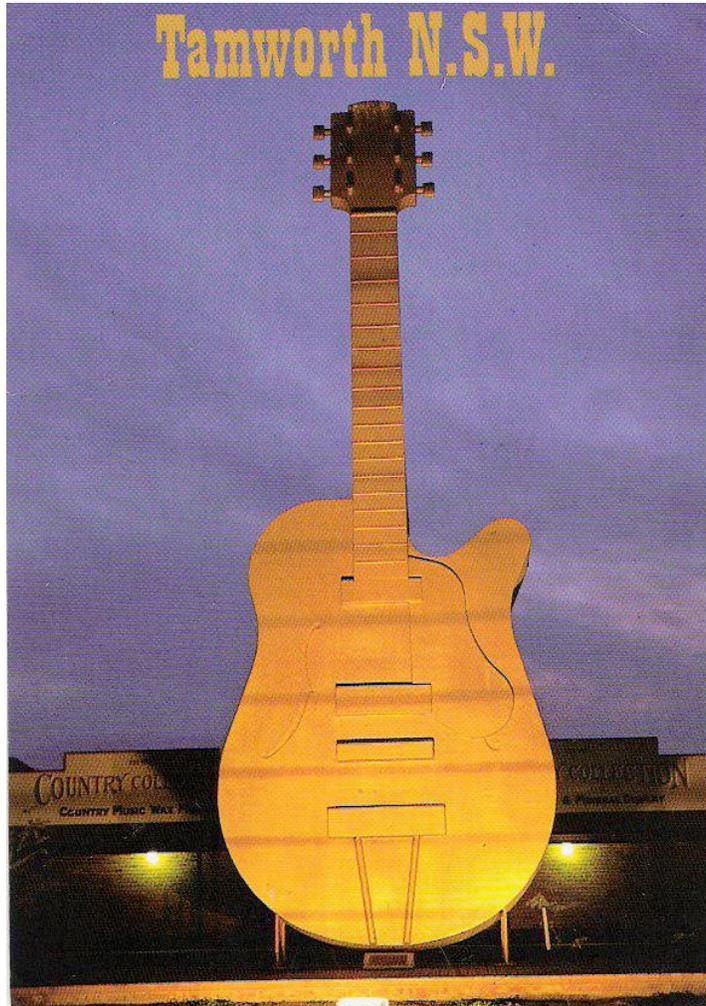


## Chapter Ten

### Play Me That Country Music

"C'mon and play me that country music,  
Like Grandma and Grandpa used to play...."  
--Alabama.



**The Hard Rock Café, Australian Style**

As I boarded the Greyhound Pioneer bus to the town on the New England Plateau that hosts the annual Tamworth Country Music Festival, I couldn't stop humming the old Alabama classic about country and western music.

The more I thought about the lyrics, the more I wondered what kind of grandparents these guys actually had. After all, I didn't know about their families, but I knew my grandparents never played country music, much less listened to it on their radios. In fact, the only song I can recall my

grandfather ever singing was a decidedly short, uncountry-sounding ditty with the following words:

"Under the shade of the old apple tree,  
All the monkeys can throw peanuts at me,  
But if I get drunk,  
You can pack me in the trunk,  
And send me back to the old country..."

A wonderful song to teach a kindergartener, don't you think?

Of course, my grandfather was a first-generation-American of Rumanian descent who served as a foreman on a Westinghouse plant near Pittsburgh, and headed up a top-secret project that turned out to involve manufacturing shells for the Manhattan Project. My grandmother was second generation Hungarian. So, maybe country music wasn't on their hit parade. After all, Pennsylvania's steel towns were never really known for their love of country music.

To be honest, I can't even say I like the rhythmic twanging and moaning about lost dogs, cheating wives and going to jail all that much; but, when I saw the festival listing in my guidebook, I just couldn't resist. I had to see if it was going to be American style country music or if Australia had its own peculiar take on the art form with a completely different sound. Although I missed the event by two weeks, even the need to see a girlfriend off to jail after she killed my hunting dog wouldn't have kept me from seeing the country music capitol of Australia.

The late night, seven-hour bus ride set the tone for the trip. As I've mentioned, Australian Greyhound is far different from its U.S. namesake. There's more legroom, more distance between stops and even an audio-video system on many of the long-haul buses, which is a mixed blessing when the driver insists on showing a "Fawlty Towers" marathon with elevator-music versions of classic American country songs between shows. Granted, John Cleese is funny and his show about a competence-challenged manager trying to run a country inn with a staff of complete nincompoops is amusing, but it got old after four episodes in two hours. As little as I appreciated the third hour of the sit-com, my fellow passengers appeared to appreciate me far less when I burst out guffawing after hearing the song playing between videotapes: the Muzak version of "Gentle on My Mind." And I thought Glen Campbell was slow.

