

SINGABOUT

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THE OLD RABBITER'S GIFT

In this day and age no self-respecting Bush Band would be seen – or heard – without its lagerphone. But it was not always thus. Forty-five years ago the now ubiquitous noise maker was unknown. In fact, before nineteen fifty-two there wasn't even a bush band.

That was the year when I had a brilliant idea. I played the old traditional bush instrument called the button accordion, and my brain-wave was to con a couple of my mates, Brian and Jack into joining me to form a group which would sing old bush songs to the accompaniment of the squeeze box, as it was affectionately called.

Then Brian and I went on a visit to my family in my home town of Holbrook.

'Come up to my place tonight', said my brother Claude. 'I've got a surprise for you. Bring your squeeze box'.

In due course we arrived and I was ordered to play. 'Give us something lively', ordered big brother, going into the adjoining room. I swung into "click Goes the Shears" with Brian singing. Then there came this crashing, jingling rhythmic sound as Claudie marched in bouncing a strange looking instrument!

It consisted of a bald-headed hair broom – they were made entirely of wood in those pre-plastic years – covered with loosely nailed-on bottle tops, which cov-

ered the head and most of the handle.

As Claude bounced it along the floor to the down-beat, he alternately struck and sawed at the handle with a serrated waddy. Then he proudly pronounced those portentous words:

‘Introducing – The One and Only Celebrated Lagerphone!’

Excitedly we wrested it away from him, or rather Brian did. My hands were strapped to the squeeze box. After a couple of tunes, we paused for another beer and the obvious question: ‘Where in the hell did you get that from’?

And he told us the story.

The local branch of the Red Cross Society had organised a fund-raising “Amateur Hour” concert – open to all performers, with prizes for various sections.

An old Rabbit poisoner turned up. He came from about ten miles out, where there was a little village called Lankeys Creek, and brought to the concert this, as yet un-named percussion instrument which he played to a piano accompaniment and scored a prize in the novelty section.

He certainly was novel, and brother Claude could hardly wait to get home and make one for himself. He coined the name “Lagerphone” because the words “K. B. Lager” appeared on the instrument several hundred times!

I was particularly interested in its origin, because I had had certain business connections with the local rabbit poisoners, or stiffeners, as they were called.

Most of these old characters were loners, or hatters, and either lived in a hut on a big sheep or cattle station, or camped in a tent on a creek bank. They all had the reputation of being ‘not the full quid’, or, as some folk put it, “a sheep short in the back paddock”.

Some months of the year they trapped the rabbits, but for most of the time, they poisoned. The poison they used was strychnine alkaloid, and it was considered that the absorption of traces of the poison over long periods of time was responsible for their madness.

The poison bait was mixed to a carefully guarded recipe and I was one of the few people who had managed to discover the secret ingredients. The basis of the mixture was either chopped raw carrots or chopped thistle roots. To a bucket of this feed would be added a time of quince jam, a couple of teaspoonsful of strychnine, plus the decoy.

The decoy was the secret ingredient and each of the old blokes had his personal

favourite, which would be one of the following: Oil of Cumin, Oil of Rhodium, which was distilled from the wood of certain rose-bushes; Oil of Aniseed, or Essence of Vanilla.

I worked as a dispenser in the local chemist's shop, to which the rabbit-stiffeners would adjourn on Saturday mornings after selling their skins.

First they would ensure that none of their mates were in the shop; then, after looking up and down the street would dart in and ask in a hoarse whisper for "Two bobs worth of Oil of Cumin", or whatever they used. When the little round bottle was safely tucked into a waist-coat pocket they would proceed to sign the poisons register and buy their ounce of strychnine. At intervals throughout the morning I would be serving the Rhodium, Aniseed, or Vanilla fanciers.

I came to realise that I was the custodian of the secret of all the decoys used in the district, and after getting approval from my boss I compounded a "Master Decoy" consisting of a blend of all the above mentioned oils and essences. I called my invention "*Nevamiss Rabbit Decoy*", and sold it at twice the price of a single ingredient.

I had to do some hard selling and spin a few lies to get the old stiffeners to change over to my product, but soon everyone was using "*Nevamiss*" with great success.

Forty years rolled by. Our first every Bush Band, called "*The Bushwhackers*" was an immediate success and soon there were dozens of imitators in the field. They all used the Lagerphone and when hair brooms with wooden heads yielded to the onslaught of plastics, the instrument grew into all sorts of shapes and sizes.

A few years ago I heard of one old stiffener still living at Lankeys Creek and I decided to visit him to tape his reminiscences.

Back in the 1950s Lankeys Creek consisted of a wine shanty which doubled as a post office, and it was conducted by an old lady whom we shall call Mrs. X. She had run the place for many years, and the official title, painted above the door was "The Lankeys Creek Wine Palace". There were several houses scattered about the neighbourhood, and a couple of miles to the south was Wantagong, a big sheep property.

To the north and the east lay two cattle stations, Coppabella and Yarrara. Between them these pastoral holdings employed thirty of forty men, and these made up the clientele of the Lankeys Creek Wine Palace.

The old rabbit poisoner's name was Sunshine Miller. He had celebrated his 80th birthday the night before our arrival and a powerful hang-over slightly dampened the brightness of his repartee! However, he did recall the heydays of the now extinct shanty when the station hands would come riding in for a Saturday afternoon of fights and jollification. Of Mrs. X, he said they called her wine "Block & Tackle". After four glasses, you'd walk around the block and tackle anybody! He claimed that she had more miraculous powers than Jesus, having made an omelette from one goose-egg and fed eleven men with it!

At the back of the shanty, under a big pepper tree, stood a shed, containing a big old double bed, covered with wheat-sacks for a mattress. This was the "Dead House" where the drunks were put when they passed out. "It held six corpses if yer put 'em on crosswise", said Sunshine, "And the next morning when they woke up, she used to charge them two-and-six for accommodation!" But time brings its changes. Except for Sunshine the old stiffeners are all gone. The Two cattle stations have been bulldozed and planted with radiata pines, which the locals call "Green Slime". The Wine Palace was burnt to the ground in a bush fire. All that remains is the big stone fireplace, with its six-foot wide opening and the great pepper tree in the yard.

But the Lagerphone – the old rabbiter's gift to the nation – flourishes mightily and can be heard throughout the land.

John Meredith 16/1/97

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