

HAT TOWN

CABOOLTURE, QUEENSLAND

A lot of people — most of them tourists — think the bush is the real Australia, but it sometimes looks more like an unreal America, where the folk culture is a chronologically confused hotchpotch of country music, cars and cowboys. I have been visiting the big outback festivals since 1993, but the Caboolture Urban Muster was the first one I ever saw that took place in a city. There might be a bit of an identity crisis in southern Queensland, where the only real cowboys are Gold Coast property developers and their local government mates.

Arangy, unshaven man named Cross has the faintly weary air of a sidekick who has played this game before.

‘Who am I, Cross?’ asked the Feral Ute King.

‘You’re the Feral Ute King,’ said Cross.

‘I’m the Feral Ute King,’ said the Feral Ute King.

The Feral Ute King had not entered his feral ute in the Best Feral Ute category of the Beaut Ute competition at the Caboolture Urban Muster — a country music festival headlined every

year by singer Lee Kernaghan — because she’s just too damned feral.

‘I own the world’s ugliest ute,’ insisted the Feral Ute King, ‘but she’s at home. I’ve only just come back from the Territory and I left her at a mate’s place and she was outside for a little while and she got a bit tired and unloved.’

‘You can’t get a ute more feral than his ute,’ attested Jade Turmain, a local dog groomer, whose ute failed to place in the Best Chick’s Ute section.

What does Turmain love most about the ute?

‘First and foremost, it’s Australian. It’s the one thing the rest of the world can never take from us,’ she said, as if there were a movement to do so. ‘We invented it.’

The Feral Ute King confirmed that Lewis Bandt invented the Ford ute in Geelong in 1934. ‘He converted a 1934 Ford Sedan into a ute,’ he said, ‘because his wife was always complaining about . . . shopping, basically.’

In the absence of the Feral Ute King’s vehicle, the prize was awarded to a ute called the Beast, which belonged to a bloke called the Bear, who had biceps as broad as haunches and a moustache like two ferrets kissing.

The Beast is big and black, with a bonnet that opens sideways. It is spattered with stickers remembering musters, rodeos and B&S balls. Its fender is protected by a bullbar the size of a farm gate. A bank of spotlights rests on the roof of the cabin, and full-sized Australian and Confederate flags fly from poles mounted on its wings.

The Bear and the Beast were pulled over and ticketed recently, in Western Australia.

What was the problem?

‘Bullbar’s too big,’ said the Bear. ‘Missing a headlight. The seat’s loose. It’s too loud. The roof’s not too healthy.’

The roof is, in fact, deeply indented, but if the Bear reaches through the driver's window and throws a looping uppercut, it springs back into shape.

The Beast has been around Australia about three times, the Bear told me. He used to pass quite a few other feral utes on the highway, 'But we're a dying breed now,' he said.

'Basically, police don't like the utes,' he said. 'Going out in the bush, I was forever knocking out roos. And I've taken out a couple of wombats. You can have all the lights in the world, but you can't stop the animals.'

After the utes were judged by the banks of Caboolture's Centenary Lakes, a song celebrating a cowboy in his 'three-eight ute' blasts through the judges' PA system.

Turmain told me there are four albums of songs just about utes.

I asked the Feral Ute King who might be the Ute-Song King.

'Hey, Cross,' he called, 'who's the king of ute songs?'

'You could say Lee Kernaghan,' said Cross, carefully.

Lee Kernaghan is the biggest home-grown country artist in Australia. His albums routinely go double platinum, selling more than 120,000 copies. In 1993, he wrote and recorded what he believes to be the very first ute song, 'She's My Ute' — an up-tempo ballad in which a man, forced to choose between his 'girl' and a 'dirty old ute', reflects, 'She's been gone a year, but the ute's still here.'

The year before, he gave the ute what might well have been its first mention on record, in the anthem 'Boys From the Bush' on the album *The Outback Club*. 'Prior to that, the ute was very much a work vehicle,' said Kernaghan, 'devoid of glamour. But I think songs like "Boys From the Bush" and "She's My Ute" kind of said, "It's okay to drive a ute."'

'Scrubbashin' is another popular Kernaghan ute song.

‘I’ve got some good ones,’ he said. ‘“Baptise the Ute” is a pretty big one, and now we’ve got a new one called “Love Shack”, which is not just about utes, it’s about four-wheel drives, Kombi vans, panel vans, sin bins . . . anything you can throw a mattress in the back of.’

