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# Locating the canon in Tamworth: historical narratives, cultural memory and Australia's 'Country Music Capital'

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## Abstract

*This article concerns the regional city of Tamworth, New South Wales, Australia, a place that prides itself on its reputation as Australia's home of country music. We consider the ongoing memorialisation of country music in Tamworth, and how the processes associated with the project of articulating country music's past work to create and maintain something that can be recognised (and experienced) as a dominant narrative or an Australian country music 'canon'. Outlining a number of instances in which the canon is produced and experienced (including in performances, rolls of honour and monuments built around the city), the article explores the ways in which this narrativisation of Australia's country music history contributes to a certain kind of memory of the genre's past.*

To walk down Peel Street in Tamworth, New South Wales, during the annual Country Music Festival in January is to experience cacophony. Sound emanates from every direction. Busker after busker lines the footpath, each with amplifiers to enable their performances to compete – or overlap and merge – with those of others. Local country radio station, 2TM, broadcasts live and loud from a caravan. Passers-by are loudly encouraged to stop and watch a reptile display, a whip-cracking demonstration, a line dancing performance. Cicadas chirp tirelessly in the trees above. Crowd members try to make their conversation heard above it all. The resulting sonic encounter is of a wall of dissonance that is both confusing and exhilarating.

Part of what is going on in Tamworth underneath all this noise has less to do with the annual festival, however, and more to do with the production of and custodianship over the history of country music in Australia. This article is concerned with one particularly visible – perhaps even dominant – discourse about country music's past that is constructed and represented in Tamworth's public spaces, the self-made 'Country Music Capital' of Australia. We visited Tamworth on two occasions during 2011, including a 2-week visit that coincided with the annual Country Music Festival. During this time, we noted a range of ways in which stories surrounding country music's history are produced and circulated in this city, and here we reflect on some of our observations. Our research belongs to a larger project about popular music and cultural memory, which considers the ways in which 'official' accounts

of popular music history and heritage rub up against the more personal recollections of individuals.<sup>1</sup> In Tamworth, we found that what operates as something approaching an 'official' account of country music is materialised in real spaces at a number of memorials and museums, as well as performed in a range of annual ceremonies. While this public memorialisation of country music links Tamworth to other international 'homes of country music', most notably Nashville, Tennessee, Tamworth is the only city in Australia that has established such a strong claim on the country music genre. Add the fact that country music itself is heavily invested in heritage, storytelling and honouring the work of its songwriters through a strong tribute and covers tradition within its musical practice, and it seems that the cultural formation that is country music is, perhaps, best thought of as a ready-made memory culture, even in its most contemporary incarnations.

Before we begin, it is important to make clear this article's parameters. The argument we present draws partly on observations made during the 2011 Tamworth festival, but our concern is not with the festival per se. And while the article focuses on an aspect of country music heritage in Tamworth and its associated tourism, our interest is not with country music's relationship with Tamworth tourism, nor indeed the history of country music or the particularities of country music's content, historical, musical or otherwise.<sup>2</sup> Rather, this article is concerned with the ongoing memorialisation of country music in Tamworth, and with how the processes associated with that project of articulating country music's past work to create and maintain something that can be recognised (and experienced) as a dominant narrative, or an Australian country music 'canon'.

It is also important to point out that we do not intend to suggest that there are no alternatives to a nominally 'mainstream' articulation of country music history in Tamworth (or elsewhere in Australia); indeed, Tamworth is home to a variety of sub-genres and marginal communities formed around country music, including a thriving bluegrass scene, which exist concurrently with the discourses and practices we describe below.<sup>3</sup> Neither are we suggesting that the discourse we outline has no internal counterpoints, arguments, tensions or detractors. However, these 'alternatives' to a country music 'mainstream' are not the subject of our inquiry. We begin instead with an analysis of what we see as the most prominent discourse, in order to explore some of the very processes that make it become – or appear to us as – dominant. Our work, then, is part of an attempt to understand in more complex terms the processes that contribute to the public remembering of certain aspects of popular music culture over others.

### **Tamworth: Australia's 'Country Music Capital'**

Tamworth is a rural city located in the New England region of New South Wales, with a population of over 50,000.<sup>4</sup> The city has been hosting an annual festival celebrating country music since the early 1970s, which is now just one event in a year-long programme of activities. These activities, together with monuments in the city's spaces, acknowledge country music as central to its identity.<sup>5</sup> At other times during the year the country music 'identity industry' in Tamworth continues to operate, albeit not quite so spectacularly, with events like the mid-year 'Hats Off to Country Music' festival, and the ongoing activities of Tamworth's key country music institutions, such as radio station 2TM and the Australian Country Music

Foundation's Hall of Fame, as well as a number of museums, public memorials, street signage, recording studios and country music education facilities in the city.

Tamworth is not alone in its commercial exploitation of musical heritage, and there is a growing body of academic work that is concerned with the ways in which music contributes to place identity, marketing and tourism (see, for example, Cohen 2007; Frost 2008). Indeed, the most prominent strand of writing and research about Tamworth focuses on the city's status as the self-proclaimed 'Country Music Capital' of Australia and comes from a tourism perspective, with a small body of writing on the topic emerging from cultural geography (for example, Connell and Gibson 2003; Gibson and Davidson 2004; Gibson and Connell 2005). This work considers the ways in which Tamworth came to use country music as a marketing strategy for sustained, year-round tourism through, for example, the 'landscape repackaging' that made music visible beyond the festival (Connell and Gibson 2003, p. 233). Central to these discussions are the politics of place marketing with regard to Tamworth's status as Australia's Country Music Capital. While the work of Gibson and colleagues is concerned with the ways in which heritage discourse produces Tamworth's identity, and considers the effects of this rural strategy on the experience of residents and the viability of tourism, it is not so concerned with the particularities of the historical and heritage discourse that is on offer.

