

Tracy Goes to OZ

Tracy Spring Tours Australia - February 1997

Northwest performing songwriter **Tracy Spring** leaves the U.S. for a 21 date solo tour in Australia from **February 20th** through **March 30th, 1997**. Bookings include the prestigious **Port Fairy Folk Festival**, numerous other festivals, and community concerts. She'll perform her wide and unique variety of original and traditional blues, folk and jazz tunes, self-accompanied on resophonic guitar, rhythm and fingerstyle guitar, and mountain dulcimer.

Tracy Spring is known for her fine guitar work, insightful lyrics, and dynamic vocals. Her work has been recognized and awarded by the **Columbia River New Folk Festival**, the **Bellingham Songwriters and Musicians (S.A.M.)**, and the **Seattle Women's Ensemble's "Tapestry"** concert honoring Northwest Women Composers. Most recently, Spring has a choral work (written for the 25th annual Seattle Folklife Festival) being performed by the **New York City Singers**.

Tracy Spring has played at many festivals, concert series, and "campfire-in-the rounds" up and down the West Coast, as far east as Philadelphia, PA, as far south as Kerrville, TX, as far west as the Long Beach Peninsula, WA and as far north as the Vancouver, BC World's Fair.

We're Not In Kansas Anymore...

Tracy Arrives In OZ!

Last Wednesday morning, February 12th, I hugged my 12-year-old off to school, accompanied my 10-year old to her 4th grade classroom for a quick geography lesson, played them Heidi Muller's "Groundhog" and Loudon Wainwright's "Swimmin' Song", and discussed the fine points of kangaroos (sorry guys...no, I can't bring you back one) and upside-down summertime. Then my beloved Albert drove me to the Vancouver, BC airport.

After a tearful goodbye to my Darlin' who will be single-parenting for the next two months, I flew off into the proverbial sunset via Cathay Pacific. THEY were not sticklers about dimensions of carry-on luggage, I might add. Nobody batted an eye at my l-o-n-g dulcimer in its soft case. Unlike other airlines who shall remain nameless (TWA, the dogs). In all fairness, I suppose it wasn't a true test, since I didn't attempt any soft-cased guitars.

The flight over the Pacific Ocean via the Alaska-Asia route was VERY long.

Unfortunately, I have very little to report, either about the views (we weren't allowed to keep the shades raised, "for the comfort of other passengers"... hope that's a cultural thing and not a new airline policy) or the conversation. My seat mate didn't speak English, and our interactions were confined to apologetic smiles as I crawled, as gracefully as possible (which wasn't VERY) over his lap on my way to the loo. I will say I was amazed and envious at his remarkable ability to sleep in the (bolt) upright position. Perhaps it was some form of meditation, but I swear I heard him snore, gently, once or twice.

Finally, we approached the night lights of Hong Kong city and harbor. That landing was absolutely the most urban imaginable. We flew past ENORMOUS downtown high rise apartments housing thousands of people, so close I could practically look into their

windows and see what people had laid out on the kitchen table for supper. Must be a heck of a thing for folks to live with: screaming jets whizzing by at all hours of the day and night. There's a new airport in the works, though, outside of town, and I'm glad for the residents.

The layover was short. I just had time to pick out some postcards, figure out the stamp machine, and pace the length of the airport 3 times. I bought postcards, which were \$4.50 HK each. Those were the cheap ones. Postcard postage was \$3.60 each. Before you get too sticker-shocked, keep in mind that Al got me \$20 US worth of Hong Kong dollars from a Bellingham bank, and I think that came to somewhere around \$180 HK. Still, I suspect it will be an expensive visit when I spend 2 nights there on my way home. I truly 'lucked out' on the last leg of the trip to Australia. I swear there was only one vacant seat on the whole flight, and it was next to me! I was able to curl up and sleep for over 6 hours of the 9 hour flight. Figured I might as well, since I couldn't look out the window, anyway. I did, however, sneak peeks at the sunrise.

We flew by Ayer's Rock, but it was on the other side of the plane. Doubt I could've seen much, anyway. I was struck, though, by how smack dab in the middle of the continent it is. I watched our position in relation to the rock, and the continent, on my personal TV. Nifty gadget. That's ECONOMY class, folks. Half a dozen movie channels and a dozen music channels, credit card slide slot for the "shopping channels", and the navigational channel which charted our course (up close and wide-angle), points of interest we were flying over (somewhat of a moot point since we weren't allowed to look out the windows), elevation, headwind, projected destination arrival, the local time at our flight origin and destination.

