

The Tamworth Country Music Festival is possibly the biggest party in the whole of Australia. So isn't it time you asked yourself ...

# Are you Tamworthy?

by ALISON WINDMILL

**The 36th Tamworth Country Music Festival will be celebrated over ten days from Friday 18 January to Sunday 27 January 2008 but if you include the ten day Countdown to the festival, well, you could Texas Twostep for twenty days straight ... and you wouldn't be the only one. No siree.**

In January, the population of Tamworth almost doubles in size to 100,000 and the festival generates more than \$40 million to the local economy. They come by ute, bus, train, plane — some blokes even travel each year by camel — to the inland city on the banks of the Peel River.

The festival itself is a mighty, large beast and it seems that no one organization is able to wrangle it. Tamworth Regional Council is the hub in the wheel. They gather sponsorship and provide the massive infrastructure needed to cope with such an influx of revellers. They will truck in more water if necessary and monitor the poo-ometer (don't ask) to record attendance levels. Tourism Tamworth is the group charged with marketing the festival (and selling the most sought after tickets) although it seems that word of mouth amongst Country Music fans is far more valuable than any currency.

Surprisingly, the festival does not have central 'auditions' for performers — each band or their management strikes their own deals with individual venues. Some musicians perform for free in the 45 degree heat, hopeful for exposure to such a target market. After all, it worked well and was good enough for The Chambers family band 'The Dead Ringers', they got their start at the festival by busking on Peel Street.

The spirit of Independence infuses the beat of Country Music and can be felt loud and proud amongst the campers. A semi-retired couple from Queensland build a walk-up stage at their own expense each year at the Cricket House Campground, providing free entertainment and a place to perform for fellow country music lovers. They do it because they love it and love being involved. Bless 'em.

It is estimated that 75% of festival gigs are free and that makes the Tamworth festival a regular punters' delight. There are no armbands or daily tickets required. Just grab your hat, the program for the day and leg or bus it around. Carry your folding chair if you plan to linger round the buskers. You could splash out \$100, dress up and go to the Country Music Association of Australia's night of nights, the Golden Guitar Awards, or turn up for free at the same event in your thongs and shorts to line the red carpet and cheer on the stars — take your pick. Country Music performers are the friendliest, most down to earth celebrities and when in Tamworth happily sign hats, CDs and even bodies. The stars use Tamworth to say a genuine 'thank you' to their fans who have bought their music year round.

With some 120 different venues showing about 4,000 performances, about 590 buskers on the 'Boulevard of Dreams' (Peel Street, to the locals) and so many visitors, it's a wonder that country hospitality isn't stretched to breaking point but the smiles on the locals are as wide as ever. If you have to hand over your town for two weeks a year you're damn well entitled to make a buck and it seems to be a good compromise. Some locals get the hell outta Dodge and rent their houses out — earning enough for their

## December

14 December — 3 February

 *Float* This major exhibition celebrates the figurative and metaphorical potential of the boat in contemporary Australian visual arts practice. **LAKE MACQUARIE** City Gallery Tel 02 4965 8260


14 December — 19 January

 *Reflections and Illusions* Art by Jacklyn Peters, Madeleine Sheldon and Kim Dove. Shoalhaven City Art Centre, **NOWRA** Tel 02 4422 0648

15 December

 Chris Kayana Gudu and his band, Dance Africa, at the Star Court Theatre, **LISMORE** Experience the exhilarating, passionate and powerful rhythms of Zimbabwe. Tel 13 000 66772 Website [www.norpa.org.au](http://www.norpa.org.au)

15 December

 *Bathurst Treasures* Join curator Sam Molloy as he provides special insight into a selection of objects that documents Bathurst's unique and eventful history. 11am at the Australian Fossil and Mineral museum, **BATHURST** Tel 02 6331 5511

holiday on the coast but increasingly it seems more locals are staying put and getting into the spirit. School and sporting groups rent out buildings and local footy fields to campers, raising much needed funds to carry the rural community through the rest of the year and the challenges of the drought and climate change.

Legend surrounds the origins of the festival but however it started, it shows absolutely no sign of stopping and the variety of music on offer has rolled way past the songs that put tears in your beer to include alternative country, independent country, country rock'n'roll, rockabilly, rock, world music and blues. Name your genre... you're likely to see it performed somewhere in Tamworth in January.

The most amazing part of the festival is the atmosphere — a testament to country music's renowned friendly vibe — getting involved in conversations with friendly strangers as you line up at the bar, strolling home in the balmy night at 3am wondering if you can

possibly attend the poets breakfast at 7am, the music, the dancing, the freedom to move between venues. "February is for sleeping," as they say in Tamworth. Some festival goers have booked the same accommodation every year for over twenty years — it honestly is one event every Aussie should go to at least once in their life. ■

**When I started compiling information about the festival for the website I edit, I felt my head was going to explode with the enormity of it all. But I knew that there were already a lot of cowboys and gals in cyberspace and the good folk of Tamworth hadn't got around to making a website for their festival yet, and heck, someone had better do it. I don't think we have managed to hogtie the beast entirely but if you want more info: [www.tamworthcountrymusic.com.au](http://www.tamworthcountrymusic.com.au)**

Alison Windmill is the Editor of the The Tamworth Country Music website: [www.tamworthcountrymusic.com.au](http://www.tamworthcountrymusic.com.au)



*The McClymonts performing at the 35th Country Music Awards of Australia, Tamworth 2007. Photo courtesy CMAA*

## December

17 December — 2 January

👁️ *A Certain Time* Moruya artist Jo Arkinson's contemporary approach to landscape, figurative and still life subjects in oil, acrylic and pastel. The Mechanics Institute, **MORUYA** Tel 02 4474 1000

18 December — 19 January

👁️ *Focus on the Collection* The Gallery's collection, acquired over 55 years, incorporates paintings, textiles, works on paper, photography and sculpture. **GOULBURN** Regional Gallery Tel 02 4823 4443

18 December — 27 January

👁️ *Peter Wade: What Lies Beneath* With carved timber and found objects, Peter explores the nature of objects and the human potential for good and bad. **GRAFTON** Regional Gallery Tel 02 6642 3177

18 December — 27 January

👁️ *25 x 25 Megalo Printmakers* A celebration of 25 years of Megalo Arts Access with etching, screen printing, lithography, woodblock and linocut printing. **GRAFTON** Regional Gallery Tel 02 6642 3177