Tamworth's status as Country Music Capital is owed largely to the entrepreneurial spirit of a small number of its residents and business people who saw potential in an emergent music scene and turned it into a well-organised strategy for rural renewal. The phrase 'Country Music Capital' is essentially part of this marketing strategy, and can be seen around the city on signs and billboards, and on memorabilia (see Figure 1). As one such entrepreneur, Max Ellis, puts it on his website, 'The History of Country Music in Australia', Tamworth's centrality to country music in Australia was anything but an 'organic' process, and was initiated by key figures at Tamworth's radio station, 2TM, which began to use the phrase 'Country Music Capital' to describe the city on air in 1969:

... none of this happen[ed] by chance or good luck. It was the result of an extraordinary campaign, which succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of those original 2TM visionaries. (Ellis 2005)

The original 'Country Music Capital' campaign and its ongoing implementation is underpinned by what Chris Gibson and Deborah Davidson have identified as a complex network of invested parties that continue to be involved in the sustenance of Tamworth's image and identity, including promoters, local and state governments, media, sponsors, industry bodies and, of course, musicians and punters (Gibson and Davidson 2004, pp. 393–4). However, while the constructed relationship between Tamworth and country music can certainly be understood as a strategy for regional renewal and sustained tourism, Country Music Capital was also concerned with some of those aforementioned entrepreneurs wanting to stake a claim on the direction of 'AUSTRALIAN country music' (Ellis 2005). The development and promotion of the genre as Australian, rather than as a derivative of American country music or reliant upon imported acts, was embedded in the Country Music Capital initiative. Indeed, the relationship between Australian and American country music continues to concern some of the scene's custodians who worry about



Figure 1. Sign outside Tamworth Visitor Information Centre, which also houses the Walk a Country Mile Museum.

contemporary Australian artists aping American models of country music practice, thus threatening the survival of any distinctive aspects of Australian country music (Smith 1994).

In broad terms, country music refers to a 'genre and sensibility in music production, marketing and consumption' (Gibson 2008) and is popularly attributed to a North American heritage, with Nashville seen as its industry centre. Arriving in Tamworth, we had a general sense of the genre which, as Richard Peterson observes in his oft-cited work, draws 'passionate commitment from its fans with the disdain of the elites' (Peterson 1997, p. xiv), but we were less aware of the particular narratives being told of the genre's development in Australia. John Minson and Max Ellis, two important figures in the creation of Tamworth's country music image, have identified

four key characteristics which define country music in Australia: 'simple chords, strong storyline, memorable chorus, country instruments' (Ellis n.d.). These characteristics in many ways mirror the five-part criteria proposed by Eric Watson, prolific writer and recorder of Australian country music's history. He further specifies that a song needs to show evidence of 'a concern with the country, either in setting, subject matter, theme, attitudes or viewpoint expressed' and moreover that 'this concern will not be merely contained in it, but basic to it' (Watson 1976, p. 1). However, an interest in 'the country' is not just a matter for the lyrics. Graeme Smith (1994, 2005) highlights some of the complexities of the genre and argues that Australian country music has its own stylistic range which, as John Whiteoak (2003, p. 25) notes, sees the genre's national distinctiveness as being based in 'sound and performance' rather than in 'titles and lyrics'.

Popular histories of the genre, including the account in Tamworth's Walk a Country Mile interpretive museum, acknowledge the influence of styles from the USA, but also suggest strongly that Australian country music has a history that precedes this influence, with roots to be found in a well-established folk music tradition and bush poetry and balladry (Watson 1976; Smith 2005; Gibson 2008). Staking a claim for an *Australian* kind of country music is explicitly intertwined with heritage discourse in Tamworth and the way that country music's past is remembered. And so the principles that underpin the development of Country Music Capital with regard to nurturing an Australian version of the country music genre, come to be replicated in the organisation of the Tamworth Country Music Festival (with its emphasis on Australian artists), the Country Music Awards (which has included awards such as 'Best Bush Ballad' and 'Best Heritage Song'), and organisations like the Country Music Association of Australia (the CMAA, the industry body responsible for the development and promotion of Australian country music and administering the annual awards ceremony) and the Australian Country Music Foundation (ACMF) which was formed to 'collect, preserve and display Australia's country music heritage' (ACMF website).

