



BY MIKE SMITH

Amidst some interesting media hype over the past few months which sees **ERIC BOGLE** apparently embarking on his “final tour” or releasing his “last album”, it seems like an ideal opportunity for the iconic singer/songwriter to have the final say.

The real story is a bit like a good song – often an amalgam of truth interspersed with a bit of journalistic licence – but the bottom line and good news for the legions of Bogle fans is that he isn’t hanging up the guitar or travelling bag just yet.

“I think the references were seen by some as a good marketing angle,” laughs Eric. “I actually never said things like ‘I won’t be doing another tour’ or ‘I’ll never make another CD or DVD’ – it all really relates to a positive decision that my overseas touring is finished.

“I’ve been doing it for 40 years, and now simply find it too exhausting and too long away from home. I just want to stay close to base because that’s where I feel I belong.”

So with that good news piece out of the way, it does seem timely to look back at a man who has written himself into a unique place in Australian folklore as an observer, commentator and often social conscience.

His early musical start back in Scotland wasn’t exactly awe-inspiring – the teenage lead singer of a local rock band **THE INFORMERS** – a role he wryly admits “I got because of my amazing vocal ability and the fact that I owned a Kombi van!”

Failing to achieve Rock God status, Eric eventually denounced the whole pop music scene, and turned his attention to folk music.

It was a perfect genre for a young man with an increasing awareness

and involvement with politics who’d heard his first folk songs at various protest marches and meetings he’d attended.

“I was re-introduced to Scottish traditional music plus people like **WOODIE GUTHRIE** and other writers,” remembers Eric. “I thought ‘this music says what I feel – you can’t dance to it but it speaks to my soul’. Because of the social, political and human aspects of the music that’s why I was attracted to it.”

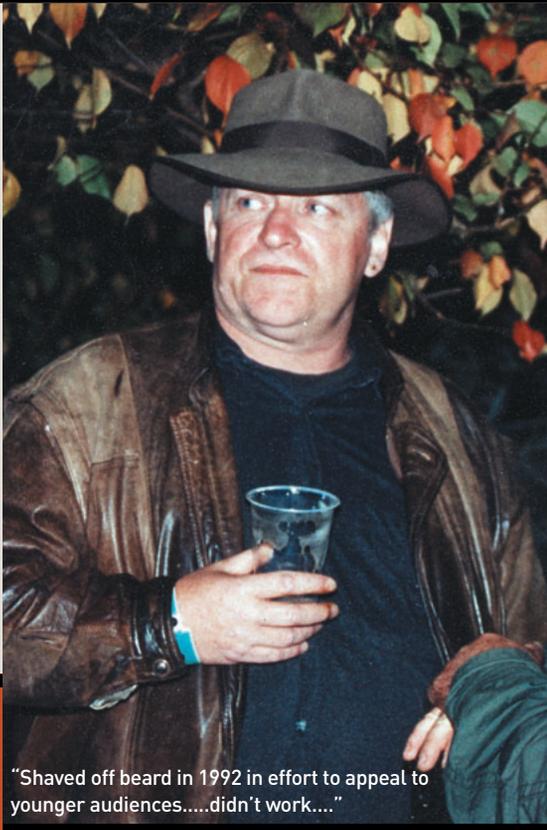
That was the mid-’60s – the halcyon period of protest via song – **BOB DYLAN**, **JOAN BAEZ** and so many others. Soon his interest in folk music had turned to passion, which then turned to love, and which to date has proved to be a

life-long, enduring relationship.

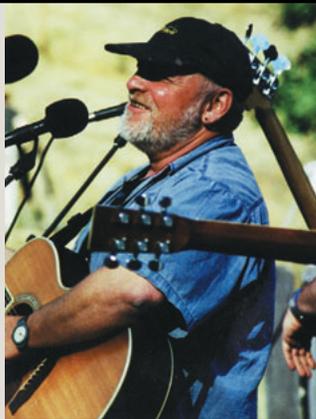
But it wasn’t until his emigration to Australia in 1969 that the eloquent bard we all know actually emerged, and in the early stages it was his songs rather than Eric Bogle the performer that defined those beginnings.

“Like all migrants you’re cast in the role of an observer – whether you like it or not,” says Eric. “Before I came here I was told that Australia was just like Scotland but with sunshine!”

“Not true – it was totally different and it took me a while to settle in. There were anomalies that puzzled me and things that tickled me. I wrote poems about them, put them to simple guitar tunes, and sang



"Shaved off beard in 1992 in effort to appeal to younger audiences.....didn't work...."



first (and last) stage outfit..... quickly discontinued...."

THE FINAL SAY

them at the local folk club, and much to my surprise people seemed to like them."

The music defining Eric certainly goes straight to his best known classic *And The Band Played Waltzing Matilda*.

"I wrote it back in 1971 when I was living in Canberra," says Eric. "I was watching an Anzac Day parade and the song came out of that. The original version was eight verses long – 13 minutes – after I played it a couple of times and people were throwing themselves out of the window – I knew I had to shorten it."

