

# Finding the music in Australiana

## POETRY

a reader's guide. By Micael Farrell. Giramondo. \$22.

THE AUSTRALIAN POPULAR SONGBOOK By Alan Wearne. Giramondo. 93pp. \$22.

Reviewer: PETER PIERCE

Two more volumes have exuberantly emerged in the Giramondo Poets series. From Michael Farrell comes a reader's guide, a book which perhaps does need the support of the blurb. There it is explained that the poems are composed "through the application of principles familiar from contemporary music – sampling and remixing, repetition and substitution, permutation and chance".

Let me restrict the sampling of Farrell's verse to one instance, the poem called "themasaur", which opens "cloaked in blackanal / tatorbatastripeab le / to bear" and leave it at that. Or nearly – sometimes haunting half lines encourage us to ponder the melancholy register that could have been sounded, rather than the higher gibberish.

Music of more conventional, indeed nostalgic, kinds provides the impetus for a number of the poems in Alan Wearne's latest collection, *The Australian Popular Songbook*. As seems increasingly the fashion for poets (whatever this has them thinking of their readers), Wearne attaches explanatory end-notes in prose, often droll riffs in their own right. Thus he reminds some of us of the cultural importance of the long-running ABC Radio program *The Argonauts*: "Through entertainment and instruction, the arts, sciences and benign moral precepts for living were passed on to the coming generations." Less demurely, he praises *Eagle Rock* as "the Australian song" of its era, particularly by comparison with "its rival, the ludicrous *The Real Thing* . . . a piece of psychedelic pap".

For Wearne, old energies – notably the intertwined ones of popular music and of politics in the 1970s – are always waiting to be brought back into vibrant being. The first half of the book (four sets of seven poems) fulfils the promise of the title, as idiosyncratically they take their bearings from a century of popular songs in Australia from the 1880s to the 1980s. This musical excursion also becomes a means to write social history in miniature. There are vignettes of Asian drug dealing syndicates, American servicemen on R and R in King's Cross, the Dunstan era in South Australia, "Babyboomer Party Time in Oz". Wearne remains a master of comic micro-narrative by means of rhyme: "Well pardon my malice / but who'd she think she was, Tebaldi, Callas?"

Unbridled (as he prefers to be) Wearne is one of the funniest as well as most incisive of contemporary Australian poets. In "My Old Man's a Groovy Old Man", rhyme turns the trick for him again. A daughter laments that her dad, "that alpha and omega pisser, / has run off to the Sunshine Coast with . . . Larissa". One couplet needs to be sipped for decency's sake, but then there is this: "He's fifty-one, she's twenty-four, / so wouldn't you move further than Maroochydore?" For the suite called "The Metropolitan Poems", Wearne's epigraph comes cryptically from living gangster Billy "The Texan" Longley: "Sydney for money, Melbourne for blokes." What follows include "Seventeen Illawarra Couplets" and "Sarsaparilla: a calypso", the latter accompanied by the melody that Wearne wrote for it.

This is the sunniest tribute to Patrick White ever penned and to tease with only a line or two rather than the whole is criminal, however – he could see "Yahweh in a grain of sand"; was "Assailed by egos and ids, asthma, AD Hope". Further, "Rose Bay matrons made him puke; / their pitiless dun-coloured lot / won't see any chariot". There is a lot more – the Bogle and Chandler murder case from an unexpected point of view, fond glimpses of scattered suburbs, an elegy for Fitzroy in the 1990s. Wearne's collection reignites belief in the vernacular riches of Australia and in the native wit, let alone the worth and pleasure of the poetry.

Peter Pierce was formerly Professor of Australian Literature at James Cook University.

## litBITS

### Happy birthday, Bard

Illustrator Gregory Rogers (*The Boy, the Bear, the Baron and the Bard*) and children's author Andy Griffiths (*Just Macbeth!*) will be helping celebrate Shakespeare's birthday at the National Library of Australia on Wednesday, 12.30-2pm. Cost \$10. Bookings 6262 1271 or bookings@nla.gov.au

### Simpson's donkey takes the stage

Mark Greenwood and Frane Lessac will be at the Australian War Memorial to launch their

book *Simpson and his Donkey* on Tuesday at 10am and will speak about the book and their collaboration at Paperchain book store in Manuka on Wednesday, 5.45 for 6pm. For the Paperchain event, RSVP 6295 6723 or email events@paperchainbookstore.com.au

### David Foster confronts mob

David Foster, writer of novels, short stories and poetry whose publications include *Plumbum, The Land where Stories End, Testostero, Mates of Mars, The Glade within the Grove* and *The Ballad of Erinungarah*, among others, is currently a Harold White Fellow at the National Library of Australia.

On Tuesday at 5.30pm he will speak about the mob confrontations at Cronulla in 2005 as well as his novel in progress, *Shahrazad*.

RSVP 6262 1271 or e-mail bookings@nla.gov.au

### Private performance with Halstead

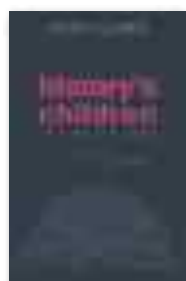
Helen Halstead will be at Dalton's Books on Wednesday at 6.30pm to speak about her latest book *A Private Performance*, a "sequel to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*". RSVP Meredith Wright 6249 1844 or email daltons@daltons.com.au

Literary Editor: Gia Metherell  
Information for Litbits should arrive by noon on Wednesday to be considered for publication.  
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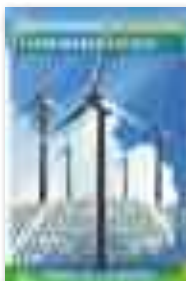


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