In drawing attention to the presence of particular types of historical narratives in Tamworth our work resonates with a recently published article by Toby Martin (2011), and his perspective on the 2010 festival, at which debates around what constitutes 'authentic' Australian country music came to the fore.<sup>6</sup> At the festival that year, Martin observed that a range of

country music commentators – fans, musicians and those with an economic or emotional stake in the festival – ... tended to have a fairly strict aesthetic criteria in mind when defining what Australian country music was, criteria that displayed a particular sense of the past, tradition and history. (Martin 2011, p. 154)

These criteria referred principally to the bush ballad. For these commentators Tamworth was viewed to be the 'premier site of preservation' for an Australian musical form that is on the verge of extinction due to the increasing commercialisation of country music and its related genres (Martin 2011, pp. 154, 159). These debates lead Martin to argue that bush ballads, as what he terms an 'invented tradition', incorporate historical narratives and act as sites of performance and preservation of this heritage. Moreover, Martin also sees these narratives as having a nationalistic function, with Tamworth supporting 'unequivocally and repeatedly' an Australian country music tradition rooted in a patriotism that works to legitimise the city's claim to

the Australian-ness of the form and its centrality in Australian heritage (Martin 2011, p. 170). We return to the notion of Australian-ness below; however, where our work differs is in its focus on exposing some of the very processes through which the kinds of stories alluded to by Martin become dominant.

### Tamworth's memorial landscape

Tamworth's landscape is scattered with material markers of country music's place in the city's local mythology and any discussion of the city's connection to the genre would necessarily include a sketch of these memorials (see also Gibson and Davidson 2004; Martin 2011). From museums of memorabilia (Walk a Country Mile Museum, Australian Country Music Hall of Fame, Wall of Fame at Lindsay Butler Studio), to likenesses of country stars created in wax (Gallery of Stars Wax Museum), to huge granite boulders housing plaques of tribute (Roll of Renown monument, Tamworth Songwriters Association Tribute monument), to a large-scale replica of the Golden Guitar statuette awarded during the annual Country Music Award ceremony (the Big Golden Guitar), to names fixed in footpaths to commemorate award winners (Winners Walkway, Galaxy of Stars), to bronze busts that sit sentry over the city's Bicentennial Park – these markers are memorials to country music which in turn produce and reproduce themselves as reminders of the importance of country music in Tamworth's real spaces. Names and songs are memorialised in Tamworth's public spaces because it is the Country Music Capital, but Tamworth is, to some extent, the Country Music Capital because they are memorialised there. Many of these monuments, including the Hands of Fame,<sup>7</sup> were established in the 1970s during the early stages of the city's reimagining as Country Music Capital, and some of them feature as part of annual ceremonies of commemoration that are held during the Festival in January each year, over which the ACMF presides.

While it may be true that, as Gibson and Davidson note, memorials and museums function during Tamworth's non-Festival months to 'provide material sites for tourists in the off-season [and] solidify images of place, capture music in the landscape, and aim for a more even spread of tourist trade throughout the year' (Gibson and Davidson 2004, p. 397), what interests us is precisely what kind of presence these monuments cast. They are not simply reflections of music's place in this landscape, but rather tell a very particular kind of story about the genre's past in Australia.

What we noticed most of all as we toured these sites around Tamworth is the clear repetition of particular stars and songs, to whom homage is perpetually paid. These come to form what we would identify to be something very much like a 'canon' of Australian country music. As Motti Regev writes in his introduction to a special issue of *Popular Music* devoted to the canon:

canons – as objects of worship, as foci of rituals of valorisation (and even pilgrimage) – comprise a realm of sacredness within fields of art and in the cultural field in general. The works and the authors that comprise the canon are supposedly the undisputed 'masterpieces' and 'geniuses' of the art form. (Regev 2006, p. 1)

Thus, the canon frames contemporary understandings of popular music by way of calling attention to a small number of examples from its past. For example, as we

walked through Tamworth, it became clear that Smoky Dawson is a performer with a firm place in Tamworth's canonical telling of Australia's country music's history. His inclusion in the canon has been guaranteed via a range of honours and activities which repeat his position there: he imprinted his palm at the Hands of Fame as one of its inaugural inductees, but he is also a figure in the Galaxy of Stars Wax Museum (see [Figure 2](#)), has been acknowledged on the Roll of Renown, has an exhibit in the Australian Country Music Hall of Fame, features at the Tamworth Songwriters Association (TSA) Songwriters Tribute, appears in the Walk a Country Mile museum, and at the time of writing there was a fundraising effort underway to raise enough money to erect a bronze memorial to him to join the other busts in Bicentennial Park. Other performers who enjoy similar multifarious honourings include, for example, Tex Morton, Slim Dusty, Joy McKean and Buddy Williams.

While popular music studies has only recently begun to turn its attention to canons and canonisation (see, for example, Kärjä 2006; Watson and Anand 2006; von Appen and Doehring 2006; Jones 2008; Williams 2010), the notion and its practices have a longer history, originating in Christian doctrine. In recent times the idea has been transposed to the arts, most notably in the field of literature, but has also been recognised as a device of ideology and legitimisation within popular music's cultural formations. In her 2008 study of the rock canon, Carys Wyn Jones usefully articulates the reason for cultural investments in the canon:



Figure 2. Wax figure of Smoky Dawson and his horse, Flash, at the Galaxy of Stars Wax Museum.



A primary function of canons is their ability to bring order to chaos, to essentially tell a story of our cultural history and present it in its most awe-inspiring light. Canons reduce fields down to their essence, thus selecting for us works that are worthy of our attention; this is a necessary function given the vast numbers of works of literature or classical music in existence. . . . We cannot possibly absorb all the writing and music, not to mention art and dance, ever created, and the canon presents, in effect, a collocation of 'greatest works' to experience before you die. (Jones 2008, p. 7)

With our metaphor of Tamworth's 'cacophony' still in mind, the most obvious appeal of the canon is that it might help find quiet within the noise or, as Jones puts it, the order in the chaos. Canons provide an appealing solution to the problems associated with an excess of information, choosing for us what is important to single out for listening or, more importantly for our purposes, what one should remember.