The only reason I mention all this is that there isn't that much to say about Tamworth as a town during the 51 weeks of the year when the festival isn't on.

If the reaction of the husband and wife who picked up their daughter at the bus stop are an indicator, the less said about it, the better. They took mercy on me when they realized I had no idea how far from town I was, and offered me a ride to my hotel. Despite the late hour, we had a nice conversation -- until I told them I was a freelance writer in town to write about the festival. Their chilly response made me feel as welcome as Howard Stern at a Pat Buchanan political rally. They were nice enough to

give me a ride, but they let me know they were not impressed. It's nothing against me, mind you, they just didn't like the festival.

Too many people, they said.

Too much disruption.

Too much country music, they added while rolling to a stop in front of my quiet, dimly lit hotel.

Although the lobby was closed, I found the room key the manager had left for me without much hassle; however I then spent the next half-hour trying to find a room so low in frills, it didn't even have a number on the door.

# # #

Having gone to a midwestern university in the mid-1980s, I identified country music with crushing poverty, farm foreclosures, and mass layoffs at the John Deere plant. Given the genre's weepy tone, I was never sure which came first, the inflation-initiated-recession or the music-inflicted-depression. Based on my experience, I expected to find the Australian version of more of the same.

I didn't.

Tamworth may not be the prettiest town in the country, but it isn't the most depressed, either. It's a sunny little city with three major streets running through its 10- or 12-block downtown area. The economy seems vibrant, the locals relatively prosperous, and the burg has no more than its share of delinquent-wannabes hanging out on the streets late at night. So what's behind the town's status as the country music capitol of the South Pacific?

Tourism.

A local disc jockey had been playing Australian C&W tunes on his Sunday night show for years -- regardless of whether the locals liked it or not. To hear city tourism officials tell the story, Tamworthians suddenly discovered the program after many years, liked what they heard and demanded more. If you ask me, I think they got so tired of fighting they decided to switch just so they could get some peace. Or maybe it's a case of hostages sympathizing with their captors; I'm not sure which.

Regardless of the cause, the show became so popular that Tamworth became the natural spot for an annual talent show. When the radio program's host proposed making it an annual festival, the town fathers agreed. Not necessarily because they loved country music all that much, though. Instead, they saw it as a way to boost business during the traditionally slow months. Twenty-four years later the crowds were so big there weren't enough places to house them all -- even with the city tourism officials arranging home stays when the hotels run out of room.

After having spent half a day asking tourism officials about the festival's origins, I stuck around for the night to hear the music at a local nightspot with a weekly jam session. The bands were good, but uninspired. In fact, I felt as if I'd walked in on white folks' middle-

class-blues night. Quite frankly, I wouldn't have been surprised to hear one of the evening's vocalists belt out lyrics like:

Woke up this morning...  
Da-da-da-da (blues riff sound)  
Both cars were gone...  
Da-da-da-da...  
Then I got dog poop on my shoes,  
Da-da-da-da...

The overall sound was old C&W, from the days before Garth Brooks and other singers who make up the movement called "Young Country" (which means they still sing about the same stuff, they just do it jazzier and more cheerfully). The only difference is that Australia's artists sing about Utes (utility vehicles), dingoes, and the outback rather than trucks, dogs, and farms.

Tamworth had just discovered young country and liked a new thing called line dancing so much locals tried to set the record for the longest line. Unfortunately, organizers didn't realize the Guinness Book of World Records would only recognize a record for one extremely long line, not two really long ones with the second directly behind the first.

I'm still baffled why they thought this would work. They were trying to set the record for the longest line dance not the record for the world's largest half-line, or biggest collection of boot-wearing dorks in a downtown area ever on a Saturday night (that honor would probably go to New York City after Garth Brooks concert in Central Park).

Before leaving town the following day, I took a bus to the Country Collection, a mix of poor man's Madame Tussaud's and extremely specialized natural history museum. Besides displaying wax figures of Australia's greatest country artists, the attraction also boasts a collection of the region's gems and minerals. There are no rhinestones, but the Longyard Hotel saloon is within spitting distance.

It's so nice to see that the town kept from falling victim to the crass commercialism so common in the States.

