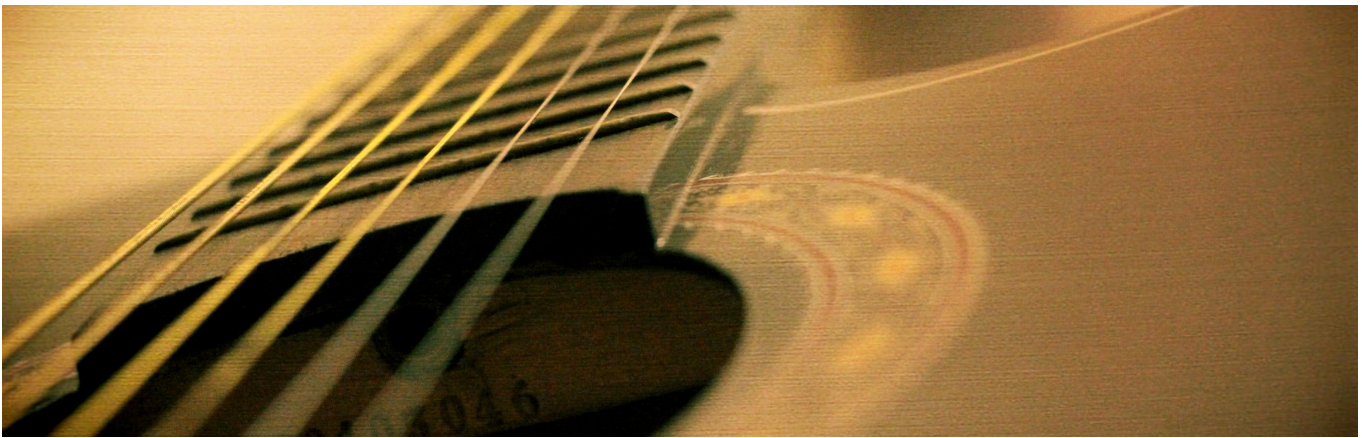

Voices From Our Past: Song and Australian Identity

By Isabella Trope.

A culture identifies itself by its music. What unique music forms the Australian identity?



There is a great corpus of contemporary music: ACDC, Men at Work, Keith Urban, and a plethora of country artists but little from historical artists that has become truly ingrained in Australian culture.

Other cultures have a rich cultural heritage of folk music, which has re-entered the cultural sphere through modern covers or adaptations to different styles. Their music evolves with their culture and remains a pertinent reminder of their past and their identity. Importantly, it reminds people not just of the stories of great men and great deeds, but the character of the common people who helped to build their identity.

There is little that acknowledges important aspects of Australian historical culture. Where are the laments of the convicts who toiled under British masters? Or the songs ANZACS sung on their way to Gallipoli? Historical culture seems to be utterly absent from our musical culture.

Australian folk songs, being much more limited in breadth and global fame (the Wikipedia category for Australian folk songs lists just 19 entries, while for Irish folk songs it lists more than one can count) have not had the same attention by modern folk-rock or folk-punk bands, and seem to still exist in the Australian mindset in what could be their original form. That is, if they even exist in the Australian mindset at all.

This contrasts to older cultures with who have stronger elements of folk music in their contemporary music. Take the American-Celtic band Dropkick Murphys. They feature transformed traditional Celtic sounds and pay homage to the struggle of the common person in their lyrics. For example, 'I'm Shipping up to Boston', according to one speculator on the music website Genius, is on a metaphorical level about an Irish immigrant who leaves Ireland for Boston, and seeks to recover his culture once establishing himself in Boston. Genius purports that this song has become the 'unofficial anthem' of Irish Bostonians.

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Another band, The Dreadnoughts, brings in a variety of European folk genres and combines them with street-punk. Like the Dropkick Murphys they integrate the struggles of common people in history. One notable song from them is 'Sleep is for the Weak', which integrates Polish historical references with klezmer sounds to talk about the experiences of Polish soldiers fighting to preserve their culture and nationhood in the Polish-Ukrainian war. While the subject matter is quite nationalistic, very much portrays the feelings of an average Polish man and acknowledges their history.

In Australia, there is an absence of music that acknowledges the historical people who formed Australian identity - such as the Anzacs or convicts. Folk music, such as 'Waltzing Matilda' is relegated to classrooms, and not seen much in contemporary culture at all, let alone music.

Perhaps Australia is simply not old enough to have a base of folk music to transform and enjoy. Australia is still forming its identity as a diverse nation with a complicated identity and history. It may be that in 70 years or so, Australian bands innovate with Celtic, British, Chinese or Vietnamese sounds to integrate the stories of common historic Australians into contemporary music culture.