One of the influential writers on cultural memory, Aleida Assmann, makes an important distinction between the canon and the archive, noting that the difference between the two marks out the difference between 'active' and 'passive' forms of remembering, which in itself must always be thought of in relation to its opposite: forgetting. The canon, she explains, constitutes the

active working memory of a society that defines and supports the cultural identity of a group. It is highly selective and, as Harold Bloom has put it, built on the principles of exclusion. The function of the archive, the reference memory of a society, provides a kind of counterbalance against the necessarily reductive and restrictive drive of the working memory. (Assmann 2010, p. 106)

This notion of an 'active working memory' is instructive here; it suggests a cultural desire for a usable, ordered memory of the past in which a discrete number of texts come to stand in for a much more complex reality. Without something like a canon, collective imaginings of the past can only be fragmented, but at the same time the veneration of a canon can be at risk of a 'contraction' of cultural memory (Assmann 2010, p. 102). As Herbert Grabes has further observed, for the 'unifying function [of cultural memory] to come into effect, it is indispensable that a sufficient number of valuable items from the past be held in collective memory, and, alongside myths and the narratives of legendary history, canons are the most efficient means of ensuring this' (Grabes 2010, p. 312).<sup>8</sup>

In the Tamworth example, the 'efficiency' of the canon is in some respects a response to what we have identified to be the sheer range and volume – the cacophony – of 'country music' as it is performed and consumed, particularly during the Festival. 'Country music' is not one thing that can be simply described as constituting a singular sound or genre, but is instead a loose association of styles, practices and taste formations. However, the representation of the genre in the historical terms offered by the memorial culture in Tamworth is much narrower in its formulation. This was particularly evident at the Roll of Renown concert, which is an annual event at the Festival that contributes to the consolidation of the narrative of Australian country music inscribed in the commemorative stones, plaques and museum displays around the town. In doing so, the Roll of Renown concert has an important role in making a canon that is literally 'set in stone' on Tamworth's Roll of Renown memorial.

### **Making the canon: the 2011 Roll of Renown concert**

As Jones (2008, p. 10) observes, 'canons do not exist in a vacuum; they are supported and perpetuated by institutions'. Indeed, in the context of the literary canon, Robert

van Hallberg (1983, p. 1) goes further, indicating that 'the formation of canons is a measure of the strength of institutions devoted to the study of art'. However, unlike the literary canon, popular music's canons are not determined so much by academia (indeed, academic opinion has arguably little sway in most arenas of popular music culture), but rather through the activities of other sorts of institutions, like industry bodies, record companies and journalistic media, and in the broad range of elements that constitute audience practice. In Tamworth, a key institution involved in the processes that contribute to the construction of a canon of Australian country music, and one strongly invested in the ongoing acknowledgement of country music's important cultural status, is the ACMF. This institution, whose membership includes some of the original cohort of Country Music Capital entrepreneurs, as well as interested enthusiasts, community members and others involved in the country music industry in some way, aims 'to actively seek out and obtain for preservation, academic research and, where appropriate, public display, all historic and significant items of memorabilia, recordings and documentation appertaining to Australian and New Zealand country music throughout the world' ([ACMF website](#)).

As part of this mission, during each annual festival the ACMF hosts the Roll of Renown concert. Begun in 1976, the Roll of Renown is another of the initiatives instigated by country radio station 2TM in which Australian country music's key players are publicly and officially acknowledged ([ACMF website](#); Ellis 2012). The concert's purpose is to announce the year's inductee to the Roll, as well as a number of other awards. The Roll appears in actual space as a monument – originally positioned outside the studios of 2TM but now found on the grassed area in front of the Tamworth Regional Entertainment and Convention Centre (referred to as 'the TRECC'), the venue for the Country Music Awards ceremony since 1999 – and consists of a number of huge granite boulders upon which bronze plaques sit commemorating each of its inductees (see [Figures 3 and 4](#)). The memorial aims to

[salute] those artists who have contributed so much to our nation's cultural heritage through country music.

They have told the story of our land, its people, its character, its trials, its triumph.  
Their spirit inspires the stars of tomorrow. (Roll of Renown plaque, TRECC forecourt)

Each plaque includes an image of the inductee and a brief paragraph outlining their career and what has been their 'lasting and significant contribution' to Australia's country music industry (Roll of Renown page, [ACMF website](#)). We discuss the plaques at length below, but as an example of the information they contain, 1977's inductee, Buddy Williams, is described as 'setting the pattern for the development of the Australian bush ballad', making 'a historic contribution to the emerging character of country music' and 'greatly enrich[ing] Australia's folk heritage'. While the Roll of Renown and the activities that accompany it are not described directly as activities of canonisation, we want to suggest that this public roll call of important country music figures constitutes the very kind of activities referred to by Jones (2008) and others, as official ceremonies which institutionalise a small cohort of performers and their oeuvre as the representatives of this particular art form.

