

PAM BROWN

Launch: Alan Wearne's  
*The Australian Popular Songbook*

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We're here to welcome the publication of Alan Wearne's collection of poems - *The Australian Popular Songbook*.

I remember pocket-sized Boomerang songbooks from my childhood. They were also called 'Songsters'. They were different from sheet music in that they didn't usually have any musical notation. They simply had the words of popular songs of the day.

The first locally-printed songsters originated in the mid-1850s, when popular entertainment was a part of the thriving, yet isolated, goldfields.

There's no doubt that the more sentimental the song lyrics the more popular the song. And these popular songs appeared in the songsters that often came out every month. Early music halls favoured heartfelt songs that the artistes rendered with appalling mock tragedy, complete with gushing tears and flourished handkerchiefs.

The growth of the songster in the twentieth century ran parallel to the advent of the recorded music and broadcast industries. The music industry delivered hit after hit and craze after craze via the new technology - the wireless.

So Alan's choice of these 'Songsters' as a template for a book of poems that are mostly nostalgic for decades-old popular culture, seems apt.

The book is divided into sections 'Seven Popular Australian Songs', 'Songs My Mother May Have Taught Me', 'It's Babyboomer Partytime in Oz', 'Eagle Rock and Other Aussie Hits', 'sophisticatedly', 'The Metropolitan Poems', and 'Breakfast With Darcy'.

Alan's poems are definite 'memory-joggers'. Reading the

very first poem I found that I had no idea who 'Terry Clark' was. So I researched 'Terry Clark' and discovered that he had died 25 years ago. No wonder I couldn't remember anything about him. Then I learned from Alan's notes that he was part of a bunch of criminals called the 'Mr Asia Drug Syndicate'.

So the notes at the back of the book were essential for my comprehension, and I can imagine that if you're twenty, thirty or forty years younger than me you might be wanting even more notes.

Who would know, without the aid of The Notes that 'Billy Bigears' was the lampoonists' name for an early 1970s Prime Minister, William McMahon, or that 'IMT' stands for 'In Melbourne Tonight', a 1960s tv show hosted by 'Gra Gra' - the late television personality Graham Kennedy (although the recent biopic on Graham 'The King' Kennedy might have rekindled interest), or that, from these lines 'if Commos got Moscow the Groupers Rome/ and you can find em anywhere send em home' that 'Groupers' were right-wing Roman Catholic activists?

And yes, most of these poems are nostalgic -

Bands and musos, mostly sentimental favourites, are well-represented here - Richard Clapton, the Melbourne band The Sports, The Ted Mulry Gang, the Little River Band, ABC-TV's Countdown - Tim and Debbie, from Rod Quantock's 'Australia, you're standing in it', the tv precursors, in a way, of Kim and Brett, except younger and cooler (more 'groovy' - this is 1979). And around that same time a young staffer ogles a girl in a pool at a house where the then-premier of South Australia, Don Dunstan, is in the kitchen cooking; Vietnam veterans on R&R (rest and recreation) visit the fleshpots of Kings Cross, Sydney; the Bert Deling 1974 masterpiece 'Pure Shit' is given homage - yes, I saw that film and I even knew several of the cast members - my personal brush with fame.

A lot of the poems in this collection are like that. There's the 1950s ABC children's radio show 'The Argonauts' which, although educational, was happily déclassé.

As the cover blurb says 'ever the master of the Australian vernacular' Alan's poems do their utmost to reclaim the everyday

speech of what used to be called 'ordinary Australians' now transformed to 'working families' - obviously bringing to mind C.J. Dennis, *ΠΟ* (who shares the book's dedication), Wilson Tuckey and maybe Bob Katter, and, at a stretch, Paul Hogan.

Alan, I think, has an interest in the Great Australian curio.

There are amazingly original similes: 'screeching like a plover', and phrases; 'sour-joyous stops and starts', 'a daggy reverence' - and this is Peter Allen in the poem 'I Go To Rio' - 'with bodytalk more pirouette than scrum, and freckled with/ chutzpah, see him, off he prances...'

Alan is a keen satirist. Take, for instance, a doubly-layered poem, filled with rhyme, that satirises the relationship between the infamous corrupt cop, Roger Rogerson and the hit man Neddy Smith and links the tale to the historical site of the first fleet landing - called 'Bound for Botany Bay'. (Very complicated connections there)

And 'A World of Our Own' (The Seekers isn't it?) a poem of couplets that sends up a Liberal-voting Melbourne upper-class faced with difficult decisions -

Will Claire attend the Boat Race dance?  
Have I a pre-selection chance?

