

## Ipswich – the Country Music Capital of Queensland



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Campus*



Country music has become big business in Australia where rural cities such as Tamworth in New South Wales, and Gympie in Queensland, turn over millions of dollars each year in cultural tourism. The Tamworth Regional Council estimates that the local economy was boosted by an additional forty million dollars during the ten-day January 2006 Country Music Festival alone. Tamworth also hosts a mid year "Hats Off" country music festival; a two-week TAFE accredited College of Country Music for young entertainers over seventeen, and the ten-day Camerata, which teaches children under 17 the skills involved in performing country music. Because of its branding as the Country Music Capital of Australia, Tamworth is able to generate tourism income from country music on an all-year basis.

The National Country Music Muster in Gympie has expanded from a three-day country music concert, into a weeklong multifaceted event that attracts between thirty to forty thousand people each year. The Muster has generated large sums of money for local businesses, and has raised over seven million dollars for charity since its inception in 1982. Gympie now boasts the Australian Institute of Country Music, which has hosted three academic conferences on country music, and has published three books from the papers presented. The Australian Institute of Country Music has opened a Centre of Excellence, which it is envisioned will eventually include a performance venue, recording and manufacturing facility, and an education and interpretive centre. "The institute is expected to employ up to 95 people by the third year of operation. It is proposed there will be substantial capital expenditure for the first stage of the project which could cost approximately \$5 million."<sup>1</sup>

Considering the success of these two regional cities in marketing country music, some people will be surprised to learn that Ipswich developed many of the ideas that later paid such rich dividends for others. It was before either Tamworth or Gympie became solely identified with country music, that the Queensland city of Ipswich had a thriving country music community.

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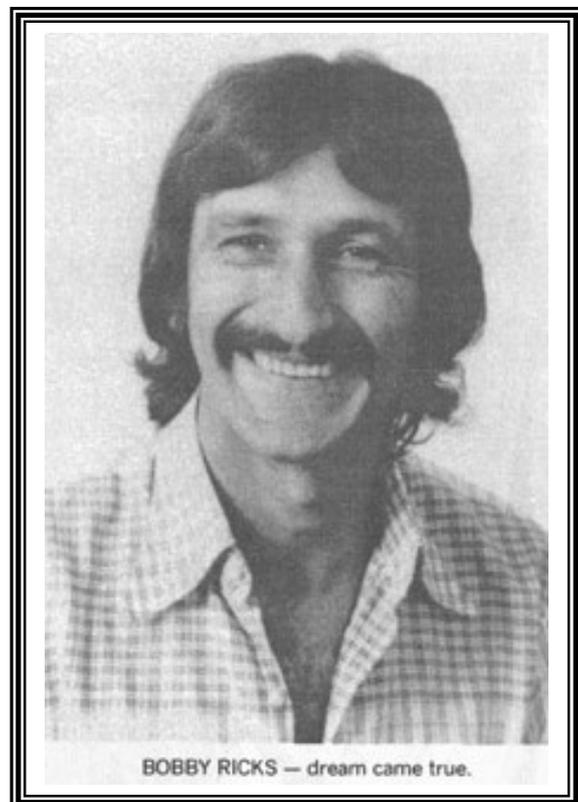
<sup>1</sup> 'About Us'. Australian Institute Of Country Music. 2005. Australian Institute of Country Music. 26 Feb 2006 <[Http://www.aicm.org.au/](http://www.aicm.org.au/)>.

In terms of organization and output of live country music, Ipswich was only challenged by places in the United States of America like Nashville Tennessee where much of the recording and publishing of country music took place, Dallas/Fort Worth where live music was performed in massive bars like Gilley's Bar and Billy Bobs, or Austin Texas for it's television show "Austin City Limits".

Ipswich could boast a flurry of country music activity that was unique in Australia. It included country music venues that had professional live country music performances several times per week.

It had several amateur country music associations within the city, such as the West Moreton Country Music Association, where non-professional people could get together and enjoy performing. Additionally, Ipswich boldly hosted country music talent quests, country music festivals and family days, country music cabaret shows and dinners, along with country music fashion parades, and carnivals. The crowning glory for country music in Ipswich in the late 1970s and early 1980s, was the Queensland Country Music Awards and Festival. Most of this activity came from an organization known as "Ipswich Country Music Capital of Queensland Association", an organization that was largely driven by Robert Ricketts, a country music entertainer who was known professionally as Bobby Ricks.

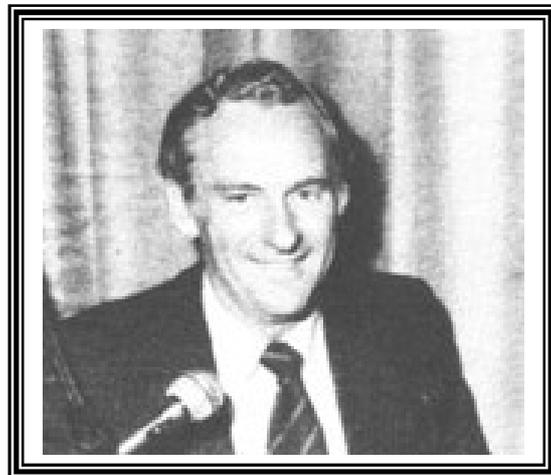
Ricketts was passionate about Ipswich and passionate about country music. He was born into a musical family, his father played several instruments and had a beautiful baritone voice, while his sisters sang and played piano. His brother was a professional singer and guitarist.



Ricketts originally trained as a motor mechanic and served some time in the Australian regular army where he honed his skills on guitar. Ricketts started his professional career as a performer at Tommy's nightclub in Brisbane, and went on to become a well known country music entertainer. By the time Ricketts started to realise his dream of making Ipswich the country music capital of Queensland, he and his wife Patricia were also caring for nine children (second marriage for both).