The 2011 concert, held in Tamworth's restored Art Deco-era Town Hall on the second day of the Festival, was an event not only with a strong tribute discourse, but also in which the public performance of personal memory and recollection was central. The concert observed a loose format, where popular contemporary performers



Figures 3 and 4. Two examples of the Roll of Renown boulders.

played versions of songs by one of the Roll's previous inductees, followed by one or two songs from their own repertoire. Each performer appeared onstage in front of a large screen showing an image of the Roll of Renown plaque belonging to the particular inductee being paid tribute to, followed by a photo of that artist. Most performers spoke warmly about their genre's forebears, often recounting anecdotes about when they had first listened to this performer's work, or remembering a time or place in which they had heard their songs. Singer Chris E. Thomas, for example, played a song by Jean Stafford (2008 Roll of Renown inductee), and told the audience that she grew up in the same part of Tasmania as Stafford and remembered listening to her as a little girl. The compere, Jon Wolfe, introduced performer Matt Manning by telling the audience he remembered him as a small boy and had watched his career unfold. Rex Dallas, himself an inductee to the Roll in 2000, told the audience that he had 'so



Figures 3 and 4. Continued.

many wonderful memories' of the Town Hall, the first venue where the Country Music Awards were held. In effect, the format of this concert married together the recollection of personal memories with the public act of canon formation. This dual enactment of private and public memorialisation works to confirm what Regev (2006, p. 1) might note to be the canon's appearance as an 'undisputed' assemblage of the genre's representatives.

The concert was also punctuated by the presentation of a range of other honours, including the Eric Watson Literary Award for writing about country music, the announcement of the inductee into the Broadcasters Hall of Fame, those chosen to add their prints to the Hands of Fame memorial, and the Tamworth Award acknowledging contributions to Tamworth's continuing status as Country Music Capital. As custodian of country music's history and heritage, the ACMF's role is to establish and circulate a series of narratives about Australian country music's history. Doing so fulfils part of the Foundation's key goals: 'to promote knowledge of and interest in the history and heritage of Australian country and traditional music' (ACMF website), but this knowledge as it is performed in public comes largely in the form of a story that necessarily concentrates its energies on a small number of performers, songwriters and their oeuvre, and key cultural intermediaries. In this sense, the concert is a public ceremony where the canon's role in recording names which should be remembered is particularly clear.

In a piece about the process of canonisation in popular music, Antti-Ville Kärjä argues that

... if history is about choosing those things that are worth telling, then canonisation could be described as choosing those things that are worth repeating. In addition, there obviously is a need for some kind of shared recognition when it comes to canon formation; in a sense, it is possible to write the history of anybody, but in order to be canonised that anybody must be accepted more broadly. (Kärjä 2006, p. 5)

What we could see at the Roll of Renown concert, then, was this process of canonisation in action, with its 'shared recognition' presided over by a cultural institution, and its 'broad acceptance' consolidated by the witness of an audience. The concert was a space where contemporary performers were able to participate in the repetition and reiteration of names and songs that already constitute the canon, honouring those who had previously been elevated to the Roll of Renown. At the Roll of Renown concert we were also able to observe the early stages of how the consecration of new members to that canon occurs.

Towards the end of the concert, the mayor of Tamworth appeared on stage to announce the names of the 2011 inductees to the Roll of Renown: Phil and Tommy Emmanuel. The Emmanuel brothers went on to perform at the concert after telling a series of stories in which they recalled their various personal and professional connections to Tamworth and the Australian country music scene since the 1960s, including the fact that they played at the Town Hall in 1960, and had produced their first ever recording on acetate at the studios of 2TM. They also named a number of other inductees to the Roll who had been important figures in their careers, recognising that they were 'standing on the shoulders of giants'; in accepting their place in the Roll of Renown, the Brothers acknowledged and appropriately honoured those who already find their place there. The Emmanuel brothers continued to perform and make appearances throughout the festival, including at a 'Meet the Pioneers' event at the Australian Country Music Hall of Fame, where a display of historical photos and other memorabilia about the Emmanuel brothers was set up in the museum space, and the pair also unveiled their own star at the Galaxy of Stars in the paving of the TRECC forecourt. A plaque was later unveiled at the Roll of Renown boulders at the TRECC during a separate ceremony at which news media was present to further document their induction. In this variety of contexts, the Emmanuel brothers were able to accept and enact in public their place on the Roll of Renown. Alongside performances and in-person appearances, lists of names and the other real-world memorials that reify these names shore up the practices of canonisation that we saw at the concert, and continue to act as mediated expressions of the canon repeated across Tamworth's landscape long after the concert event concluded. The memorials and rolls of honour that appear in public spaces throughout Tamworth are therefore part of the repetition that is integral to the process of canon formation.

The Roll of Renown concert and its role in the creation of a canon in Tamworth therefore points us to a real space of memorialisation in the city: the Roll of Renown boulders. This memorial and other sites are marked on the various country music 'tour' pamphlets available from the Tourism Tamworth visitor centre ('Discover Country Music Capital Day Trip') and the Australian Country Music Hall of Fame ('Country Music Tour Guide'), which encourage visitors to go to the Roll of Renown boulders as well as to the bronze busts, the Wax Museum, the Galaxy of Stars, the Hands of Fame Park, the Australian Country Music Hall of Fame and the Walk a Country Mile interpretive centre. The effect of 'touring the sites' of

country music in Tamworth in real space and time, then, repeats through spatial practice the canonical narrative that we saw performed in Festival events like the Roll of Renown concert. Memorials like the Roll of Renown boulders are, therefore, the non-human narrators of Tamworth's country music canon.

