

Keep Him My Heart – Returning Music and Sense of Place to Communities

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“Polkas, hulas, shakehands, quicksteps – they played them all, the string bands of old Darwin, and tomorrow night, round sunset, on a stage high above the Arafura Sea, a journey through time will be accomplished, and their sweet, sad music will live again...But how to bring the past back, and not make its return seem mere nostalgia? The theme of this year’s Festival is not just a piece of archival scavenging, but something very like a north Australian Buena Vista Social Club – a tale of revival, life, of tunes enduring and rebirth” So wrote Nicholas Rothwell in the *Australian* of August 23, 2002. He was talking about the 2002 Festival of Darwin, which had taken as its main focus the wonderful music and culture of Darwin’s pre-war string band and Sunshine club era.

They called their event *String Bands and Shakehands – the Days of Old Darwin*, after the presentation I and Darwin’s Mills family and friends gave at the 2002 National Folk Festival. I was both thrilled and humbled by that choice, but apart from sowing the seeds of the festival of Darwin event, I had little else to do - except be there – and I wouldn’t have missed it for anything.

The local community did it all from go to whoa. It took on a life of its own from day one, with all the old Darwin community’s “formidable aunties” as we termed them, organizing dance classes for the kids and making laes, even before the event was approved by FOD. But who would, or could deny them – they were on a mission, to re-live - and revive a musical heritage which was almost lost, hanging by a thread, for want of music and musicians – and for want of pride and recognition

I thought of calling this talk “*It’s on again tonight in dear old Darwin*”, after Ted Egan’s song. For that’s the way it was, right up until the time of Tracy, in one form or another. Whether it was in the unemployment camps or Immigrants Hall of pre-war Darwin, the Parap Camp Sunshine Club of post-war Darwin, or at house parties all over Darwin throughout this period, the call “*it’s on tonight*” signaled a time for revelry, catching up with friends and most of all music and dance. As Darwin author Maisie Austin recalls in her lovely little book *Quality of Life* “*it was not unusual to have over 300 people attend a party ... Kids were sent around the neighborhood to tell people, who wandered in after dinner and joined in the singing, dancing, or just listened to the music*” (Austin, 1992). And what music it was too, this wonderful admixture of Filipino *Rondalla* tunes, Malay Indonesian and TI pearling songs, Hawaiian hulas and popular dance music of the day - all forming part of a colorful Creole string band culture – *part of Darwin’s unrecognized Bohemia*, as Nicholas Rothwell described it (Rothwell, 2002).

However, I chose instead to call it *Keep Him My Heart*, after the title of a 1993 musical about Darwin’s Cubillo family – subtitled *a Larrakia-Filipino Love Story*, written by Darwin’s Gary (Cubillo) Lee. I chose this because it was that play and the events which led to it, and flowed from it, which marked the beginning of a revival - a real revival, of interest, awareness and pride in a musical culture that was almost, but not yet lost, to that community and to us.

The title also evokes the feeling for and the relationship this close knit mixed-race community has, with its music and dance heritage, especially that of the Sunshine Club days. As my good friend Kathy Mills says *it kept people together, kept them strong, kept alive the memories of old times, old ways.*” (Mills, 2002). For old time string band player Val McGinness the music was *“a great thing for binding a family and community together”* (McGinness, 1988, pers comm.). Indeed it was the cement that bound them together and provided their sense of identity – their sense of place, in what was probably the cradle of multiculturalism in Australia.

This Top End tale is about how an almost accidental collection episode in 1988 contributed unwittingly, in a small, but significant way to this revival. It tracks a 15 year path from initial collection, to *Keep Him My Heart*, to the National Folk Festival and finally the Festival of Darwin’s *String bands and Shakehands* event of 2002. It’s a real tale of folk process and revival, albeit erratic and tenuous at times.

