

Turn back the clock

15 years in the Central West
 Fast forward to today and it's no longer a sure bet. The 'C' word —
and you could bet your bottom
 'culture' — is giving the rural
dollar the only 'F' word in any
 industry a run for its money and
conversation about economic
 sustainability and community
 the new 'F' word is 'festivals,'
identity was 'farming,'
 'festivals' and 'festivals.'
'farming' or ... 'farming.'

by NATALIE KENT



fffestival fever

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FIFTEEN YEARS AGO THE REGIONAL TOWNS IN THE CENTRAL WEST were all essentially indistinguishable. The only reason people crossed the sandstone curtain or state borders to visit Condobolin, Parkes, Molong or Lithgow was to get to somewhere else.

But then the festivals hit town and grew and grew into flagship events ... and turned things on their head.

Parkes is no longer just a rural city in the middle of the New South Wales sheep and wheat belt. Come January the entire nation is talking about Australia's Las-Vegas, home to the King ... because of the Parkes Elvis Festival. Growing exponentially since the first festival in 1997, the brainchild of a bunch of local Elvis fanatics, the festival now pulls record crowds each year in excess of 7,000. With more than half of those visitors coming from metropolitan and coastal areas, armed with blue suede shoes and diamante-laced jump suits, booking out all imaginable accommodation a year in advance, the festival has local business owners' hips swivelling with sheer joy.

Pushing The Dish aside, the Elvis Festival has become *the* calling card for Parkes. The festival has provided a massive, annual economic boost for the town during drought-stricken times and

it has not only put the town on the map, it has — more importantly — put Parkes on people's holiday calendars.

With so much burnin' love for this fun, three-day cultural experience, other regional towns and cities have been quick to jump on the festival bandwagon.

Lithgow's Ironfest — 'the arts festival with a metal edge' — will celebrate its eighth run this year on April 28—29. It, too, is now attracting wide-reaching audiences in excess of 7,000. The exotic lure of jousting competitions, belly dancers, historical re-enactments, blacksmithing, live music and more has given people on the 'other' side of the Blue Mountains the push needed to cross the great divide and explore what Lithgow has to offer.

Ironfest director, Macgregor Ross, believes the 'charming' element of festivals is not only that they boost tourism in inland Australia when stiff petrol prices and cheap airfares generally keep visitors away, but they also inspire community engagement ... and, over time, local 'patriotism'.

Etching into the city's identity, Ironfest is now becoming synonymous with Lithgow just as the world-renown Australian Country Music Festival is with Tamworth.

May

11 May — 24 June

👁 *Baubles, Bangles & Beads*
 Australian contemporary jewellery, from designers and collectors. **BATHURST**
 Regional Art Gallery Tel 02 6333 6555

11 May — 24 June

👁 *Artbank: Celebrating 25 years of Australian Art* Touring collection of Australia's emerging and indigenous and non-indigenous artists. **BATHURST**
 Regional Art Gallery Tel 02 6333 6555

12 May — 8 July

👁 *Sights Unseen* Photo media including black-and-white portraiture, video, digital media and film by the late Australian artist, Michael Riley. **DUBBO** Regional Gallery Tel 02 6801 4444
 Website www.wpcddubbo.org.au

13 May

👁 *Kiss Me, Kate* A favourite musical comedy, suitable for all ages. \$18 - \$35
APAC, ALBURY Tel 02 6051 3051

The pursuit of geographical notoriety was also the driving motivation behind the central west's younger festivals, the Molong Music and Arts Festival and Condobolin's Write in the Heart Festival.

After glancing at a tourism magazine in a Millthorpe restaurant four years ago only to discover his new hometown of Molong didn't make the cut, Jeff Rogers decided to do something to grab the rest of the State's attention. A music and arts festival that attracted tourists to Molong and gave people in the Central West the opportunity to experience headline live music acts and art exhibitions in their own backyard was his vision. With thousands of visitors converging on Molong for the third festival on the last weekend in March this year, Jeff's dream is now a reality.

Not one to mince words, Write in the Heart Festival Director, Helen Dalton, knows exactly what compelled her to stage a literary festival in Condobolin for the first time last year: "We wanted people to come Condobolin — which has been hit hard by the drought — and spend money," she says.

Inspired by the Hay-On-Wye River Writing Festival in the United Kingdom, which draws crowds of 30,000, Helen hopes that, one day, Condobolin's June long-weekend festival will do something similar.

It seems the festivals are springing up like mushrooms now. Wellington put on its first, month-long, Drought Relief Festival in March. Cowra will host its first ArtzFest on 28 April and Bathurst's inaugural River Dreaming Lantern Festival is scheduled for early November this year.

Realising the value of festivals — and not leaving their growth to chance — Cabonne Council has just launched an Events Assistance Program to encourage the development of new festivals in the villages of Cabonne. General Manager, Graeme Fleming, said council strongly backs the program because events and festivals have positive impacts on both the economy and the morale of communities.

"Events and festivals are not only important to our tourism industry but also to our sense of community identity," he said. "They give us reason to celebrate and to participate in things beyond our everyday experience."

While the big dry keeps the central west's traditional pillar of strength — farming — on shaky grounds, it's clear festivals have emerged as a new life-line to keep rural centres afloat by providing an entirely new platform on which to market themselves to the rest of Australia.

With tourists' taste for the Central West's festival bait intensifying each year, it's exciting to imagine what will transpire in years to come. Best of all, people in regional New South Wales no longer have to jump in a car, or on a plane and travel for hours to attend a unique artistic experience. There is now, and there will soon be even more, a plethora of cultural extravaganzas to choose from on their own turf. ■

Natalie Kent was, until recently, the Communications Officer for Arts OutWest, the Regional Arts Board in the Central West.



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Opposite : A plurality of Elvises is putting The Dish in the background. Photo: Parkes Elvis Festival
Above: Two tons of man, metal and horse flesh collide at Ironfest. Photo: Andrew Wilson



WEBSITES

Parkes Elvis Festival www.parkeselfisfestival.com.au
Molong Music and Arts Festival www.molongfestival.com.au
IronFest, Lithgow www.ironfest.com.au

CONTACTS

Write in the Heart Festival, Condobolin daltonh@westserv.net.au
Cowra ArtzFest council@cowra.nsw.gov.au
River Dreaming Festival, Bathurst angelaprior.onthestone.com
Wellington Drought-Breaker Festival
jennifer.birchall@wellington.nsw.gov.au

May

18 – 19 May

 **Melbourne Comedy Festival Roadshow 07** Returning with a new line-up of Australian and overseas acts. \$15 - \$35
LISMORE City Hall Tel 02 6622 0300
 Website www.norpa.org.au

17 – 19 May

 **The No Chance in Hell Hotel**
 CSI meets Fame in this flawless nail-biting comedy thriller set in the backstreets of Kings Cross. \$30/\$25 IPAC,
WOLLONGONG Tel 02 4226 3366
 Website www.ipac.org.au

19 May

 **Chopper's Harden the F**k up Australia** A night of comedy, audience participation and finding your 'inner mongrel'. \$29.80/\$25.90 IPAC,
WOLLONGONG Tel 02 4226 3366
 Website www.ipac.org.au

19 May – 23 June

 **Climate Change** 10 local artists respond to climate change. **GOULBURN** Regional Art Gallery Tel 02 4823 4443
 Website www.goulburn.nsw.gov.au