I got back in just enough time to pick up my backpack and get to the depot before the train to Sydney rolled in. All I had to do was purchase a ticket. Easier said than done. Apparently, I was the first passenger to purchase a ticket with American Express since the rail line began accepting the card. As a result, the two ticket agents spent 10 minutes figuring it out. After numerous attempts, they finally realized they were punching computer keys to give me a discount when I hadn't purchased anything yet.

Luckily, the conductor was watching the entire exchange and wasn't leaving without me. Unfortunately, his highly appreciated show of courtesy meant I, Mr. Dumb American, was holding up the train.

As nice as Australia's buses are, they still can't beat the luxury of train travel. More legroom, more space to get up and move around and no "Fawlty Towers" videos.

The only disadvantage of this particular train ride was that the pre-teens sitting next to me were listening to rap music on their personal stereo systems. They either had not grasped the meaning and benefit of the phrase "personal stereo" or they felt the music was so good that they had to share it with everyone, because that's exactly what they did, loudly, despite their headphones. I thought about asking them to turn the music down but figured their hearing was so shot they wouldn't be able to hear me, even if they took their headphones off.

The train pulled into Sydney in what would have been enough time to buy a ticket for the last bus to Canberra, if the city hadn't just opened a new train station not listed in my guidebook. As a result, I didn't know where I was or how to get where I was going. Although I found the backpacker travel agency before it closed, I had just missed the bus I needed, and found myself stranded on a Friday night without a place to stay. It took an hour's worth of calls to find a hostel with a vacancy. When I finally arrived it was so full the manager kicked guests out of the television room at 10 p.m. just so he could set up mattresses on the floor for the last-minute arrivals.

Before I went to bed, the manager assured me I would have plenty of time to get the subway across town and still catch the 7 a.m. Canberra bus if I got up at 6.

He was wrong.

The subway stop was shut, the replacement transit bus was late, and it took so long to get across town I was 10 minutes late by the time it reached the right stop. Never mind that the stop itself was a good 10-minute walk from the station under the best of circumstances. Lugging 50 pounds of poorly packed backpack on my back and a 10-pound pack in front was far from the best of circumstances.

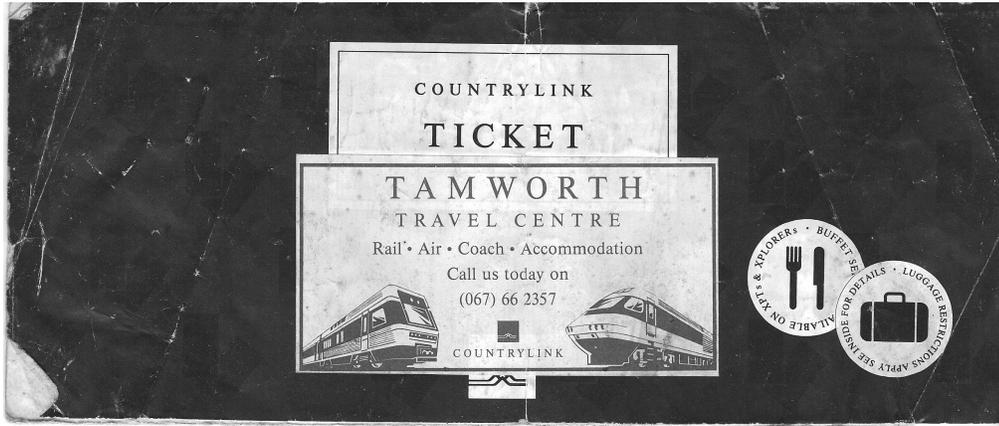
Exhausted and sweaty on a Saturday morning -- at a time when I'm not usually up -- I stopped to rest, leaning against a brick wall fronting on Hide Park.

The trouble with trying to relax while wearing a backpack is that it isn't enough to just sit down. The pack's suspension and all its straps forced me to find a seat where I could sit on one level and my pack could be elevated slightly higher. Sets of stairs and low-backed benches are ideal. When my pack was out of kilter, as it was today, I had to lean back, with the bag leaning against walls or stairs, just to get relief. After failing at my first attempt to get comfortable I leaned back a little more, using the backpack in my left hand and the grocery bag in my right as counterbalances. Still not comfortable, I edged back a little more. When that didn't work, I scooted back again.

And then I looked straight ahead and saw the sky.

I'm sure early morning drivers were shocked to look out their windows and see a pair of disembodied legs flailing wildly over a wall running alongside Hyde Park.

Who says pride goeth before the fall? I think it goeth after.



**My ticket out of Tamworth:  
When the going gets weird, the weird get going**