As folklore collectors, we are motivated by a range of imperatives and goals, from musicological or anthropological, to socio-political, archivist and performance-driven motives. All are valid in my view. Along with these imperatives go perceived outcomes for use of such material – from pure academic research and publication, to preservation for posterity, to elucidation of our culture and recycling of material for revival performance. In the historic Euro-Australian setting, that revival performance has often been far removed from its source material in space and time, though there are many notable exceptions to this, as witnessed by the work of John Meredith, Rob Willis, Chris Sullivan and many others in more recent times. Generally speaking, the imperative of returning material, in the first instance, to the community from which it came, was not a major issue for earlier Australian collectors. However, for many mixed race and migrant communities, whose hold on their still living musical or folkloric heritage is becoming tenuous, such material, often held by a very few remaining individuals, can provide a lifeline to cultural identity and sense of place.

In my 30 years living and working in northern Australia I have dabbled in folklore and oral history collection – and dabbling is all it has been, as time and circumstances permitted. As such, my collections are meager and my methodology erratic, compared with many here today. Throughout this period, my driving imperative has always been not just the material itself, but what it says about identity and sense of place – the same imperatives that first drew me to the folk revival in the early 1960s. Those of you who have attended workshops I’ve given at national and regional folk festivals over the years would have seen this theme repeated in successive presentations.

Throughout my years of living first in the Kimberley, then in the NT and QLD I have always been intrigued by Bill Scott’s 1980 observation (Stringybark & Greenhide, 1980) that

“Whilst we are sitting in our folk clubs, singing our folk songs, the folk are somewhere else, singing something different” (Scott, 1980).

Never was this truer than of Darwin's *Top End Folk Club* – that legendary gun turret venue facing out across the to the confluence of the Timor and Arafura seas, which in the 1970s and 80s saw regular crowds of 300 plus people on many a magical tropic club night. I took great delight in finding out what that “*something different*” was in Darwin – and I wasn't disappointed!

That's how I came to meet those wonderful Cubillo, Hazelbane, Adams, Angelo and Mills families – and many more, including of course Valentine Bynoe McGinness – one of the last surviving old 1930s Darwin string band players – and perhaps the last surviving melody musician from that era. When I think back on this time I'm reminded of Rob Wills' observation in the forward to his monograph on the *Songs, Tunes and Yarns of Ebb Wren* (Willis and Meridith, 1993) that collectors should “*always look in their own backyard*” before traveling kilometers in search of new material. For nine years I'd lived not 1 km away from Val McGinness and didn't know he existed – this wonderful self-taught mixed-race musician, bush mechanic and jack of all trades. Even after I first heard about the legendary *Uncle Val*, via his niece Kath Mills, it took me the best part of a year of patient nudging before the family took me around to meet this then 77 year old patriarch and keeper of family and community music. Such is the importance of trust, credibility and above all patience, when dealing with these communities – everything happens on a different timeline. As my friend and colleague Karl Neuenfeldt said of recording in the Torres Strait “*It took me 2 years to get someone to sit down with me and name some songs from 12 hours of recordings of a Tombstone Unveiling dance and music evening on Badu*” (Neuenfeldt, pers comm.).

Of course I was gob-smacked when I finally met Val – by his musicianship, repertoire of tunes and songs and willingness to share it with me. His wife Jane too, a Torres Strait lady, had her own vast repertoire of song and dance.

I did a little recording with Val, always under the watchful eyes of Kathy and family and used a little of this in my 1987 National Folk Festival workshop “*Some folk's folk up north*” in Alice Springs, with their permission. Then time and circumstances intervened. Val spent increasing amounts of time away in Queensland with family, whilst my work also kept me out of Darwin for long periods.

It was nearly a year before our paths crossed again – in very different circumstances this time. One September afternoon in 1988 Val's grand niece June came to see me. She told me Uncle Val was dying of stomach cancer, with little time left. Could I come around and record *Uncle Val* for the family, before he went into hospital or passed away?

Of course I said yes, but was daunted by the prospect. I shouldn't have been, for what followed was the most intense period of recording, interviewing, jamming, storytelling, laughing, joking, sadness – and music, music, music I've ever experienced.