The duct tape and bubble wraps on my guitar cases, as well as the DOZENS of bright orange "fragile" stickers pasted merrily over their large mummified bodies, were effective. They arrived in a whole and timely manner. I made it through customs/immigration without a hitch; didn't even need to crack open a case. Lucky for the customs agent, 'though I'm sure they've seen it all. Since my 2-bag baggage limit was already filled with my guitars, I'd stuffed every possible nook and cranny with wardrobe, strings, and other personal and musical paraphernalia. At least the underwear was clean. Thanks to Zeke Hoskin, by the way, for the suggestion not to forget my "down unduhwear". I didn't.

I've had a delightful reunion with my Aussie immigrated sister, Jacqueline, and her family: partner Warwick, kids Miriam and Reuben, and Breakfast the dog. Only white-knuckled a few times on the drive home. That's a comment on the left-handed driving custom over here, not her driving abilities, btw. I am VERY pleased to discover that the international driving permit I acquired through AAA will be hugely underused, since my dear agent Mary has arranged for me to "chauffeured" to and from all of my gigs. Hooray! Australia and I, in unison, heave a sigh of relief.

This morning, after a glorious sleep in 'til noon (Bellingham time), I arose in the first morning light and went walking in the green and brown hills near my sister's house in Fern Tree Gully (yes, really). Green, because the climate is much like northern California around here, and folks loved foliage up here in the Dandenongs. Brown, because they had a terrible fire here several weeks ago. And people who lived close to where the fires did, or nearly did, destroy their homes are now far less enamored of the vegetation. I don't know how many acres went up in flames. Some houses were destroyed, and a few people, including firefighters, lost their lives. There happened to be a visiting Canadian aerial firefighting team and planes in Australia when the fires broke out, so they REALLY got to show their stuff and do a good worldly deed.

Interestingly enough though, as any good forest fire should, in MOST places, it merely burned off the undergrowth and lightly charred the first 10-25 feet up the eucalyptus (gum) trees. Badly burned trees looked to me to have already been decomposing on the ground before the fire. Aside from keeping the underbrush from getting dense enough to lethally ignite the trees, burning the rotting, fallen trees probably keeps the termite and other tree infesting insects under control, if allowed to happen on a regular basis.

And the forest is already regenerating. On my walk this morning, I saw many new green shoots sprouting from the charred trunks and branches. The animals and humans will take longer to recover, I'm sure.

Also on my perusal of the regrowth situation, I mention a special, ironic note for Northwest gardeners: the nasty imported blackberries were already sending up new shoots, as well as something that looked like quack grass. Guess it goes to show, you can't keep a good weed down... On my early morning walk, I saw 2 bright rosella parrots, numerous Indian mynahs, one sulfur-crested cockatoo, and a flock of galahs, as well as numerous shriekers and singers I haven't yet identified. Heard a kookaburra utter its lunatic cry, but didn't see it. I reached the top of the hill just in time for the sunrise, which was glorious.

So...that's my week so far. Tonight I'm headed in to Melbourne on the train with my nephew to attend an outdoor MSO (Melbourne Symphony Orchestra) concert. Aside from one radio interview with the ABC (Australian Broadcast Corporation), I have all next week to rest up, get used to the HEAT (upper 80's I'd say), work up some tunes with my harper sister Jacquie, and practice my Austraaaalian, mate, before I head off on tour. I'm excited. The uniqueness of this country and its people are all coming back to me. I have a great mix of country community concerts and big festival gigs, and I can't wait to get out there and sing my little heart out!

Week 1:

Tracy Plays 3LO Radio Melbourne, Portland and Hamilton, VIC

My work week started on Thursday, with a live radio interview with Gail Jennings @ the ABC's (Australian Broadcast Corp.) Southbank Melb. 3LO. I played a few tunes and chatted with her about the upcoming weeks of festivals and concerts in the Victoria area. She was a charming lady; I liked her very much. I got to talk a little and play a LOT; my favorite kind of interview! But the BEST part of the experience was the WONDERFUL air conditioned ABC building. Melbourne's weather had been very intense: 5 days of 40 degree heat (that's Celsius, mate) that had wilted even the locals. And THEY'D had the whole summer to acclimatize. Somewhat in shock, this Northern gal employed survival tactics learned in my 12 summers of Yakima heat: application of internal and external water of the cool and copious variety.

