

Oh! Give Me a Hut

Traditional

Oh! Give me a hut in my own nat - ive land

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14

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Oh Give Me a Hut

“*Oh Give Me a Hut*”, is a song of hope for building a good life in Australia. As long as there are some who sing it that way, this song will never stop growing. Its now too big to sing straight through, and I feel a need to talk about it as I go.

Its first singers, the first Australian born descendants of convicts and immigrants, expressed their joy at being at home in the bush. They called themselves Australian born natives to distinguish themselves from others who hankered for the climate, environment and society of Europe. They sang in the hope of realizing their dreams and establishing homes and families in the bush.

*Chorus: Oh give me a hut in my own native land
Out in the bush where the tall gum trees stand
No matter how far in the bush it may be
With a dear native girl to share it with me.*

1. In the gladness of springtime the songbirds give voice.
The trees and the herbage with flowers rejoice.
Kangaroos and emus bound over the plain,
And the Jackass, he cackles, again and again.
2. And how pleasant to rise at the dawn of the day
And chase the wild horses in the hills far away.
They'll snort and they'll prance, aloud in their glee,
As they race through the bush with the bush men like me
3. How pleasant to stroll on a hot summer's day,
Where platypus paddle and bandicoot play.
I'll settle in the bush with the wild native bear,
With the pademelon and the wallaby and the wombat so rare.
4. How pleasant to rest at the end of the day,
When the stars in the heavens their glories display.
As the Southern Cross wheels around the night sky,
In loving embrace, with my darling I'll lie.
5. How soothing the sounds the bush utters at night,
A rhythmic frog chorus, bats twittering in flight,
A Boobook calling, Bush Curlew cries,
A breeze in the treetops whispers and sighs.

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In the 1860s, bush workers and those who had tried their luck in the gold fields added other verses. They sang of gaining, after a struggle, the right to become free selectors of properties in the bush. They sang of building an egalitarian society whose members worked together for the common good. I have added more verses

celebrating their establishment of the agricultural industries and infrastructure that formed the foundation on which modern Australia was built

6. No more with our swags through the bush need we roam,
Robertson's victory has promised us a home.
His land bill is passed and we may reside,
In a place we select by some clear waterside.
7. We will plant our own garden and sow our own fields,
And eat of the fruits, which our labour yields.
We've won independence with a tough fight.
Good riddance to the squatters who denied us that right.
8. Oh you sons of industry, to you I belong
To you I dedicate these verses of song
We'll all pull together. The bush will succumb.
From our endeavour, good times will come.
9. How we have toiled through many a long day,
Clearing the forest, carving a way,
We've cut down the trees, we've grubbed their roots out.
We've sown down our paddocks. Let's hope it turns out.
10. We've opened up the country. There's plenty of space,
With towns, water works and factories in place.
By railway and clipper our goods are transported.
Our wool, wheat and butter to the world is exported.

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The inheritors of Australia are still hoping for a good life. In the twenty-first century, we continue to sing the colonials' verses to express our joy and happiness and pride and expectations. But, with the benefit of hindsight, we have some reservations. Thus, I have added these verses to express my regrets regarding how we have degraded the land and my hope that we will restore it to health.

11. How pleasant it was in the box-ironbark woodland
Stretching from Victoria right up to Queensland.
Clearing, irrigation, environmental degradation.
Just pockets remain in parks for the nation.
- 12* Emu, Mallee Fowl and the Plains Wanderer,
Bustard, Magpie Geese, and dancing Brolga,
All these and more were once commonly encountered,
But now from the district, they have been hounded.

13. Oh! let us restore environmental splendence.
Together, let's treasure our collective inheritance
Let's manage the land wisely and keep our prosperity
Let's manage the land lovingly and conserve it for posterity.

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No generation of Australians has properly acknowledged the injustices done to the original owners of the land. No generation of Australians has established proper relations with the descendants of the original owners. In these closing verses, I express my hope that those matters will at last be addressed.

14. How pleasant it was before settlers came,
The bush was a larder, kept stocked full of game.
For a few hours a day, folk gathered bush tucker.
Then we arrived. Oh! What a muck-up.

