

The crucible of country

How did it happen? How did a small country town in NSW (pop 37,000) become Australia's 'Country Music Capital' and, in the process, virtually create a country music industry in this country?

by MAX ELLIS

Well, like so many of these things, it happened because a small group of people made it happen.

'Hillbilly' music was a regular feature on regional radio in Australia in the 1940s and '50s, but by the late '50s, Australian country music had been overwhelmed by all-consuming 'rock 'n' roll'. The real story begins in 1965 when television was introduced and radio's evening audiences were decimated. Tamworth's 2TM, with its clear channel signal reaching much of eastern Australia, fought back, airing programs of jazz, folk music and even the supposedly despised 'country & western'. To everyone's amazement, listener response was huge and over the next few years a program hosted by legendary country music personality, John Minson, 'Hoedown', began to attract more and more listeners.

Later that decade Radio 2TM started running concerts featuring Reg Lindsay, Slim Dusty, Tex Morton and many others and went on to stage the famous Bi-Centenary Show, which re-introduced artists like Smoky Dawson and Shirley Thoms. The posters said "Worth Driving 100 Miles To See" and the fans came in droves.

It was in response to this amazing reaction that 2TM staffers Warwick Higginbotham, Kevin Knapp, John Minson, Eric Scott and I conceived the idea of marketing Tamworth as the Australian centre for country music. We wanted to encourage the composition and performance of Australian country music; to create an identity for the station and Tamworth ... and make some money for 2TM in the process (!). In 1969 we declared Tamworth the 'Country Music Capital'. The name and concept caught on and 2TM's reputation with fans grew.

A scheme 'to recognise and encourage excellence in Australian country music' was established and on 28 January 1973, the first Australasian Country Music Awards were staged in the Tamworth Town Hall. Joy McKean won the first Golden Guitar



March

15 March

 **Mud Fest** Short film festival under the stars, now in its 4th year, the event attracts entrants from all over the world. Elliot Rocke Estate **MUDGEES**
Tel 02 6372 7722
Website www.mudfest.com.au

15 – 24 March

 **Driven to Abstraction**
MUDGEES Arts Council group exhibition show at The Stables, next to Mudgee Visitor Information Centre Tel 02 6372 2776.

15 March

 **Cabaret Kite** 6 Hilarious local vaudeville style performances for just \$5.00
BATHURST Memorial Entertainment Centre
Tel 02 6333 6161

16 March

 **Bruce Dale Concert** Bathurst's longstanding twilight concert in the grounds of beautiful Bruce Dale homestead at **PEEL**
Bathurst Arts Council Tel 02 6331 6622



Left: George Dasey presenting the first Golden Guitar trophy to Joy McKean for her song, 'Lights On The Hill' on 28 January 1973.

Opposite page: Three pioneers of Australian country music, (L-R) Buddy Williams, Tex Morton and Smoky Dawson, place their hands in wet concrete at the first Hands Of Fame ceremony in Tamworth, January 1977.

ever, for her song 'Lights On The Hill' and Slim Dusty won the first two of the thirty seven he later accumulated.

We chose the January long weekend for several reasons. January was a quiet time for 2TM and the long weekend, ideal for travelling families. There was also a successful country music talent quest run by the Capital Country Music Association. Most importantly, we knew media was generally short of news during the holidays and we could generate more publicity as a result.

The creation of a highly successful Awards trophy and brand, the Golden Guitar, gave us a powerful identity for the event from the start. In tourism, identity is the name of the game and over the years the 'Golden Guitar' and 'Country Music Capital' brands have given Tamworth an image second to none.

With the Awards established, 2TM turned its attention to creating a festival around this core event. From the mid 1970s through to the mid '80s, the station launched numerous initiatives, most of which still form the back-bone of today's Festival. They include Capital News and Festival Guide (1975), Roll of Renown (1976), Hands of Fame (1977), Tamworth Songwriters Association and 'Buttercup' Open House (1978) Bluegrass Championships (1979), Star Maker Quest (1979), the Cavalcade (1980), the Rodeo (1982) as well as major concerts, buskers in Peel Street, Industry Seminars and much more.

2TM believed in spreading the activity and soon every pub, club, restaurant, hall and street corner in Country Music Capital featured some form of live music (today there over 2,500 performances from traditional to country rock). Indigenous people embraced country and in the early years singers Harry and Wilga Williams staged concerts with participants and fans coming from all over Australia.

From the beginning Tamworth promoted Australian music. Overseas artists were welcomed but discouraged from performing. 2TM had relied on the support of artists like Slim Dusty to launch the concept

and felt they deserved top billing without distractions from international stars. This approach worked and crowds keep coming back to hear Australian music from Australian artists.

The publicity the Festival generated was, and is, stupendous, ranging from the sublime — *Time Magazine's* 'Australia's Nashville' — to the ridiculous — 'The Hills are alive with the sound of buzzing blowflies' in *The Telegraph*. Encouraged by 2TM's promotional visits to the capital cities, national media flocked to the city. Tamworth and the Golden Guitars became household names around the nation. A national survey found an incredible 72% of all adult Australians recognised the Golden Guitar Awards.

Tamworth changed perceptions about the Australian country music, dragging it out of the closet and onto the main stage where it flourishes today. The national and international success our country music artists enjoy today, people like Keith Urban, Kasey Chambers and Troy Cassar-Daley, would not have been possible without the promotional focus generated by Country Music Capital and the Golden Guitar Awards over the past thirty-five years.

So that's how it all started. How Tamworth consolidated its fame is another story and it's one that is still being created. ■

Max Ellis was one of the architects of the Golden Guitar Awards and the Tamworth Festival. As 2TM Manager during the 70s and Chief Executive of the Awards he was responsible for initiating and shaping the development of the Festival. In 1992 he played a pivotal role in starting the Country Music Association of Australia and, as CEO, ran the Awards until his retirement in 2003.

Max Ellis' website www.historyofcountrymusic.com.au tells the story of Tamworth and Australian country music.

March

20 – 23 March

 **Tullamore Irish Festival** Irish music, dance, Irish horse hurdles, children's entertainment. Poets breakfast, ecumenical service lunch + Irish Hooley with the festival performers **TULLAMORE** Tel 02 6893 7229

20 – 24 March

 **BluesFest 2008 – The 19th East Coast Blues & Roots Music Festival.** Featuring Top international and national blues & roots artists. Belongil Fields, **BYRON BAY** Tel 02 6685 8310 Website www.bluesfest.com.au

20 – 24 March

 **National Folk Festival** Hundreds of the world's best musicians perform daily in a non-stop flow of entertainment across 22 venues. Packed with workshops and sessions; join in the dancing, singing and playing. **CANBERRA** Tel 02 62497755

20 – 29 March

 **Dorrigo Creative Mountain Arts & Craft Exhibition A** showcase of talent of the **Dorrigo Plateau. Community Hall DORRIGO** Tel 02 6657 4005