

STRING BANDS & SHAKE HANDS - The Days of Old Darwin Town

by Jeff Corfield

In the last week of August I was privileged to be part of a very special Festival of Darwin – one that celebrated and paid tribute to a unique multi-cultural community and its wonderful music and dance heritage. This year's festival didn't feature big name southern stars. It featured ordinary "old" Darwin folk, telling their own story, through the music and dance of a by-gone era – and Darwin loved it!

The rich music and dance heritage of Darwin's mixed-race community should be a national treasure, yet it remained largely unknown, even among the broader Darwin population. Its unique tapestry, woven from indigenous, Asian, Torres Strait, Polynesian, Melanesian and European threads, is as much Australian as the more Anglo Celtic dominated folk and community music heritage of southern Australia. Yet, while public awareness of "top end" culture, from TI to Broome, has increased, thanks to artists such as Christine Anu, Seaman Dan and the Pigrim Brothers, Darwin's own contribution has remained largely un-sung - until now.

As the commercial hub and cultural melting pot of the Top End, "old" Darwin drew people from the world over, but especially from Asia and the Torres Strait, to work in the pearling, trochus fishing, live cattle export, railway construction and mining industries. These workers, their families and their mixed race descendents stayed, and in the process, created their own unique and vibrant music and dance culture, which echoes through the "saltwater song-lines" that link Top End communities, even to this day.

Whilst early colonial Darwin sported the usual array of musical societies, choral groups and even a brass band, by far the greatest legacy of this rich musical melting pot was the flourishing string band era of the 1930s and early 1940s, before WWII. Born in the Cubillo family "big house" within the diverse, yet close knit Police Paddock community, the early Filipino *rondallas* (string bands) paved the way for a proliferation of string bands during the 1930s. Groups such as the Manilla String Band, Pon Brothers String Band, Thursday Island String Band, Joe Ponce Band and Darwin String Band entertained locals with a diverse repertoire of traditional and popular Spanish/Filipino, Hawaiian, Island and European styles of music, adapting, exchanging and mixing it along the way to make it their own.

They played for dances and social functions at the Soldier's Hall, Town Hall, Immigrants Hall, the Unemployed Workers Movement (UWM) camp and Buffaloes Football Club, where patrons danced the *Two Step*, *Fox Trot*, *Pride of Erin* and *Barn Dance*. At their own community functions, they also played for dances such as the *Polka-Mazurka*, *Veleta* and *Darwin Shake Hand Dance* (Filipino Barn Dance) - favourites of the mixed race community, but virtually unknown to Darwin's white population. The Cubillo (Manilla) String Band also had a regular gig at Government House, under the patronage of Mrs. Abbott (the administrator's wife), who provided them with uniforms and even some instruments. It was said that many of Darwin's pre-war string band musicians could hold their own with the world's best, evoking comparisons with Cuba's *Buena Vista Social Club*.

World War II scattered Darwin's mixed-race community and with it, the string bands. However, many folk returned to Darwin after the war to resume their lives and raise their families. Housed in the ex army 118 Parap Camp (now Stuart Park) they experienced both hardship and an intensely

rich cultural experience borne of sharing tough times in a close-knit community. It has been said that Parap Camp was the “birthplace of multiculturalism in Australia”. Once again, music played a vital part in community life, as returning string band players and visiting TI pearlers such as Seaman Dan, joined forces to make music, provide entertainment and fight for the right to set up their own “Sunshine Club” for community dances and social functions at Parap Camp. Indeed, music, dance, sport and struggle were the “cement” that bound together that post-war Parap Camp community. They remain the ties that bind, down through the years, to this day.

The journey that took me back to Darwin in August, began some 15 years ago, when I first met Valentine Bynoe McGinness, then one of the last of Darwin’s surviving string band musicians. Val lived but a few streets away from me in Darwin, yet for 10 years I never knew he existed – this wonderful old-time musician, who at 78 played his favourite mandolin or home-made steel guitar with the dexterity and passion of a youngster. I was, at the time, researching old Darwin music, for a presentation at the 1987 National Folk Festival. I am always reminded of folklorist Bill Scott’s astute observation that *“whilst we sit in our folk clubs, singing our folk songs, the folk are somewhere else, singing something different”*. How true this was of Darwin!

When Darwin’s Kath Mills took me to meet her Uncle Val, I was gob-smacked! His vast repertoire of tunes and songs amazed me. His generosity of spirit and willingness to share his music and knowledge disarmed me straight away. Though I knew him for only a short time, we shared a friendship based on love of music. Val became my window into the days of old Darwin town – a time of “string bands and shake hands” as I have since come to call it.

Val’s life spanned most of last century and was woven into that rich Top End tapestry. His life was also a symbol of that unique mix of struggle, sport and music that epitomised Darwin’s multicultural community, especially before TV and Tracy. Born on Valentine’s Day 1910 at the Lucy tin mine south of Darwin, Val and his four siblings inherited the powerful genes of “fighters and singers” from both his Irish father Stephen McGinness and Kungarununj mother Lucy (Alyandabu). Taken away at eight years old when his father died, Val, Lucy and brother Joe endured “starvation rations” in Darwin’s notorious Kahlin Compound for several hungry years, before he ran away in the early 1920s. Over the next 15 years, Val became a skilled blacksmith and wheelwright, a champion footballer, an advocate for half-caste rights – and a fine musician.

It was that great TI song-man and musician Jaffa Ah Matt, who first introduced Val to the flat back mandolin, which was to become his signature instrument. Val and Jaffa were members of the Pon Brothers String Band and Darwin String Band during the mid-1930s - the heyday of the string band era. Val moved to far north Queensland around 1938, where he continued playing music, introducing his “Darwin repertoire” whilst raising a family and building a reputation as a skilled bush mechanic throughout Cape York. It was here, at Coen, that Val taught a young Seaman Dan his first guitar chords.