The Ricketts family had decided to settle in Queensland's oldest provincial city, Ipswich, a city with a fascinating history, and proud working class roots. The main thrust of the Ipswich economy in the early years was agricultural, however the massive coal deposits in the area became very important during the 1880s as increased use of steam engines in boats, trains, mills and works required a reliable supply of fuel<sup>2</sup>. Other well established industries included railway workshops, woollen mills, sawmills, foundries, brickworks, engineering and boiler making works, and factories.

The people who came to Ipswich must have been prepared to do hard work, and be determined to make something of themselves. Consequently Ipswich grew into a strong community where workers were given a say through trade unions, and where local politicians not only represented the people of Ipswich, they also served the broader community of Australia.



***The Hon Bill Hayden, Leader of the Opposition, and Patron of the Ipswich Country Music Capital of Queensland Association in 1978.***

For example, the one time Premier of Queensland (1942-1946) Frank Cooper found his voice in Ipswich, as did the Honourable Bill Hayden who served Australia as Minister for Social Security, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and Treasurer.

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<sup>2</sup> Brief History of Ipswich'. [Ipswich Library and Information Service](http://library.ipswich.qld.gov.au/lh/ipshistory.htm). 15 June 2006. Ipswich City Council. 15 July 2006 <<http://library.ipswich.qld.gov.au/lh/ipshistory.htm>>.

Hayden rose from being a policeman to become the leader of the Australian Labor Party from 1977 to 1983, and the twenty-first Governor General of Australia between 1989 and 1996.

Not surprisingly, out of the highly political culture in Ipswich came a high level of country music activity. Music is an effective political platform, and all music is linked with ideology. Ideology is defined by cultural theorist, Stuart Hall as, "those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence"<sup>3</sup>.

Music involves the production and transformation of ideologies, and country music historically gives a voice to minority groups, such as the poor, the oppressed, women, and aboriginals. Therefore, country music is another means by which people of Ipswich are able to voice their grievances, their emotions, and tell the stories of their life.

The ideology of country music is frequently seen as a replication of politically conservative aspects of the white working class, with law-abiding citizens, extreme patriotism, firm gender roles, and hard physical work. A stereotype that many would imagine to fit well with the population of Ipswich, however like Ipswich, Country Music is very diverse and does not always fit the stereotypical roles assigned it. There is evidence to show that the community of Ipswich, as well as the country music community, are largely tolerant of diversity, accepting of different racial and cultural backgrounds, ranging in age groups, and have male and female participation in important issues within the community<sup>4</sup>.

As Ipswich and Country Music also share their working class roots, Ipswich was ideally placed to be the Country Music Capital. This connection between country music and the working class is an area that historian Bill Malone has researched extensively.

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<sup>3</sup> Hall, Stuart. Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect'. Mass Communication and Society. James Curran, Michael Gurevitch, and Janice Woollacott. Eds. London: Arnold, 1977.

<sup>4</sup> Adsett. R. Further research to be undertaken in PhD Dissertation.

Malone argues, “country music has been an art form made and sustained by working people”. He says “this deceptively simple truth has long been obscured by the tendency of both friends and foes (of country music) to affix descriptions or labels that either denigrate or romanticise the music”. Malone says “Some descriptions of course, such as hillbilly were hatched by detractors, but have been embraced by many fans and musicians as a badge of working class pride”<sup>5</sup>. Ricketts recognised that Ipswich was perfectly positioned, both culturally and geographically, to become the Country Music Capital of Queensland. He felt that the working class roots of both Ipswich and country music could be successfully combined and worn as a badge of honour, rather than being disparaged and viewed with shame.

The proposal for Ipswich to become the Country Music Capital of Queensland rapidly grew legs. By November 1977, an article had appeared in the Queensland Times where Ricketts publicly stated, “Ipswich has the potential to become the Country Music Capital of Queensland”. He argued that a country music Jamboree in Ipswich would boost local business and claimed that Ipswich was most favourable because of its proximity to Brisbane, its large population, and the size of the city, would be perfect to guide and control the tourists that would be generated by such an event. Ricketts also announced plans to set up a country music academy in Ipswich to instruct and educate would-be entertainers; he suggested that Ipswich could hold awards for top artists, to be supported with performances by interstate and overseas acts. Ricketts announced that he was establishing a steering committee, and called for an expression of interest in forming an organization to promote Ipswich as the country music capital of Queensland. The first public meeting generated a lot of attention, and about sixty people turned up, around 12 being musicians, with the rest of the group consisting of about 50 per cent country music fans, and fifty per cent local business people<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Malone, Bill C. Don't Get above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Queensland Times (Ipswich). Wednesday, 9 November, 1977.

During 1977 Ricketts took his ideas for Ipswich to the Federal Member for Oxley, the then Leader of the Australian Labor Party, Mr. Bill Hayden. Hayden a great supporter of country music told the Brisbane Courier Mail “Later historians will look at country music and be able to gain an insight into our society’s attitudes and values”<sup>7</sup>. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1977, Hayden wrote to the Mayor of Ipswich, Mr A.G. Hastings, and told him of his support for Ricketts’ proposal that Ipswich become the Country Music Capital of Queensland, and at the same time he requested that the Council make the Ipswich Civic Hall available free of charge for country music concerts. A reply from Mr Hastings to Mr Hayden dated August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1977, states, “I think Mr. Ricketts is to be commended for his enthusiasm but, regretfully, the Council are unable to accede to the proposal that it make the Civic Hall available, free of charge, for Country and Western music concerts”<sup>8</sup>.

It appears that the Mayor of Ipswich may not have been all that keen on supporting a country music community in his city, but the visionary Mr Hayden was, and he said so in a letter of encouragement he sent to Mr Ricketts. On September 1<sup>st</sup>, Mr Ricketts sent a reply to Mr Hayden outlining the benefits of establishing Ipswich as the Queensland capital of country music, including: tourism; national television shows generated from Ipswich; links with the country music capital of America, Nashville Tennessee; and a centre for education for young artists. Mr Ricketts’ letter to Mr Hayden also derides Mr Hastings for ignorantly calling the music “country and western”, an outdated label that specifically refers to the music from Hollywood cowboy movies<sup>9</sup>.

