

SINGABOUT

DECEMBER 2019

THE OTHER BUSH MUSIC CLUB

60 years of the Victorian Folk Music Club

The Victorian Bush Music Club was established in 1959, 6 years after the success of Dick Diamond's play *Reedy River* introduced traditional songs to the public, and 4 years after transplanted Sydney member Joy Durst, along with Frank Nickels, started Victoria's first bush band, the Billabong Band.

In 1963 the Club changed it's name to Victorian Folk Music Club, and the Club & Band are still going strong!

Report from President Steve Bullock - *We had great success with the VFMC 60th anniversary celebrations - the Woolshed Ball was widely praised, and the birthday cake was scrumptious. Then last week we had a special Tuesday music session with a big supper (and more cake), and invited the Newport fiddle club to join us (something we had intended to do for a considerable time). It was also a great success. The Billabong Band has been busy with the Ball, and numerous community events, with plenty more gigs before Christmas.*

BMC & VBMC worked closely for many years with BMC giving their younger sibling space in *Singabout* until 1964 when VBMC & the Folklore Society of Victoria established their own magazine, *Gumsuckers' Gazette*, later *Australian Tradition*.

After *Singabout* ceased in 1967, John Meredith & other BMC members published articles in *Australian Tradition*.

The book *Against the Stream*, a history of the Melbourne New Theatre notes that the Melbourne production of *Reedy River* premiered in March 1953, featuring the Unity Singers, Unity Dance Group and a small orchestra. The play was based upon a selection of actor John Gray's collection of traditional bush songs.

The bush band was introduced in the Sydney production later that year and became a part of all subsequent productions. The Melbourne production, like the Sydney one, was a roaring success and played to packed houses, running for a number of years.

In 1955 Melbourne formed its own Bushwackers Band following the band of that name appearing in the Sydney production of *Reedy River*.

In the Summer 1956 edition of *Singabout* Frank Nickels reports that *The Billabong Band* is the name chosen for Melbourne's folk ensemble, which was originally the Melbourne Bushwackers. Frank was their mouth-organist and reported that they were "privileged to have a concertina player in the band".

By 1958 the *Billabong Band* were advertising for new members who could "manage one of the following instruments - guitar, button-accordion, concertina, mouth-organ, flageolet, recorder and similar". They were also looking for some "reasonable voices".

At the same time there was an announcement of the first Singabout Night in Melbourne that was "such a success that a member of the audience offered her home for the second". It also notes that "it won't be long before a Bush Music Club is flourishing down south".

The Winter/Spring 1959 edition of *Singabout* announced that "Inspired by the Billabong Band, a Bush Music Club has been formed in Melbourne". The club was formed primarily to run the Singabout nights. They reported having 40 members and about twice that many attending the Singabout Nights. The club's secretary was Keith Watson, the only member of the band to be on the committee. The band decided to limit their presence on the committee so that they could concentrate on their own work.

At the time of the formation of the Victorian Bush Music Club the Billa-bong Band were involved in the latest production of New Theatre's *Reedy River*, and were "somewhat exhausted" after a six week season of four shows a week and several matinees.

In August 1959 the Melbourne club accepted an offer to take a ten per cent share of *Singabout* magazine. They then contributed articles and songs to the publication.

1960 saw the club's activities expanding and dances were being introduced at Singabout sessions, including the Barn Dance, Virginia Reel and Quaker's Wife. Singabouts were also arranged for other organisations and they had even got an article about the club in the Melbourne Herald. In August of that year a new publication *The Victorian Bush Music Club Monthly* was started. Not totally happy with the name, the club changed it to *Gumsuckers' Gazette* from issue 3.

A meeting was also held with the Folk Lore Society of Victoria to see if they could benefit from sharing of ideas and activities. This was successful and resulted in mutual sharing for many years and the eventual amalgamation of the organisations. The two organisations also combined to Jointly produce the *Gumsuckers' Gazette*.

In 1961, the club started running a Club Dance in addition to the Singabout nights. By 1962 folk was making it into the mainstream press, and in December they made an initial contact with the Nariel musicians and dancers, holding their New Year's Eve Dance in the Nariel Hall.

1963 saw the club, along with the Folk Lore Society and the Council of Adult Education, organise a week long Australian Folk Festival which concluded with a special Singabout in the Lower Melbourne Town Hall.

Towards the end of 1963 the club decided to change its name to the Victorian Folk Music Club to better reflect their interests in contemporary as well as traditional Australian music. In early 1964 *Gumsuckers' Gazette* was also renamed and became *Australian Tradition*, its current title.

November 1964, during the Sydney Bush Music Club's 10th anniver-

sary, Alan Scott journeyed south from Sydney to give an illustrated talk in the Ringwood Town Hall.

In July 1967 the VFMC and the Folk Lore Society of Victoria formally amalgamated, with the Folk Lore Society operating as a sub-committee of the VFMC with specific delegated duties. This was done so that the combined group could continue the collecting work of the Folk Lore Society and preserve their valuable archives. The Folk Lore Society continued in this form until it was finally wound up in 1994, the 35th anniversary year of the VFMC.

Further reading:

<http://www.vfmc.org.au/historyvfmc.php>

<http://www.vfmc.org.au/VFMCHistory.pdf>

<https://bushmusicclub.blogspot.com/2019/09/60-years-of-victorian-folk-music-club.html>

<http://www.reasoninrevolt.net.au/bib/PR0001947.htm>



The *Billablong Band* as featured on the cover of *Singabout* Vol 3 No 4 in 1959.