### Reading the canon: the Roll of Renown plaques

While a consideration of how the inductees to the Roll of Renown come to be chosen behind the scenes by the ACMF is beyond the scope of this article, it is useful to consider how inductees' eligibility to become members of the canon is represented in the Roll's memorial discourse. The plaques that represent the inductees for posterity in the monument outside the TRECC don't just tell the viewer who the important figures are, but also outline why it is appropriate that they join our 'working cultural memory' of Australia's country music's past. In this section, we analyse some of the logics of inclusion which contribute to this iteration of cultural memory.

Looking at the plaque inscriptions, it becomes clear that the emphasis, beyond biographical detail, is on a small selection of criteria that contribute to the historical narrative being produced in Tamworth about the development of Australian country music and, in doing so, further reinforces the ceremonies of canonisation that we have identified. These criteria are alluded to on the Roll's explanatory plaque to which we refer above: that is, a contribution to Australia's cultural heritage through a musical form that celebrates 'our land, its people, its character, its trials, its triumph', in a way that inspires future generations of country musicians. It seems that, to be considered a 'pioneer' of Australian country music, the inductee must embody a particular country music version of being 'Australian', a category which, as it always does, serves a strong ideological purpose.<sup>9</sup> To this end, the notion of 'authenticity' is important, both in the sense that the performers address a 'real' Australian identity, and in the sense that their musical sensibility is sufficiently 'genuine'. References to 'authenticity' thus appear on a number of inscriptions, such as that for Slim Newton (inducted to the Roll of Renown in 2009) who 'is steeped in the tradition of authentic Australian country music', and Gordon Parsons (inducted in 1982), the 'originator of the authentic Australian country ballad'. An example of such a ballad is Parsons's song 'Pub with no Beer', and a number of other plaques also make mention of what have become Australian country music 'standards', like Stan Coster's (1990) plaque, where he is described as the 'prolific Australian bush ballad writer' whose 'classic songs include "You can never do wrong in a mother's eye", "By a fire of Gidgee Coal" and "Three Rivers Hotel"', Slim Newton (2009) who 'will always be remembered as the creator of one of Australia's greatest country hits ["Redback on the Toilet Seat"]', and also Shorty Ranger (1993) whose plaque reads 'Shorty's classic, Winter Winds, first recorded by Slim Dusty in 1957 will live as one of the great Australian classics'.

'Authentic Australian-ness' is performed here via lyrics that make reference to rural themes and other signifiers of settler Australia (pubs; beer; droving; swags; travelling, and obtaining mastery over, the land), and is a conflation which puts Australian country music at the heart of a range of debates around nationalism and cultural identity, and the ways in which rural people, places and concerns have been established as the defining characteristics of a 'real' Australian identity (see Smith 2005, Chapter 6; Gibson and Davidson 2004, pp. 389–92). This conflation

is, as Gibson and Davidson (2004, p. 390) observe, a 'slippage' between the notion of country as a place and country as a genre and, we could further add, country as the quintessentially 'Australian identity'. Further to this, the debates around what constitutes 'Australian country music' that take place within the country music scene itself reinforce the connections between authenticity of feeling, perceived 'authentic Australian-ness' and 'real country music' (leading to the only possible conclusions: that 'real Australian music' is country music, and that country music represents the 'real Australia' and 'real Australians'). As van Tiggelen (2011, p. 118) notes from his observations of the non-canonical 'horror country' band Graveyard Train busking in Peel Street at the 2010 festival, underlying an accusation of 'That's not country' is a deeper claim of 'It's un-Australian', with new country posing a threat to the 'fair dinkum', 'dinki-di', 'true blue' spirit of Australian country music.

The homage to Slim Dusty (1979) in Shorty Ranger's inscription is one example of how the Roll of Renown, in referencing previous inductees, uses repetition as a way of establishing canonicity. In some cases, inscriptions infer collaboration with 'the greats', such as that for Kenny Kitching (2004) which states that he has 'played with almost every major country music recording artist in Australia' or, as in the case of Lindsay Butler's (2007) plaque, the inscriptions name these collaborations directly: 'he has played with all the greats, from Slim Dusty [1979], Buddy Williams [1977] and Gordon Parsons [1982] to Rex Dallas [2000], Brian Young [1999], Stan Coster [1990] and Barry Thornton [1991]'. Such listings reinforce the canon in much the same way as the Roll of Renown concert does in its use of visuals, storytelling, and covers of these artists' 'standards'. Moreover, these are also the performers who appear in exhibits at the Australian Country Music Hall of Fame, who feature in the Walk a Country Mile interpretive centre, and in the other material markers of the canon in the Tamworth landscape. A demonstration of deference to those artists or musical styles that are already canonical thus seems to be an important marker for gaining entry into Australia's country music canon.