15. If pride in Australia is to be unabated,
We must acknowledge the wrongs perpetrated.
The unjust treatment of the dispossessed
Is a horror of history that must be addressed

16. We must urgently forge, for the health of the nation
A treaty that restores all that was taken.
We must find a way to restore independence
We must celebrate and honour the original descendants

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My Irish ancestors, my English wife's family and my daughter's Congolese partner all came to Australia to make their homes. They all left other homes in the hope of finding a better life here. Since European settlement, Australia has accommodated millions like them from all over the world. My hope is that all Australians listen attentively to all of our stories and celebrate and honour everyone's cultures. I hope that Australia will continue to grow in unity because Australians foster and enjoy an ever-widening diversity.

The aboriginal descendants must willingly want to enter the mix. I wish I knew how that change of heart could be brought about. In present day Australia, it does not seem possible for one to remain an aborigine and at the same time be a modern Australian. It must be possible. We new Australians must work with the original descendants to find that way. All Australians must invite the descendants of the first Australians back in. We must let them be themselves. We must welcome them. We must bear the cost. When we have accomplished this, Australia will be one of the most fair and just of nations and all Australians will be admired and envied as amongst the world's luckiest people. One day, I hope to be able to end this song on that happy note.

Notes

I lived on the edge of the bush in Eaglehawk as a child. I spent many school holidays at Salisbury West, on the Loddon River Plain, between Inglewood and Bridgewater. As a student, I did a lot of walking in the Australian Alps. I taught in the bush for a few years. I live in Bendigo now, but being in the bush still appeals to me.

I learned this song about twenty-five years ago, after hearing it performed on a set of cassette tapes published by the Australian Broadcasting Commission. I was the teacher, at the time, at Heskett Primary School, on the northern slopes of Mt Macedon. I lived in the bush with my wife and two kids. I adopted this song, because of its joyous celebration of bush life. After hearing me sing it, my father taught me: "*I Live Out in the Bush*" and "*Dan, Dan the Dirty Man*". Although I had sung them as a kid, I had no sense of owning a song, until that experience.

Some years later, I learned of aboriginal song ownership and experienced several performances of aboriginal song cycles. I began to understand the important role singing can play in binding communities together and maintaining community practices. Aboriginal song owners were far more than entertainers. They maintained discipline, taught the next generation, kept groups focussed on cooperating for a common purpose and became leaders of their communities. They earned their status as song owners only after gaining their community's respect. I began to recognise some similar aspects in the singing I had experienced as a kid and in some of the folk songs I listened to and sang.

I adopted this song of hope because my aspirations were similar to those of colonial settlers who first sang it. My enthusiasm waned, however, due to its silence on important issues.

The original singers were oblivious to the rights and practices of the aboriginal owners of the land who, up until a few years before the enactment of the land acts, had successfully lived in the bush for millennia. All settlers displaced aborigines by their occupation of land. Some settlers actively blocked aborigines from accessing traditional hunting, food gathering and ceremonial grounds. Some violently evicted aborigines from their lands. Some murdered and massacred the aboriginal owners of their land. Almost no one at the time of settlement acknowledged the unjust and brutal dispossession of the original owners.

The other concern was that, although the singers felt at home and appreciated the marvels of the Australian bush, most were oblivious to the environmental consequences of their settlement actions.

What are the responsibilities of modern Australians regarding prior aboriginal ownership and environmental degradation? While preparing this book, I worked on this song again, and it now directly addresses the missing matters. More remains to be said and much remains to be done, but I can sing this song confidently again. This song helps me determine how I should live in twenty-first century Australia. I would not want to be like Bob the Swagman, simply content to describe an unsatisfactory situation.

Sources:

Performance of Dave de Hugar, Program Five, *The Stringybark Cockatoo, While the Billy Boils, a Panorama of Australian Folklore* (a set of sixteen programs on eight cassette tapes), Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1981.

J S Manifold, *The Penguin Australian Song Book*, Penguin Australia, 1964

Michael Gallagher has reworked many verses and added others.

Indulkana Community of Central Australia, *Inma Nyi Nyi, The Song Cycle of the Zebra Finch*, collected by Catherine Ellis, Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music, University of Adelaide, 1976.

Tony Dingle, *The Victorians, Settling*, Fairfax, Syme and Wheeldon Associates, 1984, who details how the Victorian settlers transformed bushland into the Australia we know today.

* The disappearance of wild birds from a district should set alarm bells ringing. They are the environment's 'miners canaries' and their disturbance signals looming trouble. Anne Bridely, compiler, *Birds of the Bendigo District*, Bendigo Field Naturalists, 1991, notes that birds listed, along with others, were once common in the Bendigo district. Singers from other districts might like to check local records and substitute another list.