We recorded at extended family parties (yes parties – even then), a 50th wedding anniversary, other community functions and at Val's own home. It gave me a wonderful

insight into what it must have been like in the old days of Darwin – a Darwin I and most residents never knew – that *Bohemian underworld* Nicholas Rothwell referred to. Many times three generations of family played along with him – whilst a fourth danced around them. At other times he played just for me. The result was a meager 12-15 hours of stereo cassette tape, some of which was family banter, some favorite family music and jokes, kids fighting, dogs barking – the typical folk collector’s fare! Amongst all that were some real gems of both tunes and songs, from Val’s long musical life experience, spanning most of last century in Australia’s Top End. Then he was gone –first to hospital, then to Atherton with his son’s family finally to his maker, in November 1988.

In the months that followed Val’s grand niece (Kathy Mills’ daughter) Alison and I set about extracting material from the raw tapes for compilation into what became a set of two 90 minute cassettes for copying and distribution to extended family and friends of Val McGinness. We distributed somewhere between 30-50 sets all up, mostly in Darwin, but also to his family in north Queensland.

I also made a couple of cassettes containing around half a dozen dance tunes Val used to play with legendary TI songman and musician Jaffar Ah Matt, in the old 1930s Darwin String Band. These tunes included *Shakehands dance*, *Tea Tree Waltz*, *Ali’s Quickstep* and *Jaffar’s March* – none of which I ‘d come across before – and all of which reputedly had their own special dances attached to them. I used these tapes to teach *Top End Folk Club* musicians such as Tony Suttor, Peter Bate and my son Jamie the tunes. Together with Kathy and Ali Mills, we also taught some of the club’s dancers the *Shakehand’s Dance* and other once-popular dances, including some hula. Before I left Darwin for Townsville in late 1989, we also played these tunes and dances for a *Parap Camp Sunshine Club* reunion – and at our own farewell, to the great joy of those “*formidable aunties*” I referred to earlier!

Thus began a 15 year journey, with its own frustrations, pleasures and intrigue. Having been transferred to Townsville in late 1989, opportunities to visit Darwin for any length of time dwindled. It wasn’t long however, before I started getting enquiries – not just from Darwin, but from all round Australia. “*Are you the bloke who made them Val McGinness (or Darwin stringband) tapes? Could you make me a copy? My auntie (uncle, dad, mum, bush band, folklorist colleague) would love a copy. I had one, but my mum’s tape player chewed it up... that copy of a copy of a copy I had finally gave out!*” “*Where did you get it from?*” I’d ask. “*Not sure, a friend of a friend, who visited Darwin a while back... I think Tony Suttor might have given it to him.*” “*Hey Tony, did you send that Val McGinness tape to anyone?*” “*No, not me! I can’t even find my own copy these days!*”

And so it went on, year after year, as did my encounters with these tunes in a range of places and situations – isn’t the folk process great - alive and well, despite everything? Over the years I heard southern revival bands playing *Tea Tree Waltz*, saw the music in print, found folk from Tassie to TI who had copies of those taped tunes, heard my recording of Val singing *Waltzing Bat Matilda* on the radio and saw it and other sections of these recordings used in the great little documentary film *Buffalo Legends* – about the

history of Australia's first Aboriginal dominated AFL club – the *Darwin Buffalos*. And in amongst all this, I saw both the recordings - and the tunes used in the 1993 Darwin musical *Keep Him My Heart* – the event that saw the first reformation of a Filipino *Rondalla* (string band) in Darwin in 50 years.

So what did I think of all this? Mixed feelings really. As a product of the folk revival and a committed *folk recycler* – as Warren Fahey termed it (Fahey, 2005) I was thrilled to see this material in circulation, being played again, especially in Darwin, and heartened by the interest in this unique Darwin contribution to our folk heritage. However, another part of me was apprehensive about its wide circulation, without the strict permission or sanction of the family who had asked me to record it, not for my own purposes, but for them in the first instance. Knowing the sensitivities involved first hand, I had, for most of that 15 years limited distribution without their specific sanction and had held off finally lodging the original tapes, pending formal family permission – a situation complicated by the strong Jehovah's witness connection of Val's immediate family. The situation caused a deal of personal frustration - and no doubt consternation amongst colleagues anxious to access this Top End material.