The Ipswich Country Music Capital of Queensland Association (ICMCA) was formed shortly after the first public meeting, and officials of the organization included Mr Joe Sciacca as President; Mrs Pat Ricketts as senior Vice-President; Bobby Ricks as Secretary- Organiser; Mr Larry Tooley as Treasurer; and Mr Trevor Johnson as Public Relations Officer. It wasn’t too long before events were up and running, and paid advertisements appeared in the Brisbane Telegraph, the Queensland Times, and the

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<sup>7</sup> The Courier Mail (Brisbane) . 16 March, 1979

<sup>8</sup> Bob Ricketts archive material and personal correspondence, accessed January 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Bob Ricketts archive material and personal correspondence, accessed January 2006.

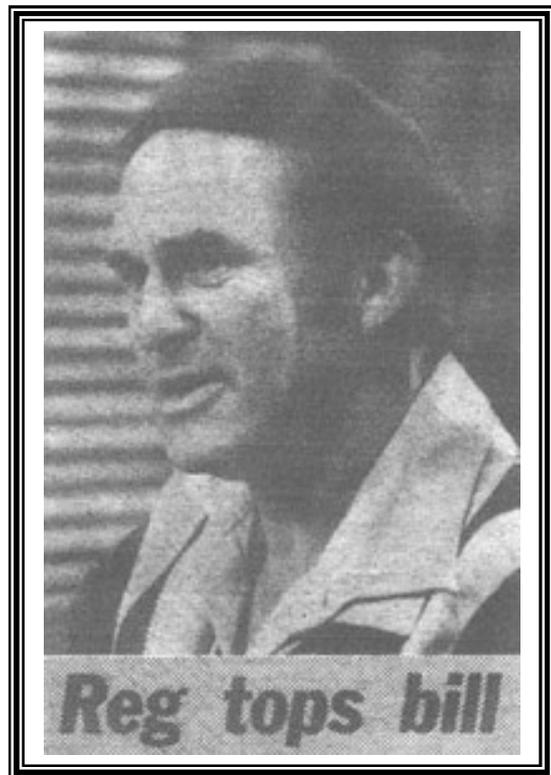
Advertiser, stating, "Ipswich Country Music Capital of Queensland Association presents The Biggest Country Talent Quest Of All".

This event was to be held at 7.30pm at the Palais Royal Tavern Ipswich, every Wednesday commencing 18<sup>th</sup> January 1978. The Grand Final of the talent quest was held at the Ipswich Civic Hall on Wednesday April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1978. For the princely sum of \$8 for members and \$10 for non-members, patrons enjoyed a champagne supper and a special performance by country music television stars Reg Lindsay and Heather McKean.

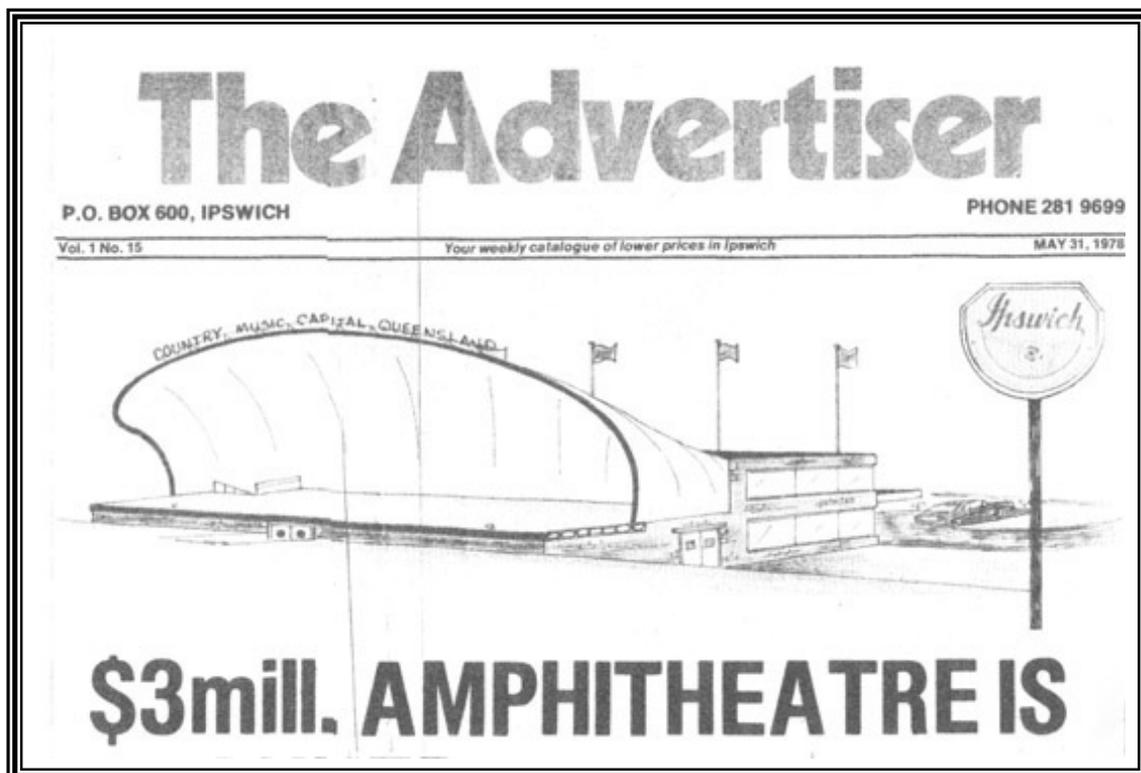
The honour of being the first winner went to thirteen-year-old Tate Mason, who's parents, Bobby and Dee, were well known performers in the Ipswich area. Tate's prize included the production of a record album, "valued at over \$1000".

By May 1978, the ICMCA was presenting a country music cabaret every Wednesday night at the Ipswich Showground Hall; the Showground Hall was also the venue for the second ICMCA talent quest that began on the 21<sup>st</sup> June 1978.

Central to the position of Ipswich as the country music capital was an extraordinary to plan to build a \$3 million amphitheatre that would seat ten thousand people!