Friday, Jacquie and I loaded up her Volvo station wagon (newly outfitted with air conditioning!) with my two guitars and dulcimer, her Celtic harp, wardrobes, maps, tapes & cd's, lots of water and emergency rations, and headed off for the Portland Music Festival, an alleged 4 hours down the Southwest coast of Victoria.

Over a year ago, when this trip was in it's planning stages, my dear sister had tantalized me with references to the Spring Sisters being the "Thelma and Louise" of the Outback,

leaving a trail of spent Aussie men and cappacino cups in our wake. I promptly rejected part of that scenario, saying that leaving spent cappacino cups in our wake would be ecologically unsound, and therefore we should take one cup each and reuse it.

Alas, though, having terribly misjudged the distance to Portland, we had little time for cappacino or anything else. The trip took over 5 hours, and we arrived, breathless, in Portland only JUST in time for my gig at the local yacht club. The gig went well though, in spite of a hurried set up. While I played, I had a most delightful view of the Portland bay and a rising near-full moon. We stayed the night with one of the festival organizers and her family, a gregarious truck-driving husband, two gorgeous little boys who were greatly amused by my American accent, and a large, easy-going German sheppard named Finnigan.

The next day Jacquie and I went exploring. We visited the petrified forest (limestone formations) and sea-spouting blowholes 20 kilometers down the rugged coast. We saw a kangaroo family (2 adults and a joey) bounding across the fields and an echidna (sort of a little porcupine/anteater) sleepily curled up beside the road. We looked at some very old stone house ruins of a pioneer's house in a farmer's field, and clamored up to a series of limestone caves uphill from the road, keeping our eyes watchful and our feet noisy so not to surprise any slithering reptiles. On the way back to Portland, my brave sister turned over the wheel to me (since I'd been trying to climb in the driver's side all afternoon by mistake, anyway). I am pleased to report that I only drove on the wrong side once!

That night I played at the Portland Civic Hall, 2 sets before James Blundell, one of Australia's most beloved country singers. It was a very spirited evening; people partied mightily and a good time seemed to be had by all.

The next morning we said goodbye to our hosts, CAREFULLY checked the distance on the map, and headed off to my Sunday afternoon gig in nearby Hamilton. The concert was in a lovely little community hall, made of round wood beams and mudbrick, with a beautiful red gum wood floor inlaid with contrasting wood images of bandicoots (sort of like a raccoon/American Possum). People sat around tables, drank good Australian wine and had afternoon tea, listened attentively, and treated us extremely well. An EXCEPTIONALLY civilized way to spend a Sunday afternoon; my favorite gig so far. Since we still had a few hours of daylight left, we decided to drive home that evening to Melbourne, passing the huge tilted sediment cliffs of the Grampion Mountains. Looked like some good hiking up there; I hope to get back another time and try them out. We passed rolling brown fields dotted with freshly shorn gray sheep, gum tree groves, cool billabong watering holes, and some football-field-sized flocks of raucous cockatoos feeding intently on something in the grass, so numerous and white, they looked like snow.

We rolled into Jacquie's home in Upper Fern Tree Gully late, tired but happy, and ready (after a good night's sleep) to get some more material worked up together. The Celtic Harp is a wonderful instrument, and Jacquie is doing a great job of working out arrangements on some of my stuff (i.e. Hawk or Dove, Empty Arms).

So ends my first working week here in the land of OZ. I have a concert Thursday in Mulwala, New South Wales, then fly to Perth for the Nannup Festival next weekend. I've never been to that side of Australia, but I hear it's gorgeous! More about THAT story in next weeks journal!

TRACY'S CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH A KANGAROO
(THE 'ROO WINS)
AND GIGS IN NEW SOUTH WALES AND WEST AUSTRALIA

What a week!!! Starting with a crash course (figuratively speaking) in left-handed driving, my first solo flight was a 2 hour drive through narrow hilly roads, squeezing past VERY large logging trucks on tight corners. My tour manager, Mary Sounes, had decided to accompany me to my Thursday night gig up on the Victoria/NSW border, giving Jacquie a chance to catch up on some work at home and harp. I and Jacquie's trusty Volvo station wagon arrived slightly dusty but in damn good shape, if I do say so myself.