The self-sustenance of the canon is an important element in its dominance. But in reading the inscriptions on the Roll of Renown plaques it becomes clear that this is also a debate, as alluded to earlier, around what 'real' country music is – that is, exactly which kind of country music it is that deserves remembrance. A thread running through many inscriptions is the performers' connections to 'heritage' aspects of country music, and this links to the 'authenticity' we referred to earlier. Lindsay Butler (2007) is described as a 'passionate promoter of our rich country music heritage', while Stan Coster (1990) 'is likened to Henry Lawson as a legendary preserver of our heritage'.<sup>10</sup> Central to this is a 'mastery of the bush ballad style', as Butler's plaque puts it. We can see this, for example, in the plaques of Shorty Ranger (1993) whose songs 'provide a full and tuneful picture of the people and places of the Australian bush', John Williamson (1997) who has an 'ability to distil the character and idiom of Australia into his ballads', and that of Brian Young (1999) who is a 'writer and singer of bush ballads which often reflect the spirit and character of the land and people of northern Australia . . . a modern day balladeer who has carried on the tradition of bringing country music to the bush'. The Roll, then, gives a nod to those performers who have worked within the particular confines of the dominant Australian country music tradition that is the subject of preservation attempts. This is, of course, cross-cut with different stylistic and musical approaches such as the 'completely original and uniquely Australian' humour of Chad Morgan (1987), Jimmy Little's (1994) 'enduring country-pop style' and Barry Thornton's (1991)

'distinctive bush ballad lead guitar sound'. However, as observed on Anne Kirkpatrick's (2010) plaque, the more modern country music that is honoured here still fits in with the older styles being preserved, and so Kirkpatrick is acknowledged for her 'ability to blend a contemporary style with traditional themes'.

While this canon can accommodate a range of stylistic modes that fall under the broad generic descriptor, 'country', what all the inductees have in common is that they 'fit' the ideology of country music that has been created in official renderings of the genre by the key individuals and institutions invested in the genre in Australia, perhaps to a point that might once have been described as 'homological' (Willis 1978; Hebdige 1979). This logic has evolved through a desire to distinguish Australian country music from its American counterpart, and therefore the elevated performers are those that do not replicate US styles but, rather, are distinctive in their performance of a particular kind of 'Australian-ness'. The Roll of Renown, then, aims to nurture a distinctly Australian version of the country music genre. There is, of course, much more to Australian country music than the 40 performers memorialised on the Roll of Renown. There are other names that appear in the Hands of Fame and the Wax Museum, for example, that have not (yet) been elevated to the Roll, and there are others still whose names do not appear in the material form of the 'active working memory' at all. But the elevation of a selected few assists with the creation of a narrative which, like other canons, acts 'as a guide for people who wish to understand popular music's history' (von Appen and Doehring 2006, p. 34). In this, the Roll of Renown and the other Tamworth museums and memorials are successful. Although we arrived with very little knowledge of Australian country music's significant figures or songs, after time spent visiting Tamworth's sites of country music memorialisation, as well as attending concerts and commemoration ceremonies, we were left with a distinct impression of who and what constitutes Australian country music 'worthy of repetition' (Kärjä 2006, p. 5) in the canon, or what Assmann (2010, p. 106) might call its 'active working memory'.

## Concluding thoughts

We went to Tamworth because the memorials to country music that dotted its landscape were overt markers for a research project seeking to explore popular music heritage and cultural memory, and when we saw the Festival's programme outlining a large number of events that referenced the past, we thought that undertaking fieldwork in this context would help us to think about the public representation of music history.<sup>11</sup> However, what we actually found in Tamworth was evidence of something much more precise: a canonical rendering of that history. Moreover, what this rendering has begun to answer for us is a question that was one of the starting points for this research's larger project: how is it that certain stories about popular music become *the* stories that are remembered, while others are forgotten? In Tamworth, we found that it is the canon, characterised by its singular and coherent story which is experienced through practices of repetition, and supported by the broad recognition of its content and authority by audiences, performers and institutions alike, that transcends the complexity of country music as a lived experience. The canon is, in effect, the sound that rises above the cacophony, the sound that makes itself heard over and over again, against the sonic backdrop of a discordant, contradictory,



complicated reality. It is the story that is told and retold, while others are forgotten by collective memory.

The effect of the singularity of this canon is interesting to consider. Regev has warned that the canon, once established, 'exert[s] cultural power by influencing memory and heritage by radiating out on to the work of musicians. That is, canons influence the narration of the past, and they inspire the radius of creativity for the future' (Regev 2006, p. 2). While the canon is a rhetorical device that whittles down the multifarious events of the historical past to a smaller number that can be more easily managed in memory, this does not mean that the 'present' of country music has become any less diverse. While it is true that the canon we have identified here is a strong presence in country music discourse in general and in Tamworth in particular, we would not want to overstate the impact it has on the range of country music that is produced and consumed in Australia. And this is, perhaps, what becomes most important about the Tamworth example: in spite of the considerable energies directed towards the canon, country music as it is practised remains – at least to us as outsiders – a diverse and vibrant area of cultural production. Indeed, and in spite of the tendency we observed toward paying homage to the past and the strong presence of the canon, the range of genre and style that make up 'country music' in Australia appears to us to be more varied – and perhaps even more popular – than ever. Whether this variegated participation can be remembered in anything other than in Aleida Assmann's sense of an 'archival' or 'reference memory', however, is the real question that this research poses.