The song was edited down to five verses, but then almost forgotten. "I knew there was a kernel of a good song there, but the song was written because of the Vietnam War," said Eric. "I thought when they brought the boys home the song ceased to be relevant, so I threw it in the guitar case and forgot about it."

The song re-emerged in 1974 when Eric sang it at a songwriting competition in Brisbane and came third – but a couple of versions on reel to reel tape subsequently made their way to England and the song was recorded by 'ROCKIN' JOHN CURRY in 1974 and JUNE TABOR.

TOMMY MAKEM and **LIAM CLANCY** recorded the song in 1976 and got it #1 in Ireland (as did **THE FUREYS** 1981 with *No Man's Land (The Green Fields Of France)* which sat on the hit parade for half a year).

"The interest in my songs really helped kick start my own performing career," said Eric. "I was offered concerts and tours on the basis of my songs that were familiar via other artists."

Eric finally recorded *And The Band Played Waltzing Matilda* himself on his first Australian production, *Now I'm Easy*, in 1979, and has since re-recorded the song a number of times

But the *And The Band Played Waltzing Matilda* juggernaut has been timeless - it's also

been recorded in Danish, Spanish, French, Portuguese and more besides. By 1996, one researcher tracked down 130 recordings, including 10 in languages other than English.

The incredible success of that one song was pivotal to the impending Eric Bogle career. Other songs were subsequently picked up and recorded by an impressive array of artists,

"The impact of the first songs was emphatic," recalled Eric. "Others started to pick up my songs before I recorded. The songs always travelled before me and were great ambassadors."

"I actually didn't want to put out an album myself in those early days," he admits. "I was an accountant at the time and couldn't see the value (apart from ego) of making an album at all – I wouldn't be touring to flog it."

But Larrikin Records convinced Eric to record *Now I'm Easy*, and in 1980 he decided to become a full time musician (of sorts).

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First Overseas Festival, Tonder, Denmark, 1980 (with John Munro and Brent Miller)

THE FINAL SAY

“It wasn’t really ambition – it just happened,” said Eric. “I was totally tired of being an accountant, and thought ‘do you want to do this for the rest of your life?’ and the answer was ‘no’.

“We moved back to Sydney, where I decided to play music for pin money – then I’ll get a real job again.”

But then Eric started to actually make a living (much to his surprise) – although it wasn’t easy in those early days.

“It was bit like water on stone,” reveals Eric. “I kept vertical and kept trying – people gradually began to listen and come to the concerts.

“I’ve been really fortunate over the years and garnered an incredibly loyal audience. The great thing about folk music and country music fans is that their connection is very personal and they take you to heart.”

Despite the simplistic styling of “folk singer”, Eric has been embraced by country music fans because his songs resonate so strongly.

It’s a connection that in a broader sense can also be applied to artists like **JOHN WILLIAMSON**, **GRAEME CONNORS** and **PAT DRUMMOND** with their approach and style that defies boundaries.

“I think it’s simply that we all tend to write story songs and songs about Australia,” explains Eric, “coupled with a facility to walk in somebody else’s shoes for a while.”

“With me personally it’s often an an

empathy. I never fought in World War 1, but I’ve read enough and talked enough to people who have experienced that sort of thing to be fairly empathetic. I think good songwriters have that facility.”

Because the songs are what so strongly define Eric Bogle, it’s worth a closer look at the internal workings of this master songsmith.

“When I first arrived here I was writing from the role of an observer,” said Eric. “but then there is a definable change at times from observer to participant.

“I’ve lived here for over 40 years – I’m an Australian – your focus and your views shift and the songs do get more personal. This is where I have lived most of my life and where I’m going to die – this is my home, and the later songs with Australian stories have a more personal point of view that even Matilda did.

“You become a part of what’s going on – which sometimes blows your objectivity,” he laughs. “But I’ve never really been good at that.”

The Bogle way is often

a deceptively gentle way of getting a strong message across. “I follow issues and sometimes do have personal anger” he admits, “but I try not to include as much as I’d possibly like in my songs – you start haranguing people – you’ll lose them.

“I’m using my songwriting as a personal expression for my emotional point of view, which I suppose can be fairly selfish. But I can’t expect everyone listening to agree with me – and in fact a lot of people don’t – but I often tend to rein myself back.

“Let’s face it – society loves angry young men – angry old men are just an embarrassment,” he laughingly adds.

Probably the most significant theme that recurs in some of Eric’s most memorable songs is that of war. It seems an odd topic for a man whose stance is anti-war, but Eric explains.

“I’ve watched old diggers marching as well and as proudly as they could and I found it very moving – not glorifying war but rather remembering the sacrifices.

“My songs tend to parallel that sentiment, and some see that as a paradox – on one hand an anti war song – on the other hand praising the bravery and courage and commitment of the young men and women.

“War is the most pointless pursuit of the human race,” says Eric, “but it also brings out the best of humanity – people who will sacrifice their lives for others. It brought the country together – comradeship and mateship – and I’m conscious of what they must have suffered and felt.”

His latest (and 15th album) *The Dreamer* is again testament to this consummate communicator – incisive, eloquent and masterful. It’s what stands him apart from the crowd, yet brings him close to his audience.