Mary immediately popped me back in the car (she drove) for a relaxing bushwalk up the road to a clear and lovely waterfall surrounded by towering eucalyptus and lush fern trees. Amidst all that beauty and tranquility was a mournful little plaque: "By an act of God on a windless morn..." and the names of 4 dead teenaged children crushed by a huge tree that fell on their tent as they slept, 30 years ago. No warning, no apparent reason... they were just at the wrong place at the wrong time. Made me want to hug my kids, halfway around the world.

After a barbecue and a good night's sleep, we watched huge bright parrots at the bird feeder on the veranda, enjoyed the warm morning sun, consumed good coffee and toast and jam. Soon, Mary's husband, Proinnsias (Irish) showed up with another of her touring artists, Robin Huw Bowen, fresh off the plane from Wales. Robin is a phenomenal triple harp player on his second Australia tour. Mary is touring the two of us, as well as an Irish band. Makes for quite a diverse roster.

After a leisurely and MOST civilized breakfast, Mary and I left Robin to his jet lag, Proinnsias to his electrician trade, and set off for my gig in Mulwala, New South Wales. Our other agenda was the ongoing search for the ultimate piece of chocolate cake. The gig was very successful, the search was not, but may be aided NEXT time by the fact that I described our quest in my interview with the local paper. I suspect people will aid our endeavor for the elusive delicacy, next time through.

The turnout at the Services Club (SORT of like an upscale senior center with participatory sport games, and slot machines, bars, restaurants) was pretty good. I sold a few albums, and had men and women alike coming up and saying they are guitar players and I inspired them. Hooray! We packed up and headed back to Marysville (no relation), arriving at Mary's house at 2am. That's the good news.

The bad news is, 5 kilometers from home, Mary had a premonition, slowed WAAAY down as we rounded a corner, and ran smack into a kangaroo family. We knocked over the last 'roo in the bunch, and knocked out the right Volvo headlight. Thanks to Mary's foresight and quick reaction time, we screeched to a slow skid, and impact was somewhere in the neighborhood of 25mph. We THINK the 'roo was OK; felt like we hit muscle instead of soft tissue, (if there IS such a thing on those wiry animals.) No blood. It hopped off, muttering under its breath, no doubt bruised but hopefully wiser to the perils of roads, late night drivers, and Volvo station wagons.

We were ALL very lucky. The main hazard of night driving in Australia is colliding with wildlife. Having a kangaroo land in your lap at 100kph is as deadly as having a deer do so at 65mph. Hitting a wombat is akin to running into a 2 and a half foot curb, and can flip a car. The highways aren't fenced, and the animals are very nocturnal.

Shaken and pumped full of adrenaline, Mary and I finished the drive and lay sleepless in our beds for quite some time. Unfortunately, I had to haul myself out of bed at daybreak, drive myself back to Melbourne in the one-eyed Volvo in time to do a phone interview with a West Australia ABC radio station, and catch my flight to Perth. After a 4 hour flight, I was met at the airport by the promised car and driver, and I (gratefully) was chauffeured to the Nannup Folk Festival, three hours away through the dusk and dark, eerily reminiscent of the night before, driven cheerfully but with far less prudence. I was a bit nervous to say the least, but our timing was good on all counts, and we arrived dent less with no blood shed.

I dropped my driver off at the festival and drove to the outskirts of town to my accommodation for the next two nights: the beautiful Argyll Cottage Bed and Breakfast. I was met at the door by Liz, the delightful Scottish landlady, who asked me in a charming thick brogue "Ah, ye poor dear. Woold ya like a nice cuppa tea?" Given the trials and travels of the previous 30 hours, I'm sure I looked like something the cat dragged in, with an evening performance still ahead of me in less than an hour's time. Not usually a tea drinker, I nevertheless took her up on the 'nice cuppa tea'. I could tell by her accent she'd make a great one. It was. I swear it got me through the gig. Afterwards, I fell into the big comfortable queen sized bed and slept straight on through late morning.

