



## Fifty Years of 'CRASHING AND JINGLING'

Mark Cranfield tells the story of how the National Library acquired John Meredith's lagerphone

One of the most remarkable events of the 2002 National Folk Festival held in Canberra was a performance by the four remaining members of the pioneering 1950s bush band, The Bushwhackers—Alex Hood, Cecil Grivas, Harry Kay and Chris Kempster.

The Bushwhackers had reunited to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of their appearance in *Reedy River*, an iconoclastic Australian play written in the mid-1950s by Dick Diamond. Based on the tumultuous events of the 1891 Shearers' Strike, sympathetic

to the shearers' cause, and featuring numerous Australian folk songs, the play was a great success and the (politically radical) Bushwhackers went on to become a leading force in the Australian folk music revival, appearing frequently at folk clubs, on record, on radio and at festivals throughout the 1950s.

Fifty years later, at the conclusion of their National Folk Festival concert, the four survivors presented the National Library with the lagerphone they had used so vigorously that day—just as they had used it in their heyday.

There were a number of reasons for the gift. Firstly, the remaining Bushwhackers valued the close relationship between the National Library and the National Folk Festival, which sees the Library interviewing and recording Festival performers. Secondly, the Library maintains an active field-

J.C. Parker

The Bushwhackers on the set of *Reedy River* 1953–54

b&w photograph; 11.1 x 15.6 cm  
Pictures Collection nla.pic-an24377447

recording program and is widely recognised as the most important repository for folklore collections in Australia. The third reason, probably the most compelling, is that the Library holds the very extensive collection of field recordings, photographs and manuscript materials belonging to the founder of The Bushwhackers, the late John Meredith, AM.

It would be impossible to overestimate John Meredith's achievements in the field of Australian folklore, as a field collector, as a writer, as a mentor, and—in his early days—as founder and leader of The Bushwhackers. Born in 1920, he was raised in the little New South Wales town of Holbrook, close

to the fabled 'Kelly Country' of north-eastern Victoria. As a boy, Meredith took up the button accordion and, by the time he was a teenager, he was playing at local dances in the Holbrook district. For many years, the music he played was unquestionably 'Australian traditional'. He learned songs from sources such as Banjo Paterson's *Old Bush Songs*; he learned dance tunes from family members, from friends and from other local players. Typically, the tunes were drawn from English country-dance music, and from Irish jigs and reels.

Throughout Australia, music of this type had been played for generations at social events and at dances, on a range of instruments that included accordion, concertina, fiddle and piano. But *never* the lagerphone—or several other instruments that have come to be closely associated with Australian bush music. So, when did the lagerphone first appear and where did it come from?

For the explanation, we can turn to the words of John Meredith himself. In a brief (edited) sketch, entitled 'The Old Rabbiter's Gift' (1997), he provided the following account.

Forty-five years ago, the now ubiquitous noisemaker was unknown. In fact, before 1952, there wasn't even a bush band. That was the year when I had a brilliant idea. I played the traditional bush instrument called the button accordion, and my brainwave was to con a couple of my mates, Brian [Loughlin] and Jack [Barrie], into joining me to form a group which would sing old bush songs to the accompaniment of the squeeze box, as it was affectionately called.

Then Brian and I went on a visit to my family home in my home town of Holbrook. 'Come up to my place tonight', said my brother Claude. 'I've got a surprise for you. Bring your squeeze box.' In due course we arrived and I was ordered to play. 'Give us something lively', ordered big brother, going into the adjoining room. I swung into *Click Go The Shears*, with Brian singing. Then came this crashing, jingling, rhythmic sound as Claude marched in bouncing a strange looking instrument! It consisted of a

bald-headed hair broom—they were made entirely of wood in those pre-plastic years—covered with loosely nailed on bottle tops, which covered the head and most of the handle. As Claude bounced it along the floor to the downbeat, he alternately struck and sawed at the handle with a serrated waddy. Then he proudly pronounced these portentous words:

'Introducing the One-and-Only Celebrated Lagerphone!'

