

Monaro Musings

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The Newsletter of the Monaro Folk Society Inc.,
Reg No A 00208

www.monarofolk.org.au

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The Prez Says

Hi everyone

The Society's activities are well and truly underway for 2026, with Contra in the Caves, a St Valentines Day dance, and several Merry Muse already in the books, along with another successful season of Dancing in the Park where it was great to see around 40 or more dancers regularly coming along in January. Over the next few weeks we have the Shearers Ball, a couple of Contra dances where we will be welcoming our interstate friends either side of the National Folk Festival, and all our regular events as well.

Our membership numbers are continuing to grow steadily, and although (like everywhere else) it seems, we have needed to increase some of our entry fees to accommodate rising costs, we are continuing to offer discounts to our members at a similar level as before.

On the subject of membership, we are still in need of a new membership secretary, following Anna Brown's resignation late last year. This is starting to become urgent as we head towards membership renewal season in June. If you would be willing and able to help out the Society (and more importantly, all your fellow members) in this way, please get in touch either with me or with Moir.

We are also still looking for someone to take on the role of publicity officer for the Society. I see a lot of potential for the Society's activities to continue to grow and expand if only more people knew that we exist, and your contribution would therefore be of great benefit to all our members, and to the folk traditions of which are all custodians.

I look forward to seeing you at a Society event soon.

Cheers

David

Editor's Note

Articles about Numeralla, Contra in the Caves and Ruination Day (14 April) in this edition. Also, sadly, three obituaries, as we pay tribute to Maureen Cummuskey, Sean Kenan and Ted Egan.

Numeralla

What!!! A free folk festival? Free camping with a river to swim in and campfires (if there is not a total fire ban). YES that is Numeralla. It is a wonderful small friendly celebration of the very best in festival culture. There is a festival program, and if you don't know many or are a bit reluctant to join in a session there are things to do.



Andy Irvine

The concert on Friday night was tops ... Andy Irvine, not able to go to his scheduled gig in Victoria "volunteered" and gave us a magic 45 minutes, but the local acts were a very competent accompaniment. The sound was great (thanks Ian) the hall full, awesome.

Saturday saw a range of workshops, in particular an introductory workshop on accordion for young and young at heart. This ran over two mornings and I am not exactly sure of the details but I heard that a few accordions had found their way from Nariel and were being offered as a "come and have a go" opportunity for anyone interested. It's a good story and maybe someone else can confirm.

The Saturday night dance is the original bush dance at its best. A scratch bad lead by MFS's own Ray Mulligan sounded out assorted traditional dance tunes and the hall danced. The callers keep it simple and fun. Locals, visitors, and the odd wanderer, join in. Sunday sees a small local market, and more workshops.

The traditional Sunday blackboard gives an opportunity to all comers to have a go. A mixed bag of performances but none too long and all interesting. Sunday evening saw a final concert. Each morning there was a well attended poets breakfast under the trees near the tennis club. The festival is funded by food and bar sales and the raffle. It is supported by the Numeralla community who do an amazing job.

Like any really good festival!!! Wait there is more. There are two campgrounds, one each side of the Numeralla river. The one near the tennis courts is large, flatter and more appropriate for caravans and campervans, though lots of tents do set up under the trees. The tennis club is open as a camper's kitchen and there are proper toilets.

There were several session locations, just groups sitting around playing music they knew. Most are really happy to have an audience sit and listen or welcome a musician to join in. This is the quiet time by 11 side of the festival.

The other side of the river is more densely populated, and the sessions go on all night. Get there early if you wish to squeeze in here, but the swimming is closer, the vibe is all folkie.

Australia Day weekend next year is their 50th. Come, contribute, enjoy, and buy lots of food and raffle tickets. Thanks to Fran and the committee for a wonderful weekend.

Moir Holmes



Dancing in the hall, Numeralla



Poets breakfast, Numeralla



Session, Numeralla

Contra in the Caves

If you missed it, you missed something special. Without going into the physics, it's the uneven walls that give a special quality to the sound.

When large groups are playing, you can hear each instrument, you hear the fiddles (well, you can usually hear fiddles, they are loud ...) but you can also hear the harmonica, the hammer dulcimer, the concertina, the piano and the base as individual melody lines. The clarity is unusual; it challenges the Snow concert hall in Canberra for crispness and the Snow is considered world class.

Contra is fast, is toe tapping and both the Contra Club and Northern Confluence play great music. Jim Williams is always worth a listen and a song goes down well, adding variety to the program. Bob Hodgson plays a harmonica like a real instrument; better than any other harmonica player I have ever heard. Ray Mulligan has a gentle touch on the accordion. The cave itself is interesting and the concert is held in the first chamber with columns, stalactites and stalagmites. If you are a cave fancier there is a full guided tour just before the start of the concert. The fun does not end then.

Outside the cave is a covered BBQ area and it's a bring your own everything meal, at a reasonably lazy pace. After dinner it's off to the Wee Jasper Hall for a dance. The hall is a beautiful example of a much loved village hall. The floor has been redone and is perfect for dancing, the air flows through the windows and doors and the contra music gets everyone up and going.