I awoke to the delectable smell of bacon and eggs and toast, brewing tea and coffee, which pulled me straight out of bed (I went for the coffee this time), ready to face a considerably easier day than the one before.

The Nannup Festival was a WONDERFUL experience: well-organized, great variety of music on stage and street, jams, workshops, friendly people and a small-town feel that gave a real sense of recognition and cohesiveness to the event. Normally a sleepy forestry/tourist town, Nannup pulls out all the stops for this 8th annual event, and it was one big good-natured party. I'd highly recommend it to performers and audiences alike! I led a songwriting workshop, played one more evening performance, and headed back to Perth (in broad daylight), driving myself in the rental car after another good night's sleep and world class breakfast, thanks to dear Liz at the Argyll Cottage. Thanks also to main festival organizer Barbara Stephenson. She and her crew did a fantastic job and I had a GREAT time.

I spent my next two days off in Perth, visiting my sister's in-laws (THANKS DEB and ANDY!) who took me for a swim in the Indian Ocean, a beer-sampling (pronounced BEEyah) picnic overlooking the twinkling night lights of Perth below, and the unfamiliar Aussie stars above, and also let me nap a bunch. I was a wee bit pooped, this no-longer-Spring-chicken...

Now I'm back in Melbourne, briefly regrouping before heading off for THIS weekend's fine adventure at the huge and majestic Port Fairy Music Festival. I have one national radio interview, 2 or 3 performance slots (currently double-booked simultaneously on two stages, not sure how they'll rectify that), and 2 panel concerts with some of Australia's and Britain's best and brightest songwriters. I'm excited!! More about THAT next week!

Tracy Visits William Ricketts Sanctuary, Port Fairy VIC and Dalby QLD

This journal entry is being written from my old (Bellingham) friend Sally Sue Peyou's computer in Sydney, NSW. She picked me up from the airport this afternoon and is driving me to my next gig in Wagga Wagga tomorrow, five hours down the road. My week started off with a day off (!) in Melbourne. Ten years ago, I discovered the wonderful work of environmentalist/spiritualist William Ricketts. He was a sculptor of clay, stone and wood, with a deep love and empathy for the original (aboriginal) people and animals here, and his work illustrates my personal beliefs regarding humans and their relationship with the natural world far better than my words will be able to describe. Suffice to say that I am deeply moved every time I visit the sanctuary where his works are being preserved, way up in the Dandenong Mountains, and I visit every chance I get. I highly recommend his biography "White Fella Dreaming" (sorry I can't remember the author).

Thursday, my sister Jacquie and I loaded up the trusty one-eyed Volvo (low beam still works) for that wonderful world-wide gathering of the musical masses that is the Port Fairy Folk Festival. We were running a little late, as usual, so we pulled off the road into the parking lot of a little country pub to phone ahead to our accommodations. On the way back, I nearly tripped over the skin and skeletal remains of a very flat, very large snake. From the markings, I'd say it was a tiger snake, one of the more poisonous and aggressive (?conflicting reports on that claim) varieties in Australia. Whether it had wandered into the parking lot and been splatted unknowingly, or brought to the pub and cruelly dispatched, the end result was the same. I took the opportunity to study it a bit, and say a little peaceful prayer for its life and death.

Years ago, on my first trip to Australia in 1980, I bicycled nearly 2000 kilometers on a solo backroads trek from Sydney, to Melbourne, and around Tasmania. Those roads were so remote that sunning snakes stretched out confidently across the road, and they and my loaded down bike crossed paths on a regular basis. I'd get my courage up and "run the gauntlet", so to speak. They'd barely stir as I passed, and I never looked back. Then I'd use the adrenaline to get me another few miles down the dusty lonesome road.

But... back to the adventure at hand...Port Fairy was an absolute BLAST.

We stayed in a local family's home (they'd vacated for the weekend in return for BIG rental bucks), played music, listened to music, drank demure to copious amounts of Guinness (depending on the individuals involved) and in general had a rollicking good time. My personal highlight was the women's panel hosted by Port Fairy Artist of the Year, Judy Small. It was a bit of magic first thing in the morning, in a packed hall with a very enthusiastic audience. The women were: Chris While and Julie Mathews (British duo w/GREAT guitar and keyboards, harmonies, superb writing), Sara Grey (trad. American folk music with big-hearted warm vocals and banjo), Kavisha Mazella (Aussie Italian Gypsy Songwriter), Bronwyn Calcutt (vocals, accordion, hilarious black humor) and myself. We sang about women, lovers, children, birth, death, and everything in between. The warmth and love and strength generated, we and the thousand souls in that huge outdoor tent, were a sight and sound to behold!!!