In the end however, Val's family and friends had done as much as anyone to circulate the material, both within their own community and beyond that to extended family and friends across the Top End and all over Australia. As Ali Mills says about the importance of keeping this music going.

“It's not as if it's just the past we're talking about. Mum (Kath Mills) has got 29 grand children, after all, spread all over Darwin and Australia. This music's also about the present.” (Alyson Mills, 2002).

Indeed, this diverse community musical heritage, the product of Filipino *Rondallas*, TI and Malay pearlers, Aboriginal and Islander missions, itinerant depression musicians, brass bands, big bands, Hawaiian hula troops, phonograph and radio, was a living treasure in the eyes of that community, one they longed to revisit and pass onto their kids – and share with greater Darwin.

This, more than anything, impelled Kathy, Ali and I to bite the bullet, both by depositing the tapes with the NT Archives Service, commencing a small book on Val's life and music – and to telling the story of *String Bands and Shake Hands – the Days of Old Darwin* at the 2002 National Folk Festival here in Canberra. It hasn't been an easy ride. Bringing the talented and free spirited Mills sisters to Canberra for the 2003 NFF was no small challenge – but worth it, as they were the hit of the festival that year. Finishing our small monograph has also been a frustrating process – especially working from a distance.

So what about this Darwin community music heritage? What is so special about it and why is it so important to this multicultural community? Why did it all but disappear and why do they want so desperately to revive it? In many ways it shares common features with northern coastal and island communities from the Witsundays to Broome. Professor

Phil Hayward, in his book *Tide Lines* describes such communities as *archipelagic*, on a number of levels, from the physical-geographic, to the ethnological, where “islands” of music and culture are shared across the *tide lines* of transient contact, which itself brings forth a certain *exoticism*. But Darwin was much more than just another Top End pearling community – it was literally and culturally where “*east met west*” as historian Peter Forrest observed (NT News, 20/8/02) Filipinos, Koepangers, Malays, Greeks, TIs, Japanese, Chinese all came to work in the pearling, the meat works, the railway and live cattle trade, in what Ernestine Hill described a “*that ramshackle, piratical old Darwin*” (Hill, 190?). They stayed, or moved to and fro, inter-married with local *Larrakia* and *Kungarakan* people and created a unique music and dance culture along the way – a fusion of diverse influences - a rich musical tapestry. The early *Rondallas* began amongst this atmosphere in the Cubillo “big house” in Police Paddock – one such cultural *island* in a sea of white-dominated, polite Darwin society. They knew little of each other, and still don’t! The *Rondallas* thrived and were joined in the 1930s, by a proliferation of Filipino and TI based string bands, playing for dances all over Darwin, from Government House to unemployment camps.

Another layer within this archipelagic strata was also present – those “*island*” communities comprised of mixed race stolen generations, taken away, either literally to off-shore islands like Croker and Mellville, or “*islands*” within the Darwin community, such as Kahlin compound. Experience in such “*island*” communities, whether harsh or benign, left inmates with a lifelong fixation about *identity* – the need to *know who you are and where you came from* according to Kath Mill’s says (Mills, pers comm.). Music and dance played – and continue to play an important role in this search for identity and sense of place for these people, as a means of “*calling their culture to them*” as Kath describes it. “*We don’t just sing songs of this place, but from all over (when we get together), so no-one is left out*” Kath says. Yet, in another sense they also felt “*shamed*” about this Creole culture – and kept it to themselves, both because of this shame and as means of “*exclusion /inclusion*” a sort of secret password to re-enforce their shared community identity, in contrast to the broader European society.

WWII scattered Darwin’s population and along with it the string bands. However many mixed race folk returned and were, for many years housed in former army huts at Parap118 Camp. Music again provided the ties that bind. Ad hoc bands were formed and re-formed and parties and dances organized, especially when the TI boys (like Seaman Dan) came to town. Still restricted by the Aboriginal ordinance, they set up their own *Sunshine Club* as their cultural focus and formed the *Australian Half Caste Progressive Association*, to fight the race laws.