It's a bit of a drive back to Canberra and most stay overnight in the Bill Grace Camp Ground, (Reflections Holiday Parks) just down the road. Sunday morning is a slow start with lots of good conversation and for those interested an all comers music session.

For a gold coin donation, the concert and dance are special. Put it in the diary for next year, 16th January (The cave tour and camping incur a cost).

Moir Holmes



Dancing in the hall, Wee Jasper



In the cave



Morning session. Wee Jasper

Vale Maureen Cummuskey

During her early years, growing up in Hong Kong, Maureen was introduced to folk music via a Canadian TV show. In 1970, she attended a couple of National Folk Festival concerts in Sydney and was blown away. She soon got involved in the Sydney folk scene.

She became part of a group which scored a residency at the old Canberra Lakeside Hotel. After coming to Canberra each weekend for three months she fell in love with the place and moved here in 1975.

She did support for touring acts and once opened for Billy Connolly. When she finished her set, she walked off the stage to be greeted by a huge bloke in Wellington boots: "He just picked me up, whispered how he enjoyed my set and then put me down again."

She coordinated the first Monaro Folk Christmas Dinner in 1975 which was, she recalled, "bigger than Ben Hur". She also organised a Carols Concert that year at St Andrew's Church, with the rector acceding to her request to include 'Pagan' carols on the bill.

Maureen was President of the Society from 1977 to 1979 and newsletter editor from 1976 to 1979. She was the driving force behind the Society's first Ard Tack mini-festival in 1981. Judy Small and Eric Bogle were amongst the performers. She was also a *Lark in the Morning* presenter on Radio 2XX and sang at 2XX birthday gigs.

In the early 80s, Maureen was a founding member of a musical theatre group Women on a Shoestring, which put on shows about Australia's women's history: *Woman —Glimpses into Her Story in Australia* (in colonial times) and *Women Down Under* (from the 1930s on)).

In 1980 she joined Salvation Jane, the first women's rock band to play regular live gigs on the Canberra pub circuit, performing multiple genres with an emphasis on rock, punk and folk. They had a regular gig at the Dickson Hotel. They expected about 50-60 people at most at the first one. By 8.30, 320 people had turned up.

When asked if they had had any trouble from male audiences, Salvation Jane remembered an early gig at a football club. Setting up the stage, they were met with howls of male laughter. The men eventually "calmed down" and even started dancing - though not with each other, Maureen pointed out.



Salvation Jane (Maureen in middle).
Source: <https://salvation-jane-band.au>

In 1983, Salvation Jane and Women on a Shoestring joined forces to present *Did You Say Love?*, a cabaret sending up romantic fiction, a great success at both the PITS Theatre Restaurant in Canberra and the Adelaide Fringe.

As another Canberra folkie Mike Jackson put it, promoting the Merry Muse in *The Canberra Times* back in the day, Maureen was someone with "a strong emotive voice that can belt out a ribald Irish song yet is equally at home with a gentle lament.

Declan O'Connell (drawing on *A Score and a Half of Folk: Thirty Years of the Monaro Folk Music Society Inc* by David Meyers, edited by Kevin Frawley, 2004), <https://salvation-jane-band.au> and, for old *Canberra Times* articles, that National Library treasure Trove – <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper>

Vale Sean Kenan

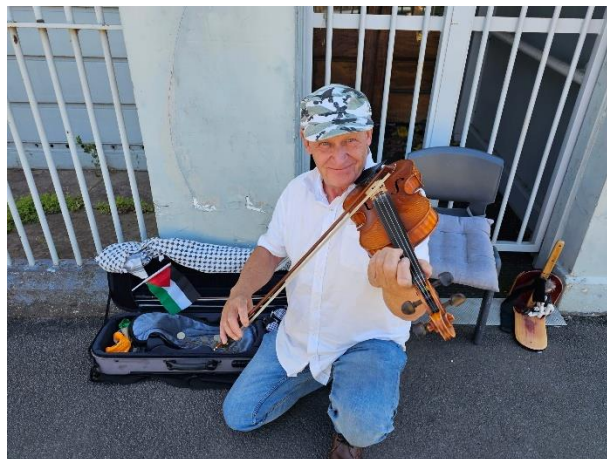
Sean Kenan moved to Canberra in the late 1980s and stayed until the early 2000s. He then settled in Maldon, Victoria after a stint in Melbourne, his hometown.

In Canberra he was a dynamic presence, creating the Tinkers band in the early 1990s. They played traditional Irish music with great skill and vigour, recording a cassette in 1991 and a CD in 1994, and inspiring many younger players.

As well as playing in the Tinkers, Sean anchored numerous Irish music sessions, where his encyclopaedic knowledge of Irish music, collaborative approach, and ability to welcome and encourage players of all standards were highly valued. Many people would say that Sean inspired them to play music.

He helped with the organisation of National Folk Festivals in the early 1990s and put on the very first folk festival at Major's Creek. He loved street performing and was involved in the early years of the Warehouse Circus in Canberra.

