

All That Glitters: Cultural Mis-chord in Kountry Musik Kapital

[This article appeared in *ArtsWest*, the Central West Regional Arts Magazine. It was a reaction to the building of the 'Big Golden Guitar' along the New England Highway at Tamworth, where I'd lived for several years.]

First impressions are a funny thing; they not only stay with you, they colour your every perception about a place. Take Tamworth, for instance. Arrive during the off-season – February through September – and you might be forgiven for thinking there's nothing special about the town. The usual clusters of motels and service stations cling like molluscs to the fringes of the highway, fibrolite suburbs seep into the apparently limitless countryside, bleaching heat bakes the main street. Even the river, lying inert between parks and sports grounds, recalls almost any town west of the Great Divide.

But arrive as I did in latter part of January and all that changes. January is Country Music month, an annual festival culminating in the presentation of the industry's most prestigious awards at the Longfield Entertainment complex. For two weeks the population of the city doubles to around sixty thousand, and all hell breaks loose.

The devotees start arriving in early December, their origins almost as many as their number. Most of them come from rural areas, many from the genuine outback, the buckled fenders of their utilities still smouldering with dust. Often it's a family pilgrimage, the kids hanging limply from the back windows of sagging Fords, the women's faces in the front seats pinched from hard living.

The festival has traditionally been pretty much a folk event; not a community celebration in the usual sense, but a focus for the kind of coarse, splintery ethos that is the mainbrace of outback sub-culture. It's certainly not everybody's cup of tea; there are many, even in Tamworth, who choose to leave town at that time – a strategy that, for the more astute, affords an opportunity for a lucrative home-stay venture.

Country Music has never had much status in community arts circles, partly because its commercial aspects have been selectively promoted and partly, I suspect, because a lot of the decision-makers in that field find it difficult to bridge the gap between this particular genre and their own socio-graphics.

The legitimacy of the medium ought not to be judged by such personal percepts; the origins of the form and the strength of its following certainly give it credence as a vehicle of cultural expression. The real festival takes place on the streets, championed by the buskers and the numerous unknowns who make the slate at the pub-sponsored jams and talent nights. From time to time it's possible to pick up something uniquely Australian, an original blend of settler's fiddle and didgeridoo, songs about Australian rural issues without the Dixie accent, and it's exciting.

Most folk don't make it to the Awards Night, a glitzy affair designed to cater for the significant commercial interests – the local tourist industry, the recording studios and the retail lobby - that dominate this fastest-growing sector of the music industry. If anything, the grassroots festival has developed in spite of the glamour events; a lot of the music that makes it to centre stage is nothing more than a vulgar mish-mash of sentimentality and imported Nashville that manages to combine many of the worst elements of the country music genre.

I was back in Tamworth again, a couple of years later, around the same time, and it seemed to me that the omens weren't all that good. There were more brand new stetsons among the crumpled Akubras floating above the crowds in the shopping arcades, more dudes there for the spectacle rather than the music, people more at home at the Powerhouse Motel than in a caravan park.

The glitz might be winning. Which is a pity, because the fledgling Australian tradition is going to find it increasingly difficult to survive in the type of cultural climate the promoters are trying to create. There are moves afoot to erect a twelve metre high 'Golden Guitar' along the town's approaches, and given the kind of track record of the local council and the immense political clout of the scheme's promoters, there's every chance this unique example of architectural bad taste will get the go-ahead. Not everyone's crazy about the idea; local residents are worried about their property values, and some community members have raised concerns about the artistic sanity of the project.

The Golden Guitar is more than just another piece of junk. When it takes its place among the numerous other 'big things' that litter the Australian landscape, it will be a symbol of confused priorities, a monument to cultural parasitism. A first impression, certainly; something visible from miles around, an embodiment of something crass in the character of the place, testimony to the possibility that in Australia's country music capital, all that glitters may indeed be gold.