Other highlights were: FINALLY meeting phenomenal Canadian writer/performer James Keeleghan (who played "Rebecca's Lament" for me TWICE), and Jez Lowe, a wonderful singer-writer-instrumentalist from England. It was also lovely to rendez-vous with fellow Yankee folkie, Rik Palieri. Sorry I missed your Brisbane gig, Rik. I was waylaid in Dalby an extra night. The Port Fairy folks got quite an earful, with Rik's

polish bagpipes, courting flute, banjo, and big booming voice. I'm starting to worry, though... I hate to admit it... I'm beginning to think he talks a bit funny...

It was hard to say goodbye to these new-found-friends, knowing I'd be going solo for the rest of my touring here. Most of them were continuing on the festival circuit, while the remainder of my gigs are concerts out in the country.

After one day home in Melbourne, I once again bundled my guitars up in their duct-tape-and-bubble-wrap and shipped them (with a gulp and a prayer) up to Brisbane for my next gig. Three hours northeast of Brisbane lies the lovely farming community of Dalby, where my dear friend Janis Brooke and her husband and four beautiful daughters live. I performed a benefit concert for the local high school, and had a couple days to relax and catch up with myself and Jan. We hadn't seen each other in 17 years! We met in Tasmania via a wild American lass named Maureen Catalina, who I'd met on a 50-mile bushwalk in the Tasman Cradle Mountains. I ran into her again several weeks later on the streets of Davenport (TAS), busking (street music), singing Elvis songs at the top of her lungs. Maureen said this really nice woman had put her address in the guitar case (in lieu of change) with an offer of a hot meal and shower, and Maureen reckoned this woman would like TWO musicians as well as one. We both ended up camped out on Jan's floor for a week or so, and I and my trusty bike hitched a ride with Janis and her two girls all the way up to Brisbane, QLD. A life-long friendship ensued.

I still keep in touch with Maureen, as well, who now has two sweet young daughters and lives in Nashville, TN. And presumably still has a flair for singing Elvis songs.

One of the highlights of my time at Janice's house, was prying the 2-4 inch BRIGHT green frogs off of the windows with Ashley, her 11-year-old, and relocating them back to the nearest billabong. They are beautiful, but their poop is prolific and stinks to high heaven. They apparently have good homing instincts (sorry), and Ashley assured me that her "pets" would find their way back to the house by morning. I'm not sure why they liked the house so much. I suspect they loved Ashley as much as she loved them.

This morning we arose at daybreak, and drove through the beautiful misty autumn dawn, ever watchful for 'roos springing out of the bush, in time to catch my mid-morning flight to Sydney and yet another ABC radio phone interview. Also on the flight was the Brisbane pro basketball team, who filed by and took their places in the row behind me. The row behind had double the usual amount of leg space, which was a good thing. I got temporarily nostalgic, missing MY tall guy, and struck up a conversation with a lanky transplant from Florida. They were sweet, well-behaved guys with very large feet.

So... that brings y'all up to date. Sally Sue's partner just brought me a Guinness, so I'm going to go catch up with her now. I'm doing well, with occasional bouts of homesickness, but seem to wind up in good hands every step of my journey. I am grateful. 'Til next time...

**"The amount of journal writing not consumed
is directly proportional to the number of gigs
swallowed..."**

Tracy's Last Three Weeks in OZ"

These have not been quiet, contemplative weeks. I've had little time or opportunity to wrap my fingers around any keyboard. My last entry was made three weeks ago from my dear former Bellingham friend Sally Sue Peyou's computer in Sydney.

Sally Sue, her partner Barb and traveling Greek friend Alexandra drove me to my gig in Wagga Wagga in their little silver Saab. Now, THAT's a loaded statement. Imagine four women, camping gear and surfboards for three, two guitars in airport garb, and one dulcimer in a midsize Saab sedan making the 5 hour drive to inland New South Wales, and you begin to get the picture and the truth of the statement emerges: "It's a long long way to Wagga Wagga..."

