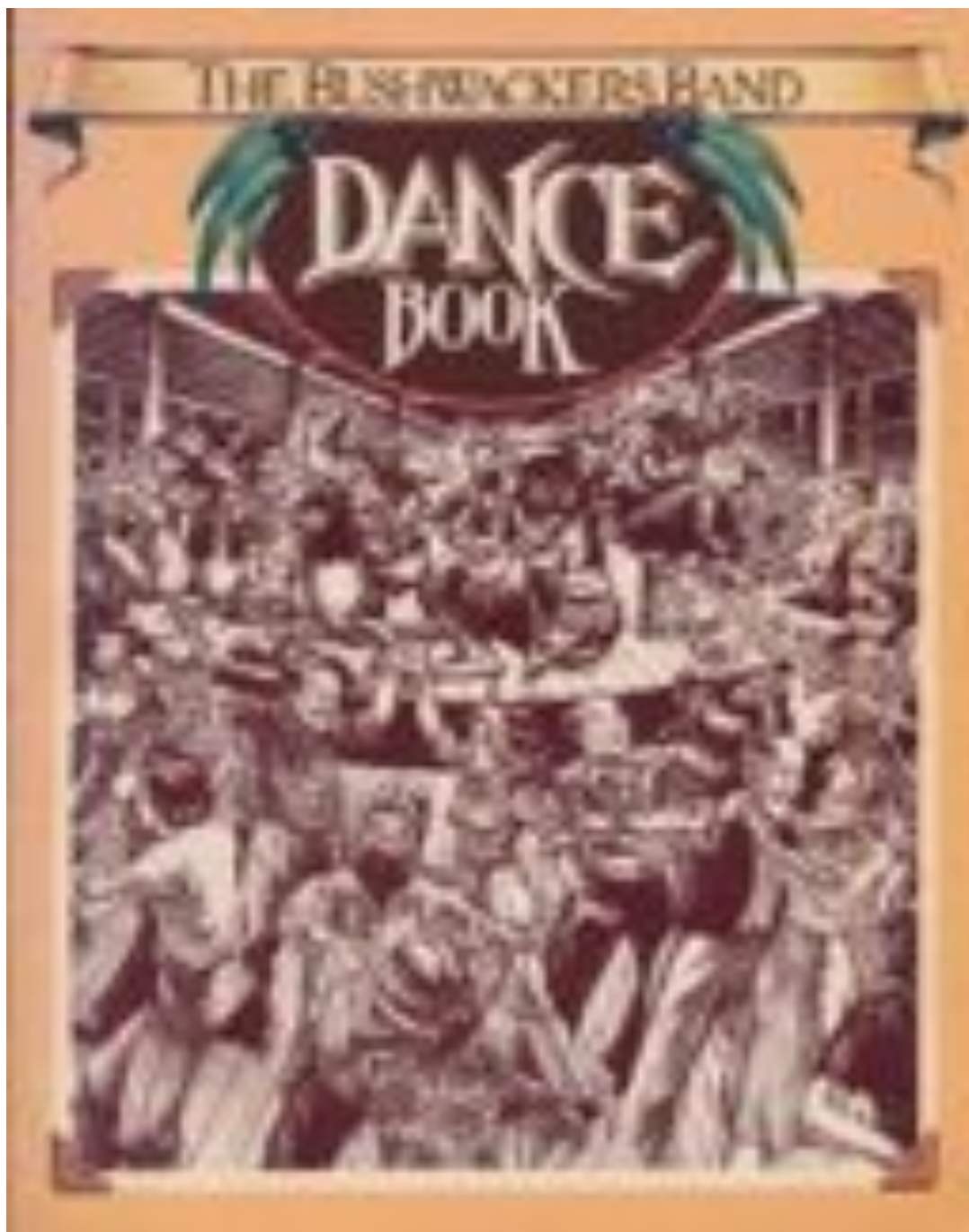
Dave Isom had been a member of Captain Matchbox and ran the La Trobe Uni Folk Club, but neither Dave nor Bert Kahanoff, the third initial founder with himself, were hanging out with the VFMC. As far as he knew he was the only one who went there, though all were associated with the VFMC via the Nariel Creek folk festival. Jan learnt the dances at VFMC dances and at Nariel Creek, and so became the band's dance caller. Through the VFMC Shirley Andrews workshopped and taught the folk dances she had profiled through ‘The Tradition’ and Take Your Partners so Jan certainly had good experience with dancing and then calling.