*Reg Lindsay, special guest at the inaugural ICMCA talent quest Ipswich Civic Hall on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> April 1978.*



*Plans for a 10,000-seat amphitheatre at Willow Bank Park on the Warrego Highway near Ipswich. The Advertiser May 31<sup>st</sup> 1978.*

The Queensland Times reported that when completed, it (the amphitheatre) “will be the largest, open air auditorium in the southern hemisphere”<sup>10</sup>. The proposed location for this massive project was at Willow Bank Park on the Warrego Highway, the site that is currently occupied by the Willow Bank Raceway. It was proposed that the construction be carried out in three stages, and that funding be sought from State and Federal Government as well as private enterprise. On the 7<sup>th</sup> June 1978, the Brisbane Telegraph reported that the Morton Shire Council had granted the ICMCA “50 acres of land on the Warrego Highway at Willow Bank Park”, and the plans for the 10-thousand seat Amphitheatre were released<sup>11</sup>.

Mr Ricketts said that the idea was to have a country music tourist complex, something of the scale of Dreamworld on the Gold Coast. Its operation would be similar to the world famous Opryland Park in Nashville where people could go on rides, buy food, view displays such as instrument making, and see different shows throughout the day<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Queensland Times (Ipswich). 20 January 20, 1978

<sup>11</sup> The Advertiser (Ipswich). 31 May, 1978

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Bob Ricketts, 23 January, 2006

# PLANNED FOR CITY

**IPSWICH Country Music Capital Association recently released plans for the construction of a \$3 million, 10,000 seat amphitheatre near Ipswich.**

When completed, it will be the largest, open air auditorium in the southern hemisphere.

The proposed site is at Willow Bank Park on the Warrego Highway, three kilometres beyond the Amberley turnoff.

About 40 acres of leasehold land is available at Willow Bank Park for the amphitheatre, subject to planning approval.



● BOBBY RICKS

Moreton Shire Council has indicated a keen interest in the project.

The venture will attract tourists from all over the world, create more jobs in the area and also promote Ipswich and the Moreton region.

It is a totally Australian project, unique in its concept and certainly a mammoth task to be undertaken by a voluntary organisation.

Due to the high cost of the project, construction will be carried out in three stages, the first being to build a clubhouse with all facilities and provide an open air area for concerts

and shows with seating for about 2000 people.

The rest of the complex will be constructed as funds become available.

The association hopes that both the State and Federal Governments will assist financially. Aid from private enterprise is also being sought.

When completed, the Willow Bank Park Auditorium will attract entertainers and artists from all over the world.

Association secretary-organiser (Mr Bobby Rick's) has already begun negotiations with such overseas stars as Charley Pride and Johnny Cash

plus many top Australian entertainers.

The Amphitheatre will be available not only for Country Music but also any of the other arts.

Many fund-raising efforts are being planned by Country Music Capital to finance the project.

Every Wednesday night is Country Music night in the new function room at Ipswich Showground and in about four weeks the talent quest will begin again on Wednesday nights. Admission is \$2 with a lucky door prize and some terrific raffles.

On Sunday, June 11, a Country Music Family Day will be held at Errol

Scriven's property, Pine Mountain.

They will enjoy Country Music, food, drinks and a junior talent quest for children 15 years and under will be held, starting at 11 a.m.

Admission will be \$2 and \$1.50 for members, all children free.

Ipswich Country Music Capital has also formed its own promotions and entertainment agency, with Trevor Johnson as manager.

If you are holding a function or dance of any kind, give Trevor a ring on 281 0772 and he will be able to supply all your entertainment needs.

You will also be helping the Country Music Association and the new amphitheatre.

*Proposed plans for an international tourist attraction to be located at Willow Bank Park on the Warrego Highway near Ipswich. The Queensland Times, Friday January 20<sup>th</sup> 1978 – page 9.*

Meantime the ICMCA were holding their weekly functions at the Ipswich Showground, as well as a Country Music Family Day on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1978, at Errol Scriven's property at Pine Mountain where for only \$2.00 admission the Ipswich community could enjoy good country music, food, drinks, fairy floss, hay rides and Pony rides. Furthermore, at around this time, the ICMCA formed its own promotions and entertainment agency, Ipswich Capital Promotions (ICP), and encouraged those holding private functions or dances to contact the organization that would supply all their entertainment needs. A package show featuring local Ipswich talent toured West and North Queensland "not only providing good country entertainment, but waving the flag for Ipswich"<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> The Advertiser (Ipswich). 21 June, 1978

During August 1978, the Ipswich Colour Festival Committee joined forces with the ICMCA to stage a huge “star studded” fund raising venture. The Show was held at the Ipswich Civic Hall and starred Reg Lindsay, Pee Wee Clark, Bobby Ricks, Liz Crago, Middle Road Country, and a young guitarist called Philip Emmanuel (brother to the now internationally acclaimed guitarist Tommy Emmanuel).

Although the ICMCA had been holding talent quests and shows at different venues around Ipswich, they realised that in order to increase revenue, they needed a place of their own. Some time around June of 1978, Ricketts was instructed to start searching for a venue, and within days he found one that he thought might not have been to everyone’s taste. Ricketts says, “At this stage, I decided to sin, and not tell the committee anything, as the site of the place would send them into fits of uncontrollable laughter”. He continues, “You should have seen it. This one big room was full of junk, the floor was holed in several places, no electricity or water, and being on the second floor, the wooden stairs were destroyed”. But he says, “I was so excited, this is it, our club will be here”<sup>14</sup>. From these comments it’s obvious that Ricketts insight and imagination was only exceeded by his determination.