Kernaghan’s expression retains something of the gawky teenage boy whose features grew faster than his face, but when he pulls down the brim of his Akubra, he instantly matures. With his hat on, he smoulders. He becomes the sex god pelted with bras at the Wagga Wagga campus of Charles Sturt University, the country woman’s cowboy crumpet.

The hat he wears today is a Lee Kernaghan Outback Club Akubra, which he helped to design. It’s a sturdy-looking article. ‘There’s a new product out on the market called Hat-agra,’ said Kernaghan. ‘It makes your hat stiff and hard. I’m using it to great success.’

‘I wore the hat back on that first album in 1991 because it was at a time when it was not very cool to be country. By wearing the hat, I just wanted to let people know that I was country. And proudly so.’

‘A hat is a part of the way of life in the bush,’ he explained, ‘just because it keeps the sun off your head. But it also says a lot about the person under the hat.’

What does it say?

‘You know, you’re . . . it’s obviously that, um . . . it says, um . . . that, um . . . well, it says . . . for me, it just says . . .’

The seconds tick painfully past.

‘I don’t know. Maybe there’s something a bit deeper about it . . .’

There’s a slow, tender pause. ‘It just says . . . I guess it says that you’re country.’

As the crowd gathered for Kernaghan's concert on Saturday night in Caboolture, mine was the only baseball cap in a sea of cowboy hats. A country boy checked me out and spoke sideways to his mates. 'He sucks cock,' he said.

But I was the only bloke for half a dozen rows who wasn't wearing a get-up like one of the Village People.

It was dress-up day in Caboolture, and everyone came as a cowboy, except me. There were shop assistants in Akubras in the newsagency, selling customers in Akubras the local paper, the *Courier-Mail*. (I asked how many Akubra wearers might drop in on a normal day; the newsagent said, 'None.')

The rule barring ten-gallon hats has been relaxed at the RSL.

Caboolture is 45 kilometres north of Brisbane, and it has never, in living memory, been bush. It was always a suburb where battlers could afford their emblematic 5 acres, and now it is one of the fastest-growing shires in Queensland. It became urbanised when the electric rail came through in the early 1980s, replacing the old wooden train, in which people had to sit side by side and opposite one another, in carriages like cattle wagons. A lot of locals own horses, but many of today's Akubra-wearing visitors live in nearby Redcliffe, and either rode the iron horse into town or arrived in the contemporary covered wagon that is the great Aussie caravan. They are city folk disguised as country, in R. M. Williams boots, Driza-Bone coats and coaster-sized belt buckles. Most of their hats look like they have just come off the block, but that might simply be the miracle of Hat-agra.

The morning of the concert began with the ute show and country markets, where buskers in hats played to audiences in hats, and stall-keepers in hats sold to tourists in hats. The sky threatened rain, but if everyone in town stood shoulder to shoulder, their hats would create a roof.

There were grey-nomad cowboys and schoolboy cowboys, line-dancing cowgirls and sex-bomb cowgirls, toddler cowboys and disabled cowboys, even one or two black cowboys. There were also a few older women wandering around in pairs, dressed as if they have just escaped from a sultan's palace, in harem pants, spangled tops and chiffon.

It turned out they're the local belly-dancing troop, Rasheeda's Veils, who earlier performed a 'boot-scooting belly-dancing display'.

And what in God's name might that be?

'Well, we did our belly-dancing display,' said Rasheeda ('no surname') herself, 'and included a boot-scooting belly dance in it, which we had choreographed especially for today.'

What did it look like?

'It combined belly-dancing and line-dancing moves,' said Rasheeda.

A student demonstrated a couple of steps but, sadly, I lack the vocabulary to describe what I saw.

'Whatever the occasion, we make up a dance so we can fit in,' said Rasheeda.

At the Memorial Hall, about 40 women and one man were taking a line-dancing workshop. The man wore a checked shirt and bootlace tie, horseshoe buckle and western-cut jeans. He would look the perfect Aussie country cowboy, except that he was Asian. Cecil Ong, a semi-retired Singaporean importer of playground equipment, was in Caboolture with five other line-dancing enthusiasts from Singapore. He learned the art when he was forced to fly to Queensland for his company's annual conference. 'Instead of attending sales meetings, we'd go line dancing,' he said.

The presence of the Singaporeans has already excited the local media.

‘When we got here,’ said Ong, ‘Korea meal.’

Half your luck, mate. All I could find was pasta joints and the RSL.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Our picture in the Korea meal.’

Ah, the Courier-Mail.