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## Endnotes

1. The broader project is called 'Popular music and cultural memory: localised popular music histories and their significance for national music industries', and is funded under the Australian Research Council's (ARC) Discovery Project scheme for three years (2010–2012, DP1092910). Chief investigators on the project are Andy Bennett (Griffith University), Shane Homan (Monash University), Sarah Baker (Griffith University) and Peter Doyle (Macquarie University), with Research Fellow Alison Huber (Griffith University).
2. This is to say that it is not the purpose of this paper to provide a précis of the country music scene or to provide a synthesis of its history in Australia. There is already a collection of scholarly literature that attempts this, and we would direct our readers to Graeme Smith's *Singing Australian* (2005), which charts the history and development of folk and country music in Australia. In addition to the works of Smith (1994, 2005), other scholarly writings on Australian country music include a series of three edited anthologies published by the Australian Institute of Country Music (Hayward 2003; Hayward and Walden 2004; Evans and Walden 2005). The writings of country music 'insider' and enthusiast, Eric Watson, also form an important touchstone for many of these works (Watson 1976, 1982–1983). A critical intervention in country music's historical narrative is Clinton Walker's *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music* (2000), which also formed the basis for a television documentary series and soundtrack CD. This work presents a parallel – or 'buried' – history of country music's indigenous stars, many of whom do not appear in other accounts of the genre.
3. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that other genres of music are also present in Tamworth.

4. See Tamworth Regional Council's website for more detail: <http://www.tamworth.nsw.gov.au/Towns-and-Villages/default.aspx>.
5. The festival has grown considerably over the years, and now includes many hundreds of artists who perform across dozens of venues over a 10-day period. For an 'insider' account of the festival's development from its roots in a talent quest in the late 1960s, see Max Ellis's 'Origins of the Tamworth Festival' at <http://www.historyofcountrymusic.com.au/cmcorigins.html>. Graeme Smith also offers an introductory account (Smith 2005, pp. 103–5). The festival follows a decentralised organisational format, involving a range of venues, promoters, managers and marketers. An 'official guide' to the festival is collated and sold by Rural Press Events (now owned by Fairfax Media) and lists many of the events and artist profiles, but a large number of events (gigs, jam sessions, parties) are held 'off the programme', and are publicised only by word of mouth, flyers, posters or, increasingly, via social networking. As well as the enormous range of official and unofficial gigs, and the busking competition – which draws hundreds of entrants and has sparked the careers of some of Australia's most successful country stars (for example, Keith Urban and Kasey Chambers) – the festival also includes elements like free outdoor public concerts, a number of talent quests, a pageant-style 'Queen of Country Music' quest, a parade and an awards ceremony.
6. For a reporter's insight into the debates that dominated that year's festival, see van Tiggelen (2011).
7. The Hands of Fame monument was established by the ACMF in 1977, 'as a tribute to people who had made a name for themselves in Australian country music' (ACMHF website). In the same vein as the hand- and footprints of movie stars preserved outside Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, LA, the Hands of Fame monument in Tamworth features Australian country music stars' hands imprinted in concrete, and occupies a space on the corner of two of the town's major streets on the edge of a park that is now known as 'Hands of Fame Park'. In 2011 new inductees to the Hands monument were announced during the 'Roll of Renown' concert (which we discuss at length below), and an official imprinting ceremony took place on the final day of the Festival. It is interesting to note that Dan Bendrups and Henry Johnson (2007, p. 55) observe a comparable public tribute to country music culture at New Zealand's answer to Tamworth – Gore, the self-proclaimed 'home of country music' in that country. Gore, one of Tamworth's sister cities, erected a 'Hands of Fame' monument in 2005, which is both a concrete rendering of a large guitar and the site for handprints of notable country music figures pressed into cement.
8. As useful as they may be for ordering memory and creating a sense of collectivity, canons also present a well-acknowledged range of problems related to cultural authority and power, the politics of inclusion and exclusion, perceptions of cultural value, and so on (some of which we address below), and critiques of the canon often focus on these deficiencies. Indeed it is because of these very deficiencies that the literary canon has become subject to so much critique. See Guillory (1987) for a useful entrée into this area of literary studies.
9. For the landmark cultural studies approach to this matter, see Fiske *et al.* (1987).
10. Henry Lawson (1867–1922) was a popular Australian writer and poet, much of whose work detailed life in the bush and the 'Australian' character.
11. At the 2011 festival punters could experience: a range of tribute acts, most of them to US artists (for example, the 'Queens of Country' concert where tribute was paid to Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn and Reba McEntire; Michelle Little's performance of the songs of Patsy Cline; the Garth Brooks Show; Bruce McCumstie's tribute to Willie Nelson; Melinda Schneider's tribute to Doris Day, 'Melinda Does Doris'; a night of reminiscence at the Balladeers Homestead with the 'Memories Trail Show'; the concert for Jimmy Little, the 'Tribute to a Living Legend'; the annual Cavalcade with its theme 'Legends of Country Music'; not to mention the large number of performers who have been 'making history' by playing Tamworth for nearly 40 years. When we first arrived in Tamworth, it was these kinds of events, with their eyes seemingly firmly fixed in the backward gaze of nostalgia, which first caught our attention. There is some emphasis on new and potential talent at the Country Music Festival with its Toyota Star Maker Quest talent search and the Telstra Road to Tamworth, which showcases emerging country music performers, yet the winners of these events still remain couched in heritage discourse. In Tamworth, and in Australian country music, the past casts a long shadow.

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