The room, as it was then, was located at the rear of the old Mining and Hardware building in Brisbane Street, off East Street, between Margaret Milham’s and Beaurepairs. The opening of the Club was down for Sunday, October 1<sup>st</sup>, but there was an awful lot of work to be done first. With the help of “volunteers, a licensed electrician, a master builder, two truckies for the rubbish, and a group of folk to do the cleaning and painting”,<sup>15</sup> the mess was cleaned up over the next few months. A competition was run in the Advertiser to name the Club, and it was Deborah Tompson of Coal Street, Basin Pocket, who came up with the name ‘Dusty’s’. On the 30<sup>th</sup> September 1978, the Queensland Times reported “History will be made tomorrow, when Ipswich country Music Capital of Queensland Association opens its doors at 1pm, the first country music club of its kind in Australia”.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Bob Ricketts 23 January, 2006

<sup>15</sup> Bob, Ricketts. ‘Bob & Patricia's Memoirs – Dusty’s’. Bobby Ricks - Ricketts. 31 July 2006. 15 August 2006 <<http://www.bobsmusik.com/BobandPatriciasMemoirs.htm>>.

The article commented on how the structure of the 100-year-old building lends itself to the country music atmosphere, with a timber roof and fine old beams.



*The newly opened Dusty's Nightclub provided a home for country music in Ipswich.*

The club was for members and their families and friends and the cost of entry was \$2 for Adults, \$1.50 for Members, and fifty cents for children. Dusty's sold food and alcohol even though the club did not have a regular liquor licence. Ricketts explains that they got around the licensing issue by each week applying for a permit to run a function at an unlicensed club. He says that it wasn't hard because "the Police reckoned we ran the best place in town, there were no problems the whole time the club was run, the police never once had to be called"<sup>16</sup>.

The crowd turned out in full force for the official opening of Dusty's by the Federal Opposition leader, and patron of the Ipswich Country Music Capital Association, the

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Bob Ricketts, 23 January, 2006

Hon Bill Hayden. The ABC's "This Day Tonight" filmed the ceremony for television, and Bobby Ricks and Middle Road Country were the first to perform at the club. Dusty's was now open from 5.30pm to 11.30pm every Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and between 1 and 6pm on Sundays a country music jam session was held where anyone could come along and perform.



*The Hon Bill Hayden jams with Bobby Ricks at the opening of Dusty's in East Street Ipswich.  
Queensland Times November 4<sup>th</sup> 1978.*

Jenny Bonnici was acclaimed as Ipswich's newest country music star when she won the giant talent quest that had been moved from the showgrounds to Dusty's in 1979.

The live shows that were already being presented by the ICMCA continued on at Dusty's, but they were broadened to include comedic entertainers such as Johnny Pace and Chad Morgan. Dusty's was going from strength to strength and as the popularity of country music began to build, it started to feature in other venues around Ipswich.

The newly renovated Commonwealth Hotel offered free country music every Saturday morning from 10am to noon, The City View Hotel presented local country music entertainer Bill Maskell every Friday night, and the Mihi Tavern at Brassall was providing country music to their patrons every Friday and Saturday night.



***Adding their political weight to an ICMCA at a street promotion in Ipswich are left to right, Mayor of Ipswich Des Freeman, Senator Neville Bonner, and Leader of the Federal Opposition, Bill Hayden.***

The ICMCA held its Country Music Carnival at the North Ipswich Rugby League Oval on October 29<sup>th</sup>, 1979, which attracted over one thousand people who paid a \$2.00 entry fee.

The carnival featured television and recording star Johnny Chester, top Ipswich acts, and a giant fireworks display. As previously noted, the ICMCA had the support of quite a few prominent politicians, such as Neville Bonner, Bill Hayden, and Dr Llew Edwards, the State Member for Ipswich and the Leader of the Queensland Liberal Party, was a great supporter of the ICMCA.

Dr Edwards (who organised and presented a nine thousand dollar grant to support the ICMCA theatre workshop<sup>17</sup>) attended the 1979 Country Music Carnival to officially open the event<sup>18</sup>. Ten years later in 1989, Ipswich born Llew Edwards was made a Bachelor Knight, and Sir Llew is currently the Chancellor of the University of Queensland.

Some local businesses came on board as well, and Dan Patchin's Quality T.V. Service, McMahon's Soft Drinks, The BP Gliderway Service Station in EBBW Vale, Perfection Press in Station Road Booval, and Allen's Music Centre in the Civic Hall Shopping Village Inala, all advertised their support of Dusty's in The Advertiser on September 27<sup>th</sup> 1978. The Brisbane radio station 4KQ, Armstrong Motors, Foux Beer, Arnott's Snack Foods, Good Year Tyres, Air Pacific, were some of the sponsors who became involved with the scheme. Others could see the benefit of using country music in their advertising; for example, Reids Palings advertised that they were "bringing in the Country to town"<sup>19</sup>. The Queensland Times had feature articles on the Queensland Country Music Awards and Joy's Fashion Boutique advertised 'Award Winning Garments', while the Butterfly Fabrics Store advertisement read "Dress In your own individual country style with these Award Winning buys". By 1985 the international companies Cadbury Schweppes, and Marlboro cigarettes had become involved with the sponsorship of country music in Ipswich, but Ricketts believes that the idea really needed the support of the Ipswich Council to continue to grow.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Bob Ricketts, 27 February, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> The Advertiser (Ipswich). 25 October, 1977: p7.

<sup>19</sup> Queensland Times (Ipswich). 17 October, 1980: p3

The ICMCA also recognised, as did others, that country music needed grass roots support through an education program. Education was seen as an important aspect in maintaining a country music community in Ipswich. Weekly Theatre Workshops were held at Dusty's, where budding performers were taught the tricks of the trade – everything from vocals, to how to open their act. The training was not for a set period, but lasted until a required standard was reached. The aim of the ICMCA was to fill the gaps in the Queensland country music scene and to turn out polished professional country music acts, which in turn would be good for country music <sup>20</sup>.

Although training was taking place in local country music clubs around Queensland and New South Wales, it was a further 17 years before the Country Music Association of Australia set up the initial College of Country Music, where a limited amount of students, who are about to embark on a professional career in country music, are selected to attend a two-week course in Tamworth. In 2004 the Gympie State High School started a Country Music School of Excellence for secondary school students interested in learning country music performance skills. Also in 2004, twenty-four years after the initial workshops at Dusty's, country music education came back to Ipswich as part of the Queensland University Contemporary Studies Music Cultures major.