After the Bushwackers formed they published ‘The Bushwackers Band Song Book’ in 1978’ and ‘The Bushwackers Band Dance Book’ in 1980. Both were excellent publications and although ‘bush dance’ doesn’t seem a term they then used, the connotation was certainly there in well-presented illustrations with Australian themes and bush style settings.



The Original Bushwackers & Bullockies Band, Photo: Dianne Harris 1973

L to R: Bert Kahanoff, Mick Slocum, Dave Isom, Jan 'Yarn' Wositzky, Dave Kidd



Frontispiece of Bushwackers Band Dance Book



Bushwackers LP The Shearer's Dream 1974 L to R: Dave Isom, Mick Slocum, Dobe Newton, Tony Hunt, Jan 'Yarn' Wositzky. Illustrations courtesy Jan Wositzky

Through the dance book and companion dance LP they were able to sensationalise dances such as Virginia Reel under the name Strip the Willow (knowing this really existed as a separate dance in its own right) then called the Waves of Tory 'Waves of Bondi' as well as the Ninepins Quadrille 'The Drongo'. There were others such as 'Flying Doctor' (Stockyards), the 'Madman's Wood Yard', Kangaroo Hop and the Qld Backstep which was really a well-known Nariel (Vic.) old time dance – 'The Manchester Galop'. Shirley took them to task about this and commented that Jan Wositzky was very

coy and sheepish on the issue. I had the feeling that perhaps they orchestrated this aspect as a portrayal of the great Australian tradition of the 'tall story', but again Jan Wositzky puts it into perspective:-

“No, rather I think that within the '70s resurgence of Australian culture, of which we were a part, along with films, theatre and rock and roll, we identified as being part of this movement and so were, if you like, creating Australian culture with the renaming of those dances. Having an Australian culture was all the go and in our popularising of those dances we gave them names that we liked and the audience would remember. It was a commercial and cultural move to give them identity that people could relate to in their daily experience; Bondi rather than say Tory ... if you know what I mean. My point of view would be that the essence of the tradition, the deeper tradition, is that people get together, hold each other and co-operate to make dances together in a communal inter-generational way, and the names of the dances are simply the mask that presents them. If those name changes happened over time as part of a 'folk process' rather than quickly as part of a commercial package it would have been regarded as natural rather than as an affront.”

Well let's remember the Bush Music Club in Sydney had perhaps initiated the catalyst for this in renaming the Flying Scotsman the Flying Pieman and other dances popular with the BMC and VFMC, such as Galopede, Siege of Ennis, Waves of Tory and Soldier's Joy in the American version were all a bit of a con in terms of any genuine dance of the bush connection. But Duke Tritton did remember Virginia Reels for example being danced on outside lawns at house parties in the 1890s, so that one's legitimate as is Circassian Circle part 1 and the Stockyards.

Gradually the Bushwackers became trendier, perhaps to continue attracting the young by incorporating electronic amplification and guitar and drum rock beat. In their older style I've got to say their original Bushwackers and Bullockies LP or cassette of 1976 including “And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda” was fantastic.

That is the history and rightly or wrongly the Melbourne Bushwackers Band and the Cobbers can be said to have put Bush Dance on the map. The above mentioned Bushwackers' books of tunes and dance descriptions including a dance recording with the intentionally altered names were innocently taken up by school teachers all over Australia. Despite the negative side of children learning dances by the wrong name, there are many many dancers who later moved across to traditional dancing. They would not have become involved or known about it if it wasn't for the Bushwackers, Cobbers and other bands in their ilk such as Paradiddle.