Excitedly, we wrested it away from him, or rather Brian did. My hands were strapped to the squeeze box. After a couple of tunes, we paused for another beer and the obvious question: 'Where the hell did you get that from?'

And he told us the story.

The local branch of the Red Cross Society had organized a fundraising 'Amateur Hour' concert open to all performers, with prizes for various sections. An old rabbit-poisoner had turned up. He came from about 10 miles out, where there was a little town called Lankey's Creek, and brought to the concert this yet un-named percussion instrument which he played to a piano accompaniment and scored a prize in the Novelty section.

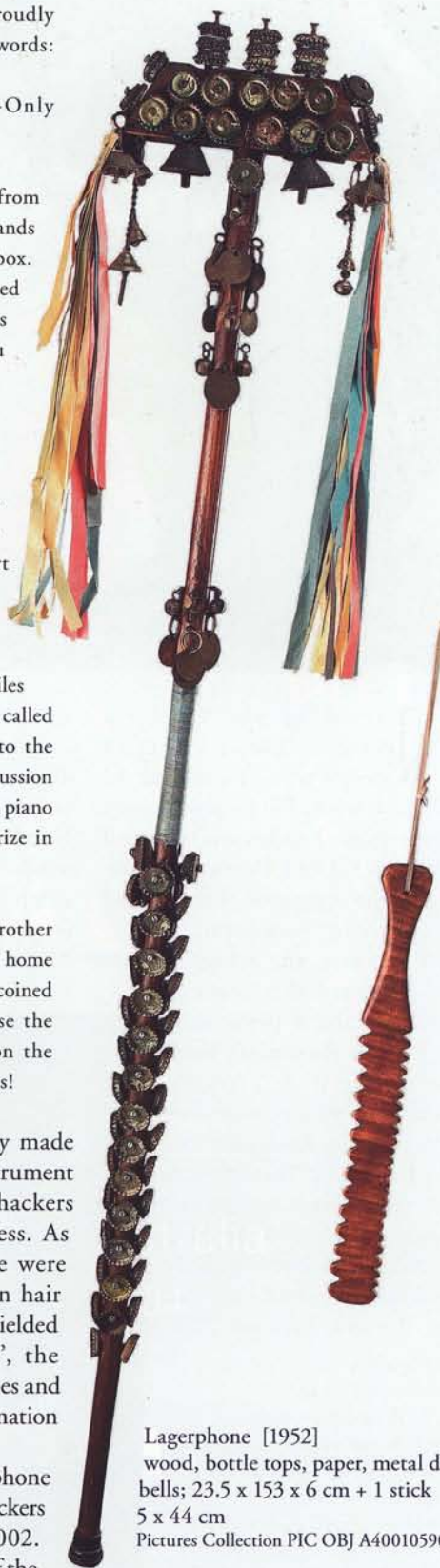
He certainly was novel, and brother Claude could hardly wait to get home and make one for himself. He coined the name 'Lagerphone' because the words 'K.B.Lager' appeared on the instrument several hundred times!

John Meredith subsequently made his own lagerphone. The instrument was adopted by The Bushwhackers and was an immediate success. As Meredith recalls, soon there were dozens of imitators and, when hair brooms with wooden heads 'yielded to the onslaught of plastic', the instrument appeared in all shapes and sizes, limited only by the imagination of its creators.

It is John Meredith's lagerphone that was given by The Bushwhackers to the National Library in 2002. Today, it is an important part of the

Meredith Collection, contributing to the story of one of Australia's folklore pioneers.

MARK CRANFIELD is the Manager of the Oral History and Folklore Collection at the National Library



Lagerphone [1952]  
wood, bottle tops, paper, metal discs,  
bells; 23.5 x 153 x 6 cm + 1 stick  
5 x 44 cm  
Pictures Collection PIC OBJ A40010590