The next step towards making Ipswich the Country Music Capital of Queensland was to show what the ICMCA had achieved in a very short time, and to announce the staging of a Country Music Awards Show in Ipswich, an event that would make everyone sit up and take notice.

Invitations to a special presentation by the ICMCA to be held on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1980, were sent to local businesses, politicians, potential sponsors, and the media. Drinks and savouries were served and the special guest for the evening was once again country singer and television star, Reg Lindsay.

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<sup>20</sup> Queensland Times (Ipswich). 'Feature', 17 October, 1980: p3

The points raised during the presentation were that Country Music Capital is firmly established with:

- A full-time registered office with secretarial and P.R. sections.
- Its own club with over 600 members and venue staging weekly shows and tours.
- Weekly training sessions to develop new talent and encourage beginners.
- An agency service to help musicians and entertainers gain work.
- The promotion of more than three hundred shows throughout Queensland in 1979/80 alone.

The ICMCA used this presentation to launch Stage Two of their plan to Announce the Queensland Country Music Awards, and other ideas that would reinforce Ipswich as the Country Music Capital of Queensland.

The plan outlined was:

- To establish a series of Local, State and National Awards for country music with emphasis on State.
- To establish branches of the association throughout Queensland.
- To present country music road shows, promoting Ipswich/Moreton and country music.
- To achieve the highest possible professional standard in country music.

Considering the ambitious scale of Ipswich's commitment to country music, it is no wonder that the inaugural Queensland Country Music Awards, held at the Ipswich

Civic Hall on Sunday October 26, 1980, had over six hundred people in attendance, and were compared to Hollywood's Academy Awards<sup>21</sup>.



*Ian Skippen from Radio 4KQ, and Channel Seven's Frank Warwick congratulate Johnny Chester at the Queensland Country Music Awards held at the Ipswich Civic Hall on October 26<sup>th</sup> 1980.*

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<sup>21</sup> Queensland Times (Ipswich), 'Country Music's Big Night'. Monday 27 October 1980.

The inaugural awards show was hosted by Channel Seven personality Frank Warwick, and Ipswich's own Senator Neville Bonner, Australia's first ever Aboriginal Senator, was also in attendance. Ricketts remembers it as: "a dine-in-evening, with minimum dress being semi formal", and full table service at all levels, from V.I.P.'s down. The show itself was professionally produced, with non-stop entertainment and presentations over a four-hour period. The Queensland Times reported that the Queensland Country Music Awards had placed Ipswich firmly on the national map as the Capital of Country Music in Queensland (if not Australia).

The ICMCA President, local solicitor Joe Sciacca, said, "Those sponsors who tonight witnessed first hand what country music is all about will now see that Ipswich can become one of the biggest tourist centres in Queensland"<sup>22</sup>. The following day the Queensland Times ran a large article on the event and announced that the big winners of the awards were two well-known Australian performers, Johnny Chester and Judy Stone<sup>23</sup>.



*The Queensland Times, Monday, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1980.*

<sup>22</sup> Adsett, R. Further research in PhD dissertation.

<sup>23</sup> Queensland Times (Ipswich), 'Judy, Johnny Rate Tops', Monday 27 October, 1980



*13-year-old Keith Urban receives the Junior Vocal Encouragement Award at the Queensland Country Music Awards held at the Ipswich Civic Hall on October 26<sup>th</sup> 1980.*

The Junior Vocal Encouragement Award went to 13-year old Keith Urban who has since gone on to pursue a successful international career in country music.

In 2004 Urban was named the Male Vocalist of the Year at the American Country Music Association (CMA) Country Music Awards in Nashville Tennessee, and at the 2005 CMA Awards that were held in New York City, Urban was named the Male Vocalist of the Year as well as Entertainer of the Year.

With national publicity for the inaugural “sold-out” event, there is no doubt that the Ipswich based Country Music Awards were triumphant, but between October 1980 and October 1981 things seemed to have soured a little. Only twelve months after the joy of the first awards, the Queensland Times headlines read: “ Ricketts: Ipswich Has Forced Us To Go Elsewhere”<sup>24</sup>. Mr Ricketts stated that although the awards were a great success in 1980, and there was a seventy five per cent increase in entries for 1981, there had been no financial backing in Ipswich. The decision had been made to move the awards to Cloudland in Brisbane because the only Ipswich sponsor was Armstrong Motors.

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<sup>24</sup> Queensland Times (Ipswich). Thursday, 8 October, 1981: p 10

Ricketts said that the Brisbane sponsors couldn't understand why the City Council hadn't jumped at the concept of country music. He says, "For four years since its inception the association and country music has been giving Ipswich national and international publicity.

For that length of time, and especially the last two years when we have been most effective, the city has not supported us". Ricketts criticises the administrators of the day, and the people who were in a position to help, and said they don't want to know<sup>25</sup>.

The 1981 awards were held at the Cloudland Ballroom in Brisbane and were a sell out, as were all the Queensland Country Music Awards between 1980 and 1985. However, all hope was not lost for Ipswich and the awards returned to the Ipswich Civic Hall in 1982, and became linked to the Ipswich Country Music Colour Festival.

The festival was sponsored by Armstrong Motors, Radio station 4KQ, The Queensland Times Newspaper, Arnott's Snack Food, Fourex Beer, and Good Year Tyres, and was held between October 1<sup>st</sup> and October 31<sup>st</sup> 1982. The program included the judging of the Queensland Country Music Awards, which was held at different venues around Ipswich and was open to the public to attend, and several country 'Super-shows" including a North American Country Show at the Ipswich Civic Hall, and a Super Heroes Freeps (Free Entertainment in the Park) in Limestone Park. There was daily entertainment at Dusty's nightclub, free country music in the streets of Ipswich's business centre, a Free Bush "Wing Ding" Dance held in Limestone Park, and the Christian Business Men's committee held a Festival Breakfast at the Ipswich Civic Hall<sup>26</sup>.

The Festival was topped off by the final two events. The first was a free Mardi- Gras held at the Ipswich showgrounds, commencing with a Grand Parade that travelled through the streets of Ipswich to the Showground.