We traveled the Road to Gundagai, and I sent my friend and folk dj Dan Maher in Pullman, WA an "On the Road to Gundagai" postcard to commemorate a particularly needed rest stop and his exuberant rendition of that old Aussie folk song.

The gig in Wagga went well, and in the morning the ladies loaded up the Saab with camping gear and surfboards for three, no guitars, no dulcimer and a LOT more leg room, and continued to the beach without me [sniff], while my tour/road manager and I continued on our merry way to Wangaratta for a three hour songwriting workshop (mine) and another concert, located upstairs in the beautiful historic Grand Central Hotel.

Mary's partner Proinnsias (prawn CHAY us... it's Gaelic to be sure, to be sure) accompanied my next gig in interior Victoria. Horsham's venue was the Westley Performing Arts Centre, a lovely old former Methodist church. The pipe organ was long gone, but the pipes remained as a backdrop behind the stage, very ornate and magnificent. Wood, stained glass, GREAT acoustics. It was my favorite venue of the whole tour.

After Horsham, Mary and I hit the road once again, on our quest for the perfect piece of chocolate cake and oh yeah, more gigs. The next series encompassed the northernmost outer reaches of Victoria: Echuca, Benalla, Robinvale and Swan Hill. The first two gigs went great: another classy old hotel, and a quiet and appreciative country club. It was in Robinvale that we met our Waterloo, AKA "The Gig From Hell".

Suffice to say that neither we nor the drunken and rowdy pub patrons were what the other had in mind. We cut the concert short and got the gear out before the brawl erupted, by the skin of our teeth.

Mary and I continued our evening in fine style, talking and tipling under the starlight and crescent moon, enjoying the clean country air and peace and quiet, far from the drunken crowd. On the way out of town the next morning, Mary noticed an old Shell station station with the "S" blown away, so not only did we go to "hell" and back, but we have the photos to prove it. I'll be posting photos on this page in the coming weeks. Stay tuned...NOT to be missed, the pictures from hell.

The next afternoon's concert would have been relatively heavenly: a attentive and gentle crowd of art-lovers in the Swan Hill art gallery. However, I had started what would be my week-long struggle with a chest cold and laryngitis.

The fellow who had set up the previous night's gig was there, and got quite an education (hopefully) when he asked how it had gone. We were polite, but candid. And I was completely out of voice by the beginning of my second set, so he got a firsthand look at the repercussions of throwing a singer-songwriter to the wolves, so to speak.

Well and truly, the Robinvale gig was my ONLY negative Aussie performing experience, out of the 27 I did. As it turns out, the fellow who had booked me into that seedy pub was aware that the music I did would be out of place in that environment, but had done it anyway (within his official job capacity) for "rural cultural development". My fees were paid by the organization, and the bar owner had GIVEN the tickets away, probably figuring nobody would show up if they had to pay, and he'd make more money on the booze he sold, in the long run, anyway. The final irony was that there WAS a community arts center in town, but the arts development fellow didn't utilize it because he said he didn't think anybody "would go to something like that on a Saturday night".

Enough of that.

The last leg of my tour was the BEST. I'd spent quite a bit of time in East Gippsland on that bicycle trip I did back in 1980-81. I saw people I knew from that time, played a variety of venues and enjoyed the company of the women's trio, "Mamatoto", who toured with me as my "support act". And support me, they did! Julie, Sharon and Cyndie did long sets, sometimes TWO if I was particularly laryngitic, and were loving and nurturing as well as very good musicians.

"Mamatoto" means Mother and Child, in Swahili, I believe. The three "moms" do three part harmony with one guitar or a capella, covering songs from Tiddas (another popular women's trio over here) and their own material as well.

Also deserving MUCH credit for getting me through was Arts Network East Gippsland (ANEG) Executive Officer, Paul Holton. He served as my road manager for that week, not flinching when I collapsed in a heap at our first meeting, when I thought I was going to have to cancel gigs due to no voice, telling me all would be well either way (which of course took 80 per cent of the stress out of my situation IMMEDIATELY), found me a quiet household (Julie's) to rest up in, fed me good food, ran the PA gear well (riding the vocal mike ever higher as the evenings would progress and I'd have less and less volume).