TV and Tracy pretty much saw the end of this era, as people died, or moved away. However, musicians like Delphin Cubillo, Jaffar AhMat, Babe Damaso were still around right up into the early 1980s, though I didn’t know them personally (mores the pity) and to my knowledge no lasting recordings of these fine Darwin musicians survive. However, fortunately for myself and this community I did get to know Val McGinness, and record at least some of his vast repertoire him and that community. As a still active and skilled melody musician – on both mandolin and Hawaiian steel guitar, he was the “keeper” of

many old string band tunes , most of which would otherwise have disappeared for lack of players.

So, when Garry Lee set about writing his family musical “*Keep Him My Heart*” where did he turn for the old tunes for his fledgling *Rondalla*? – you guessed it, my old tapes! Not all the tunes came from that source but important ones like the *Shakehand Dance*, *Tea Tree Waltz* and *Jaffar’s March* did. And didn’t Darwin love it – both old and new! That *Rondalla*, containing both original (1930s and 40s) guitarists Gabe Hazelbane and Benny Cubillo, younger Cubillo family members, plus recent Filipino migrants, still exists – albeit tenuously at times. It would be great to bring them to a National Folk Festival some time.

Which brings me back to that Festival of Darwin show. It started when I was visiting Darwin prior to the 2002 National to organize the Darwin Mills sister’s visit for the *String Bands and Shake Hands* presentation in Canberra. As I was about to leave, my friend Jenny Milne of Ausdance collared me and said “*how come you’re doing this in bloody Canberra and not Darwin?*” to which I replied that no-one had bloody asked us!

That quip set in train a 6 month frenzy of lobbying, arm-twisting and activity by Jenny, Ali Mills and those ever-present “*formidable aunties*” to bring back to life something very special, involving literally hundreds of community members in dance and music performance, community events, resurrecting old photos and re-living old times. Tony Suttor undertook to provide the music, again much of it from those dreaded tapes, to both *Rondalla* and a revival *Sunshine Club band*, made up of community members and Top End Folk Club musicians, including me. People from 8 to 80 practiced dances from *Shakehands* to *Veleta*, to *Pola Masurka* to *Tangoette* and *Hhula*, musicians practiced and aunties made endless laes - for months!

Festival events included community dances at old Darwin halls, photo exhibitions, a tribute to Val McGinness (my contribution) and of course the main festival concert event on Darwin’s esplanade at sunset. Seaman Dan, that Septuagenarian singer from TI, who started his singing career in Darwin was there, as was Ted Egan, who hit Darwin in 1951 en route to South America and stayed – to eventually become NT administrator. It was an unforgettable sight – a three level stage with musicians in the middle, dancers at ground level and a huge screen showing images of old Darwin people and places above. The music played, the dancers danced and the huge crowd stayed till the end, enjoying every moment. For the old Darwin mixed race community, it restored a sense of pride in their cultural legacy and helped “*piss off the shame job mentality*” (Dempsey, 2000) as Tiwi Islander and former Australian footballer Bill Dempsey once urged. For newer Darwin residents, it gave them a new dimension to their sense of place in cosmopolitan Darwin. For Darwin as a whole, it set in train a process and community awareness that will have lasting, if uncertain repercussions.

I left that Darwin festival with many great memories. The site of the Darwin *Rondalla* once again playing at Government House, for the first time since the 1930s. Watching Seaman Dan once again share music with mates he’d not seen for 50 years. All those

people from 8 to 80 doing the *Darwin Shakehand Dance* as the sun set over the Arafura Sea. However, for me, the most enjoyable festival event was the post-festival community party at Darwin's old Railway Institute. Amidst the music, dancing and conversation of that wonderful evening I closed my eyes and tried to picture what it must have been like in the heyday of the old Parap Camp Sunshine Club – not a stone's throw away from there. Was this how it was in those days of old Darwin town? I'd like to think so. And is this what folk music and folklore collection is about? I'd like to think so too – and you know what the best thing of all was? – they didn't have to play those bloody tapes of mine any more!!.