Val finally returned to Darwin in 1960 and soon resumed playing music with former string band colleagues and a younger generation of musicians from the McGinness and Mills families, in the twilight of the Parap Camp era. Though Rock and Roll, TV and cyclone Tracy finally brought the days of “old Darwin”, as he called it, to a close, Val continued to play his mandolin and home-made steel guitar, for family and friends, right up until the day he died in November 1988.

In September 1988, I was asked by Val’s Darwin family, to record “Uncle’s” music and memories, during the last weeks of his life. What followed was an intense three week period of recording, jamming, reminiscing, laughter and sadness - and music, music, music - before Val went

into hospital and then back to family in Atherton, where he passed away. The legacy of that time is some 12 hours of tape (now deposited in the NT Archives) containing much of Val's music, recorded at his home and various family functions.

Val left behind a rich legacy of tunes, songs, stories and memories accumulated in over 60 years of working and musical life across the Top End. As one of the last of Darwin's old string band melody musicians, Val was the "keeper" of many of the tunes and songs played during the early string band days, which would otherwise have disappeared with time. Always willing to share his music and knowledge and always ready with a joke or yarn, Val lived a life of integrity and commitment to family, to music and to the struggle for equality and dignity. For Val, "*music was a great thing for binding a family together.*" Watching him at 78 years of age, playing with three generations of family musicians, as a fourth generation danced around him, was to understand what that truly meant. New generations of musicians within the extended McGinness, Mills and associated families have inherited this legacy and continue to honour his memory by making great music and continuing the fight for justice and aboriginal rights.

Postscript

In November 1989 Val's grand-niece Allyson Mills and I produced around fifty sets of composite cassettes, containing Val's music and reminiscences, for distribution to his extended family and friends. Over the years, some of this material travelled right round Australia via the "folk process", generating widespread interest. Such interest finally led to a presentation at the 2002 National Folk Festival titled *String Bands and Shake Hands – the Days of Old Darwin Town* as a special tribute to Val McGinness and Darwin's string band days, by myself and Darwin's Mills family and friends.

Whilst in Darwin last November (2001), Jenny Milne of *AusDance NT* approached me about presenting *String Bands and Shake Hands* in Darwin. Urged on by Jenny's enthusiastic persistence, I prepared some background material on the string band and "Sunshine Club" eras, which she duly presented to Festival of Darwin organisers. To their great credit, they ran with the idea, and what evolved was the most wonderful community based project I've ever had the privilege to be involved in.

Festival Artistic Director, Fabrizio Calafuri and team members Ali Mills, Kathy Mills, Jenny Milne, Tony Suttor and countless others, set about the ambitious (and courageous) task of presenting a range of festival activities focussed around the pre and post-war string band and Sunshine Club era, using musicians and dancers from the local community. That community took up the challenge with relish, running countless workshops to teach the old dances and tunes to Darwin's new generations and participating in "community photo scanning" events to entice older residents to bring out their old snaps for inclusion in a special festival photographic display.

The culmination of the week's activities was the major Santos Concert on Darwin's Esplanade on Saturday night August 24, featuring nearly one hundred musicians and dancers, old and young, including several from the "Sunshine Club" era. They called the event *String Bands and Shake Hands – the Days of Old Darwin Town* – which both pleased and humbled me! It was an unforgettable sight, as dancers performed the *Shake Hand Dance*, *Polka Mazurka*, *Tangoette* and *Hula* at ground level, in front of countless thousands, to the music of the new *Darwin Rondalla* and Sunshine Bands, perched on a mid-level stage, whilst overhead, photos of "old" Darwin people and places filled a giant screen on that balmy tropical night.

There were in fact three imports for this special Darwin event – myself, to present a special tribute to Val McGinness, the subject of my soon to be completed short monograph; Ted Egan, who first came to Darwin in 1949 (en route to South America) and stayed; and Seaman Dan, whose successful recording career started when he was just 71 years old! It was a truly delightful piece of circularity that brought Seaman Dan back to Darwin, where his singing career first began, to share in an event celebrating the music passed on by Val McGinness, the man who first taught him guitar chords in Queensland all those years ago!

The huge crowd stayed till the end, enjoying every moment. For the older Darwin mixed-race community, the event restored a sense of pride in an almost forgotten cultural heritage – and a chance to share its riches with the broader community. For newer Darwin residents, it gave them a new dimension to their sense of identity, to their sense of place in this cosmopolitan tropical city. For Darwin as a whole, it will have lasting repercussions, with the community already clamouring for more and widespread interest generated in both local and national media. ABC TV tracked the project throughout and will screen a 30-minute documentary next year (2003), which will generate further interest and bring well-deserved recognition to this unique community music heritage..

I left Darwin, with many great memories. The site and sound of the *Darwin Rondalla* (comprising musicians from Darwin's old and new Filipino communities) playing again at Government House, for the first time since the 1930s, evoked a poignant historical image. Watching Seaman Dan interact and share music with Parap Camp mates he hadn't seen in 50 years, was another highlight. However for me, the most enjoyable festival event was in fact the post-festival community party at Darwin's Railway Institute, attended by countless ex Parap Camp residents, festival workers and performers. Amid the music, dancing and conversation of that wonderful evening, I closed my eyes and tried to picture what it must have been like at the old Sunshine Club in Parap Camp. Was this how it was in the days of old Darwin Town? I'd like to think so!

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30/8/02