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<sup>25</sup> Queensland Times (Ipswich). Thursday, 8 October, 1981: p10

<sup>26</sup> Queensland Times (Ipswich). 'Special Feature', 1 October, 1982.

Those attending the Mardi-Gras enjoyed a feast of events including, country music with Blue Kentucky, Mud Wrestling, a Rider Mower Grand Prix, Karate Demonstrations, an Indoor Cricket Display, an animal Nursery, Boxing, the Ugliest Pet parade, Food stalls and a special festival Greyhound Meeting. The Final Event was of course the Armstrong Motors, 4KQ Queensland Country Music Awards at the Ipswich Civic Hall. One of the many performers at the Awards was country singer Reg Lindsay, whose Country Homestead show was at the time one of Australia's longest running television shows. Another entertainer on the Awards was country singer Lee Conway, who too had a television show at that time known as Conway Country<sup>27</sup>.

By 1983, the Awards seemed to be fully entrenched back at Ipswich, and the trophy presented to the winners, had affectionately become known as the "Ippy's"<sup>28</sup>.

The **Schweppes** Country Music Festival that heralded the Awards Night was said to have the largest amount of free outdoor entertainment ever seen at any country music festival in Australia<sup>29</sup>. The festival included a Truckies Day, where it was hoped the Truckies Hoedown and Talent Quest would discover another truckie singing star like Lee Conway<sup>30</sup>. Not all truckies could sing, but most were able to participate in the festivities by being a part of the Trucking Convoy that travelled from Rocklea in Brisbane to Queens Park in Ipswich. Bell Street had to be closed off to traffic while the Mayor; Ald. Des Freeman, officially launched the Festival, and it continued to be closed for a show by Johnny Ashcroft and Gay Kayler, who were backed by the popular Whiskey River Band.

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<sup>27</sup> Queensland Times (Ipswich). 'Special Feature', 1 October, 1982.

<sup>28</sup> Australasian Rodeo Country Music, October, 1983: p10

<sup>29</sup> Australasian Rodeo Country Music, October, 1983: p9

<sup>30</sup> Australasian Rodeo Country Music, October, 1983: p9



Over the festival period Dusty’s Country Music Club featured performances by Ashcroft and Kayler, the Central Hotel had Lady and the Outlaws performing, the Prince Alfred Hotel in Booval presented Joe Driscoll, and the cast of Annie Get Your Gun performed at the Ipswich Civic Hall<sup>31</sup>.

The Trucking Convoy that was initiated in 1983 was a huge success, and not surprisingly it was repeated again in 1984. The Queensland Times reported “C.B. radios blared as Highway Patrol officers shook their heads in disbelief when over 100 truckies set off from Rocklea”<sup>32</sup>. Apparently for many unsuspecting motorists it ‘looked like the final battle in a blockade’<sup>33</sup>. There was hooting of horns as the trucks made their way through Ipswich to Limestone Park where a crowd of excited truck enthusiasts and country music fans greeted them. Senator Neville Bonner was one of the Trucking Judges who sat perched on the back of an Armstrong-Nissan ute to judge the “Best Individual

Rig”, and “The Fleet Award’, categories<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> [The Daily Telegraph \(Brisbane\)](#), ‘A Feast of Music’, 13 October, 1983: p23.

<sup>32</sup> [Queensland Times \(Ipswich\)](#). ‘The Ipswich Country Music Awards’. Monday 29 October, 1984: p4.

<sup>33</sup> [Queensland Times \(Ipswich\)](#). 29 October, 1984: p4

<sup>34</sup> [Queensland Times \(Ipswich\)](#). 29 October, 1984. p4.

## The Ipswich Country Music Awards

C.B. radios blared as Highway Patrol officers shook their heads in disbelief when 100 'trucks' set off from Rocklea in convoy on Saturday. For many unsuspecting motorists it looked like the final battle in a blockade, but the real purpose of the convoy was to herald the official opening of the Ipswich Country Music Festival.

Semi-trailers and rigs ranging in size from utilities to massive prime movers lumbered along the Warrego Highway into Ipswich for the start of Saturday's Festival. The trucks roared and hooted their way through Ipswich to their destinations, Limestone Park, to a crowd of excited truck enthusiasts and country music fans.

by  
**DANI ROGERS**

As the convoy grated down through their gears, "Trucking" judges, Neville Bonner, Ken Clift and Gordon Easton sat perched on the back of an Armstrong-Nissan ute to get a good look at the currents in the contest.

Before all the rigs had a chance to park, and their drivers refresh, the judges had reached a unanimous decision.

The prize for the best individual rig went to Jim Dionysius, of Inala, for his immaculate N 8027 Volvo. The Fleet award went to the shining red contingent from Brookes Transport.

Special commendation awards went to Pozzolanica for their number of entries and to the Morris Car Club who were dwarfed by the giants as they led the convoy.

At the end of the journey, the trucks were parked row upon row to allow interested onlookers a closer look at the "Kings of the road".



\* Hey, big brother, we got ourselves a convoy!!

The Ipswich Country Music Festival's impact on Queensland had become such that the Brisbane Daily Sun devoted seven full pages to the event in the October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1984 edition, and rated the Queensland Country Music Awards and Festival as "now being "among the top three of its kind in Australia"<sup>35</sup>.

## Music echoes the past

**COUNTRY** music is as old as the hills around Ipswich.

And this weekend's fifth annual Queensland Country Music Awards Festival will be staged on ground where many of the city's mining pioneers probably once gathered for their bush ballad outings under the stars.

And perhaps for this reason it is appropriate that Ipswich has become the home of Queensland's major country music event.

Awards will be presented to the winners in the Ipswich Civic Centre on Sunday evening.

The gathering will represent a who's who of country music in Queensland, among whom many will be recognized as leading lights on the national scene.

The extraordinary growth of the Ipswich festival in the space of five years places it among the top three of its kind in Australia.

It does in fact attract some of Australia's most talented country music exponents who turn up just for the sake of being able to perform before audiences who understand and appreciate the music.