In my study Nigel twitched:  
'It's Lucy, Dad, we must get hitched.'

And I to ease us from this jolt,  
poured both a treble single malt.

At first glance this might seem to be a very patriotic book indeed but on closer examination the reader detects a wry undertone.

The poetry can also seem a bit obtuse in its infusion of Australiana particular to Alan's world. Imagined oral histories - a monologue by a turn-of-the-century footy player, a union organiser in the early 1960s, strange old-fashioned rituals like the family on a Sunday drive, one poem 'My Old Man's A Groovy

Old Man' pictures a very politically incorrect old dad that brings to mind episodes of soap operas, heady times (and that's a pun you'll recognize once you read the poem) - perhaps it's Summer Bay.

Alan lives in permanent exile from Melbourne. And there is a poem comprised of rhymed triplets (or tercets) about the exile that Melbournites have sought by heading overseas for the last 60 years - from 1948 on

From Station Pier we saw the farce:  
as with some yawning blast of brass  
he dropped his daks and bared his arse.

Vulgar isn't it ? - the stanzas continue through five decades to 2004

For each a headspace, labeled, zoned:  
tripping, straight, pissed, coked or coned...  
missed the plane, too fuckin' stoned!

The second last section of the book 'The Metropolitan Poems' begins with 'Seventeen Illawarra Couplets' that make the district sound like a veritable den of iniquity and with the recent goings-on of the developers and the councillors down there in the 'Gong, it's probably a fair representation.

In a divergence from the 'Songbook' this section has actual sheet music for a musical interlude, dedicated to Ivor Indyk, the book's publisher. Called 'Sarsaparilla', it is a calypso tribute to Patrick White and you can actually play and sing it, thanks to Alan's helpmates Wayne Dixon and Brett McKern.

I don't want to go on and on as I know you're keen to hear Alan perform some of these poems. So I'll just mention a few of the now-departed or dead'uns covered in 'The Metropolitan Poems' - there's an imaginary monologue from Ruth Nash, the New Year's Eve hostess of the mysteriously murdered Bogle-Chandlers; Terry Clark of the Mr Asia Drug Syndicate turns up again, this time in Neutral Bay; there's B.A. Santamaria - those catholic 'Groupers' reappear, and Jim Cairns described by Alan

as having a 'stoic melancholy'; a Joseph Stalin follower in Ascot Vale, Melbourne; and, set in later times, there are two ballads - one celebrating the Knox City shopping centre and the other set in the 1990s in Fitzroy's (and I quote) 'happy het'ro hunting ground'.

The final section 'Breakfast with Darky' is the sad tale of a failed writer, a social realist, a failed socialist too who, as a one-book wonder, has written the tale of Darky Nolan - a socialist committed enough to attract ASIO surveillance. The poem's title refers to his offering some breakfast to the spy parked outside his house. But, finally, the writer is a disappointment to the cause.

Every book has a typo but Alan is lucky enough to have two. My knowledge of hippiedom alerted me to the mis-spelling of 'Desiderata' in the 'Knox City Ballad' and my vast knowledge of 70s rock'n'roll noticed another incorrect spelling - 'Ted M-u-l-r-A-y' in the notes at the back of the book. It is The Ted 'Mulry' Gang - without an 'a'. An important note!

I was going to say that this book is 'a hoot'. But I'm not sure what a 'hoot' is - what's the etymology of 'hoot' - is it an Australian word? But there are also some very poignant moments - family poems, the war effort, a Scottish emigrant unhappily stuck living in Box Hill South and so on. Then I thought maybe I can say that it's also, at times, a bit 'camp' but I think Alan might not agree, so, instead I'll say that it's a pleasure to read and that a good proportion of *The Australian Popular Songbook* is fun and often very funny too!

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**Pam Brown**, since 1971, has published fourteen books and six chapbooks of poetry & prose. Her collection *Dear Deliria* (Salt Publishing, UK) won the Kenneth Slessor Prize, the NSW Premier's Award for Poetry in 2004. For five years, from 1997-2002, she was the poetry editor for the Australian literary quarterly *Overland* magazine. She is a contributing editor to the U.S.-based annual of poetry and poetics *Fulcrum* and the international online journal *How2*. She is also the associate editor of the online journal *Jacket*.