
National News

HOW OFTEN DO you hear a tune, or a line from a song, that rekindles personal associations? The richness of expression and meaning of music can reach deep into our collective and personal memories at a layer beyond words. Sheet music, in particular, can tell us much about our past: what we valued; what we thought; how we felt about important national events; whom we loved on stage, radio, screen or on the sporting field; what we advertised and sold through the medium of music; and how, when and where we sang, danced, played or listened together.

The National Library holds more than 50,000 pieces of Australian sheet music as part of its collection of 200,000 music items. The Library collects, holds and individually preserves 'mint condition' copies of all music currently published in Australia, by Australians or which are related to Australia. But the National Library also 'hunts and gathers' post-1830 treasures that, through serendipity, have survived those traditional repositories: the piano stool or the box in the shed. Personal ownership is often recorded on copies complete with hand-stitched binding, scribbles, annotations, coffee stains, even ripped edges. Each item betrays its own story — who wrote it, performed it and made it popular; who bought, sold and used it; who kept it and even, perhaps, loved it. In the days before television, sheet music was also a prime vehicle for advertisements, so perhaps we can add — those who were the target of an earlier age of marketing. *Waltzing Matilda*, for example, was first issued in 1903 to advertise 'Billy Tea', with Banjo Paterson's words changed to 'billy boiling' to reflect the product.

The National Library's collection includes historical gems. Perhaps the Australian cricket team might consider adopting as its theme song Warren Russell's 1896 *Hurrah for the Bat & Ball: The Universal Cricket Song*. Taxpayers might feel that Jack Lumsdaine's wonderful *Banish the Budget Blues* (1930) is as pertinent today as it was in Scullin's day. The citizens of Gundagai might claim that *The Road to Gundagai* is the most famous song about a town, but hundreds of other location songs can rival it. School students might be shocked by the Anglocentrism of the earliest versions of our national anthem, *Advance Australia Fair*, and many will be glad that Ella Southworth Clark's confident

prediction in 1910, *The Battle's On or Prohibition's Bound to Win*, failed to eventuate. The Sentimental Bloke, Ginger Meggs, Ned Kelly, Don Bradman, Skippy, Australia's first Holden, Aunty Jack, Johnny O'Keefe, Bananas in Pyjamas, The Boy from Oz: this cast of ratbags, rogues, idols, icons and national heroes are all immortalised in sheet music.

The historical and artistic significance of these items is captured in *The Collector's Book of Sheet Music Covers* (NLA, 2001) and in the National Library exhibition *Between the Sheets*, soon to tour regional Australia. The National Library has also embarked on a major digitisation programme to provide online access to its Australian sheet music. Over 3500 items of Australian sheet music published before 1930 will be available through the National Library's website by mid-year, bringing this wonderful cultural heritage to all Australians. Viewing the digitised music items is as close as possible to the experience of handling the original paper items: users can turn pages, jump from front to back cover, or navigate to particular pages within a score.

The Library is also assisting other organisations, including state libraries and the Australian Music Centre, to provide their music scores and audio recordings online so that music can be found and accessed through a new cooperative web service. Based on the phenomenally successful PictureAustralia, MusicAustralia is being jointly developed by the National Library and ScreenSound Australia, the National Screen and Sound Archive. MusicAustralia will move from pilot to production mode in late 2003, with users ultimately able to access and navigate a rich store of information on Australian music, musicians, organisations and services from a single access point.

Perhaps even more Australians will learn to value the extent to which music has recorded, expressed and reflected the breadth of culture we call 'Australian'. And perhaps we might all finally learn the words of *Advance Australia Fair*!

www.nla.gov.au/digicoll/
www.musicaustralia.org
www.pictureaustralia.org

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