Our first gig was sold out in a small town called Maffra. The venue was a WONDERFUL art gallery/restaurant called Eugene's Dog, with a huge tin and rough wood beam shed out in the back that had been transformed into a community theatre. Maffra was my absolute favorite concert. People were SO quiet, and listened SO carefully to Mamatoto's beautiful harmonies, and my croaks and whispers.

When the show was nearly over, I closed with my usual dulcimer tune, the traditional "Wild Mountain Thyme", and their voices rose so sweetly and filled that magic tin shed hall, IN HARMONY, that it made me weep with joy.

That evening so perfectly illustrated something for me. It's not about having a pretty and agile voice (I most certainly DID NOT), it's about communication and interaction. I felt so stripped down to the bone, physically and emotionally, but the essence that remained was enough to make a connection with those people unlike anything I've ever experienced with a group of (former) strangers. It was very, very powerful.

The next few gigs went well, too, with Mamatoto continuing to "support" and shine, and my vocal chords inching their way back towards their former selves.

Paul and his daughter Nicky took me sailing at the Lakes Entrance, where the Tasman Sea and the Pacific Ocean meet the sheltered semi-saline lakes, which was very good for my soul.

Then Paul went on ahead to our last stop, the Mallacoota Festival, where he was working in his official capacity with ANEG. I spent my day off with dear old friends, Ron and Daya Jepsen and their two beautiful children, Zachary (from India) and Makoto (from Japan). The Jepsen's had just acquired three beautiful pregnant alpacas, so we all made their acquaintance together.

They were beautiful animals who had been through rigorous travels after a year-long quarantine on some Pacific Island. People had been hired to run around putting sunscreen on these hardy creature's noses, which is a comic thought until you realize how different from their natural environment that must have been for these poor, impregnated creatures, and how painful sunburns can be. It would be inevitable that someone got missed... But they will have very, very good lives from here on out, with Ron and Daya and Zack and Mak. They are phenomenal humans. The alpacas looked happy to be in one place. I must say, I can relate, a bit.

After that brief rest, I headed up the coast for Mallacoota, in the (still) one-eyed Volvo (we're waiting on a part) for my final two gigs.

Mallacoota was absolutely gorgeous. At first glance, I could have been somewhere close by my beloved Bellingham, ie the San Juan Islands, with tree-covered islands surrounded by quiet salt water. It was a beautiful warm fall day, the festival was intimate and lovely, and both of my performances went well. The highlight of the festival for me, was the festival's "Sunset Ceremony", which Paul and I caught JUST the right 20 minutes of, before my last show.

This year's festival theme was "Into Africa", and giant giraffes, elephants, and zebras were erected on a sand spit that divided the ocean and lake. The spit was lined with hundred of candles in paper bags, and the visual effect of those images reflecting through the half-moon and star lit sky was, to put it mildly, stunning.

In a parade led by drummers and an avant garde jazz band the masses (1000+ people?) crossed the spit and filed past the giant animals. Then the animals were torched and went up in a blaze of spark and glory. It was an AMAZING sight I shall remember for the rest of my days. Since we had a concert to do, we didn't stick around for whatever came after. I returned the following day and took some photos of the remaining zebras. Again, watch this site and I will post some pictures in the coming weeks. So ended my first Oz tour, with hugs and fond farewells to Paul and the Mamatoto wonderful women.

I'm now at my sister's house in the Dandenongs outside of Melbourne. My guitars are packed, and then some. God/dess help the customs agent that asks me to open my bags. They are, shall we say, CREATIVELY packed? BTW, if anyone wants to know how to pack three pairs of sheepskin slippers, clothing, books, stacks of workshop notes, guitar cords, instrument stands, tapes, CD's and misc souvenirs in and around two mummified guitar cases, just ask. I'll give you a hint, though: lots of plastic bags and duct tape...

Well, it's time to load up the trusty one eyed Volvo (where IS that part, anyway?) and embark on the last bit of this great adventure. I've cut my stay in Hong Kong down to the mandatory (for Cathay Pacific) 18 hours, and intend to find an all-night mall and do some serious (mostly window) shopping. I'll write an in a week or two, and continue posting selected photos and captions.

Until then, g'day one last time from the Great Down Unduh!