### Atmosphere

Many of these talented entertainers began rolling into Ipswich more than a week ago and have been performing nightly in local cabarets and hotels to help create a total country music at-

mosphere around the city.

The festival lures large crowds from Brisbane and other parts of Southeast Queensland and Ipswich now recognizes the event as one of its major tourist attractions.

It provides visitors with a chance to tour the city and inspect some of its magnificent colonial homes which have become an integral part of the city's charm.

The Daily Sun is pleased to be associated with this outstanding event through the publication of this special Queensland Country Music Awards festival feature.

*Brisbane Daily Sun, Thursday, October 25<sup>th</sup>, 1984.*

<sup>35</sup> The Daily Sun (Brisbane), 'Music Echoes the Past', 25 October, 1985: p38

The Festival was notable in that just about every event (apart from the awards) boasted free admission. Patrons sat under the stars in Limestone Park on the Friday night for the Rockin' Country Carnival, and were back there on Saturday morning for the Truckies Hoedown. At the Saturday night Bush Wing Ding guests danced the night away and enjoyed "pig-on-a-spit". Once again the Queensland Country Music Awards were seen as the highlight of the festival. The State Minister for Police, Mr Bill Glasson, and Senator Neville Bonner, were among the 650 dinner guests who paid \$20.00 a head to attend the awards on Saturday October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1984. There were 21 award categories and nominated performers came from Townsville, Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Brisbane, Esk, Toowoomba, Beaudesert, Beenleigh, Gympie and of course Ipswich.

The dream of Ipswich as Queensland's Country Music Capital had lasted seven years but it was all about to disappear. During that time the ICMCA had staged many events, organised tours, trained performers, operated a club, and presented proposals to Councils, Governments and Sponsors. Most of this work had been driven by Ricketts and by the mid eighties he was tired, broke, and in need of devoting some time to his large family. When Ricketts announced that he would have to move on, The ICMCA committee decided to sell Dusty's Country Music Club. They thought that a new owner would continue to run it as a country music club, but unfortunately he did not have the same commitment to country music as the ICMCA.

Another blow came when the ICMCA was notified that the Ipswich Civic Hall would no longer be available for the Queensland Country Music Awards<sup>36</sup>. The official story for the press was that the Awards and Country Music Festival had to move from Ipswich to Brisbane as a result of the extraordinary growth of the festival in just six years. However, Ricketts remembers the sponsors suggesting the move, as there was little or no financial support from within the City of Ipswich<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Bob Ricketts, 27 February, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Bob Ricketts, 27 February, 2006.

Once again in October 1985 the Brisbane Daily Sun devoted a features section to the “Marllboro” Queensland Country Music Awards and Festival and ran articles on previous award winners, such as Judy Stone, Jewell Blanch (later to become the proprietor of one of the most successful publishing companies in Nashville Tennessee), and Maria Dallas (who also owned a club in Ipswich at one time)<sup>38</sup>.

In their 1985 lift out section on Queensland Country Music Awards and Festival the Daily Sun pays tribute to Ricketts as the chief organiser of the Awards and Festival in an article titled “Two gave life to the big show”.



*The Brisbane Daily Sun Thursday October 17<sup>th</sup> 1985*

In this article Ricketts credits his wife Patricia Margaret Ricketts as “the main inspiration behind the success of the festival”<sup>39</sup>.

By 1985 the idea of making Ipswich the Country Music Capital of Queensland had virtually been abandoned. The Queensland Country Music Awards and Festival were moved to Brisbane, and would never again be associated with Ipswich. This time the Truck Convoy travelled from Rocklea, down Ipswich Road toward Brisbane, and across the Story Bridge to the Brisbane Exhibition Grounds. The Festival offered many of the same events that had been popular in previous years, but not many local businesses were involved. With the exception of the Waterloo Hotel and the Calamvale Hotel, most of the events were held within the Exhibition Grounds. Sadly, the Queensland Country Music Awards that were held at the Greek Club in Brisbane in 1985 were the last to be held in South East Queensland.

<sup>38</sup> The Daily Sun (Brisbane). ‘Virtual springboard to a musical career’, 17 October, 1985: p24

<sup>39</sup> The Daily Sun (Brisbane) -The Marlborough 1985 Queensland Country Music Awards special lift-out section, pp23-27. ‘Two gave life to the big show by Geoff McKinnon’, 17 October 1985: p25.

Nobody came forward to take up the helm and continue the success of the previous years. Dusty's was no longer available to the country music community, the land at Willowbank Park was handed back to the Moreton Shire Council, and the live performances in Ipswich dried up. Seemingly, nobody in Ipswich really cared anymore.

For a short period in time, from 1977 to 1985, Ipswich was known Nationally and Internationally as a place of unprecedented country music activity in Australia. For something that happened at a local level to involve people with such a high national profile and status is quite amazing, and it is quite surprising that the scheme was allowed to flounder. What was achieved with country music in Ipswich between 1977 and 1985 was not only remarkable, it was unique, and years ahead of its time. While the country music activities, such as the Queensland Country Music Awards and Festival, were in the hands of people who had a passion and a purpose, they survived and grew. Once taken out of Ipswich they no longer had an anchor, and country music in Queensland started to take another route. Gympie was then in its emergent stage and would eventually claim the title of Queensland's Country Music Capital.

It took a good twenty years after the Ipswich Awards before Tamworth built the Tamworth Regional Entertainment Centre (TREC) to move the Golden Guitar Awards out of the dirt and dust of the local rodeo arena. Gympie also took around the same amount of time to expand on their annual National Country Music Muster from a one-off event into developing recording facilities and educational programs in country music. Neither city has yet been able to sustain an ongoing venue (like Dusty's) that exclusively caters for the live performance of country music. Ipswich managed to bring all these elements together in a relatively short period of time, and even if it didn't last, the people of Ipswich can be proud that they achieved a remarkable feat. They not only proved they are innovative and years ahead of the competition in event management and cultural tourism, they showed the rest of Australian how it should be done.