Over at the showground, the concert opened with young Aleyce Simmonds; Lee Kernaghan’s sister, Tania; Aboriginal singer Troy Cassar-Daley; then brash Adam Harvey. Slotted in between were acts such as Tom Curtain, the Singing Horsebreaker, and — brilliantly — Mick Denigan, who performed tricks with a whip while singing songs about being a bloke who performs tricks with a whip.

Second on the running order to Kernaghan was Paul Kelly and his bluegrass band, the Stormwater Boys. Kelly — spiv-suited, controlled, more city and eastern than country and western — didn’t get an encore from the weekend-cowboy crowd.

I approached Kelly backstage to ask what he thinks of Kernaghan, but the man who is, at the best of times, the most difficult interviewee in Australia, turned me away with a curt, ‘I’m about to go on stage.’ Later, I felt embarrassed for having tried. What was the writer of the fragile, beautiful ‘When I First Met Your Ma’ going to say about ‘She’s My Ute’?

Kernaghan opened with ‘I’m From the Country’, which could, in truth, be the title of any of the songs he plays. When he performed ‘This Cowboy’s Hat’, in which a man foils a biker who tries to take his Akubra with the threat that he will have to fight every member of his family ever to have worn the hat, many people in the crowd waved their hats. When he performed a song about a dog, they did the same, since it is illegal to wave dogs. As the band played a new number, ‘On the Beach’, from his latest album, *The*

New Bush, the roadies tossed giant beach balls into the crowd. For Kernaghan's cover of 'Great Balls of Fire', they heaved a great ball of fire — albeit a painted, inflatable model — to the cheering masses. It was all getting very literal and, when Kernaghan dedicated 'Hat Town' to the people of Innisfail, recently devastated by Tropical Cyclone Larry, I looked around for a place to shelter from the coming storm.

Whatever Kernaghan throws into the crowd, generally he gets bras flung back. Tonight, they were thin on the stage.

'No bras?' he cried. 'Come on!'

Instead, someone lobs a stubby holder.

The bra-hurling craze started after Kernaghan introduced a song called 'Skinny Dippin'.

'Suddenly, at some of these wild outdoor shows, people actually were ripping their gear off and making their way onto the stage semi-naked,' he said, in another example of disturbing literalism. 'And I've really tried to encourage that kind of behaviour ever since.'

'I was banned from every council venue in Ballarat because it was claimed I was inciting the crowd,' he said. 'There was this huge stage invasion and one girl took her clothes off. I couldn't go back there for about three years, but eventually they got a new mayor and he lifted the ban and gave me the keys to the city.'

Although he collected only three bras from Caboolture, he estimates he came home with about 20 from Wagga Wagga.

'The stage was covered in bras,' he said.

Kernaghan's records outsell all but those of the most popular local rock bands, but his management doesn't even bother trying to get him a deal overseas. He's too parochial, too vernacular. He doesn't translate. In the US, 'She's My Ute' would mean, 'I own a native American woman from the Utah/Colorado region', and 'The Outback Club' — another Kernaghan song title — would

most likely be a members-only San Francisco bathhouse.

The Caboolture Urban Muster lingered on through a Queensland public-holiday weekend. One of the final events was the Monday-morning pig races, another great Australian tradition, albeit a fairly new one. The pigs were actually piglets, and they scampered and scrambled through a maze of hay bales, tyres, ramps and hollowed-out oil drums to reach a bowl of milk in the centre. Rather insensitively, a tent 5 metres away was cooking up \$5 bacon breakfasts.

The pigs are owned by Noah's Farm, in Gatton. The winner, said farm manager Kevin Kiley, is not only the fastest but 'also the smartest pig, as they have to go through an obstacle course, as you can see'.

There are a few other pig-racing operators in the state, but Kiley's pigs do not compete against them.

'They're not smart, you see,' said Kiley. 'They might have a fast pig, but they're not used to the track.'

'People back a pig, and it's run like a raffle,' said Kiley. 'A bit like a Melbourne Cup sweep.'

But with pigs.

'Yeah, with pigs,' he said. 'That's right.'

Do the pigs know they're competing?

'It gets that way,' he said. 'At the end of the day, if I put them in the starting box and just let them go, they're just sort of blasé about it. But if there's a crowd there egging them on, they go.'

Are there any songs about pig-racing?

'Not yet,' he said. 'See if you can work on it for us.'

I put the suggestion to the musician who encouraged his country peers to realise 'it was okay to write about Australia, about our way of life'. Would the Ute-Song King write a pig-racing song? 'No,' said Lee Kernaghan, 'I'll leave that to somebody else.'