After his move to Central Victoria, he would busk regularly in Castlemaine and neighbouring towns. Although his main instrument was the fiddle, (which he taught using the business name Fancy Yourself Fiddling) he also played banjo, guitar and keyboards.



Sean busking in Castlemaine

He was a regular at folk festivals in Central Victoria. He prepared and published a number of books of Irish tunes, using his own transcriptions and arrangements.

Sean was an artist and activist as well as a musician. He was a vocal opponent of the first Gulf War in 1991 and a long-standing supporter of the Palestinian and other causes.

His ability in puppetry (particularly shadow puppets) delighted many audiences and he would often combine puppetry and music. In later years he created images extensively in the scratchboard medium.

Sean was a friend to many and will be greatly missed.

Simon Kravis

Vale Ted Egan

Northern Territory folk music legend Ted Egan died in December aged 93. In the music world he was best known as a songwriter exploring Indigenous and outback Australia, past and present, blazing a trail for later whitefella songwriters like Neil Murray, Shane Howard, Paul Kelly and Peter Garrett.

I suppose the difference was that Ted Egan stayed in the Northern Territory and became a full-on Territorian. The very first song he recorded was *Drinkers of the Northern Territory* (in 1969). He went on to release 30 albums.

Ted Egan played a rather unusual instrument – the humble beer slab cardboard box. He said he started on the "Fosterphone" because he couldn't play any other instruments.

He may not have been a violinist but he was definitely a man with many strings to his bow and a rich life beyond music. He held a high office of state – administrator of the Northern Territory (a kind of Territorian version of a Governor) from November 2003 to October 2007. He was a prolific author (he wrote 17 books), a footballer, a bush schoolteacher, a public servant, a crocodile hunter.

Ted Egan was born in Coburg in Melbourne in 1932. He moved to Darwin at the age of 16 and set up and captain, a football team set up for Tiwi Islands players, St Mary. He learned his teammates' language. This helped him get a job as a patrol officer.

When he arrived in Yuendumu in 1958, there were only a few houses and they were all reserved for white workers in the community. Indigenous people had to camp in the bush. Witnessing such injustice led him to become a strong supporter of Indigenous rights.

In the late 1960s he took up a job as a Research Officer at the Council of Aboriginal Affairs where, amongst other things, He worked towards the establishment of what is now called NAIDOC week.

Ted wrote the song *Gurindji Blues* in 1969 with Gurindji leader Vincent Lingiari in support of the Gurindji people's land rights struggle. Egan had been incensed by the Minister for the Interior Peter Nixon's remark that if the Gurindji people wanted land, they should save up and buy it like any other Australian

After the song was released Nixon's department head, George Warwick Smith, tried to get Egan sacked from his job at the Council of Aboriginal Affairs for his role in writing the song. Ted's boss, Nugget Coombs, responded by saying it was a "bloody good song", a "succinct appraisal of the government's pathetic performance".

Vincent Lingiari provides the spoken introduction to *Gurindji Blues* and Yolgnu leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu plays didgeridoo. Yunupingu said he wanted "to get the message across" and he wanted people to "write to the Prime Minister and protest about Aboriginal land rights".

The record was used as a fundraising vehicle for Aboriginal causes. After all, as Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly sing in *From Little Things Big Things Grow*, the Gurindji had “friends in the south” who could do things like promote and sell records. Ted Egan was one of the Gurindji’s best friends in the north.



Ted Egan

Ruination Day

With April coming up, you might like to think about April 14. A lot of historical events seem to have happened on that day. Especially in America. Gillian Welch and David Rawlings have tied them together in a song. Two songs, actually: *April 14th, Part 1* and *Ruination Day, Part 2* on the 2001 Gillian Welch album, *Revelator*.

Songs with a take on American history that draws on blues and folk, inspired by for example, Blind Willie Johnson singing about the sinking of the Titanic and Woody Guthrie singing about dustbowl storms during the Depression.

On 14 April 1865, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.

On 14 April 1912, the Titanic ran into an iceberg.

The worst storm of the Dust Bowl era took place on 14 April 1935.

Sometime in the 1990s, it was the fourteenth day of April, Gillian Welch and David Rawling watched a punk band turn up for a poorly attended five-group bill somewhere in Oregon. A two-dollar show. Too few people there to make even half a tank of petrol. A life on the road disaster night that found its way into *April 14th, Part 1*.

Canadian band Cowboy Junkies sing about similar road experiences in *200 More Miles*. 200 more miles of rain before they sleep, no warm sheets or welcoming arms to fall into.

Blind Willie Johnson recorded *God Moves on the Water* in 1929: “Year of nineteen hundred and twelve/April the fourteenth day/Great Titanic struck an iceberg/People had to run and pray.” Pete Seeger has recorded a Titanic song, too: *The Titanic*. “It was sad when that great ship went down/It was sad.”

The 13 minute 55 second title track on Bob Dylan’s 2012 album, *Tempest*, draws on an old Carter Family song to revisit the Titanic disaster (and name checks Leo DiCaprio).

Woody Guthrie became known as the Dust Bowl Troubadour. His 1940 album *Dust Bowl Ballads* follows the travels of Okies, dust storm refugees, heading west to California.

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