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Keeping It Real? Authenticity, Commercialisation and Family in Australian Country Music

[Amy Bauder](#) | [Volume 18](#) | [Issue 1](#) | [March 2015](#) | ['authentic'](#)

Getting the Family Together: A Fieldwork Account

The final gig of Bob Corbett and the Roo Grass Band's 2013 tour is a hometown show at New Lambton Community Hall in Newcastle on the coast of New South Wales, Australia. The tour had already covered Newcastle and surrounds at various locations within 50 to 100km of the Newcastle CBD. In addition to lead singer and guitarist Bob Corbett, there are three main members of the Roo Grass Band, Sue Carson on fiddle and mandolin, Dave Carter on banjo, bass and bagpipes and Robbie Long on guitar, mandolin and bass.

I enter the building and at the top of the stairs a tall, slim woman with a shock of red hair rushes to greet me with a hug, "It is so good to see you!"

This is Veronica, Bob Corbett's Mum. She's been busy setting up the merchandise desk, taking tickets, and greeting almost every member of the audience by name. Veronica has functioned as de facto tour manager throughout the band's Lucky Country Hall Tour. As well as running the merchandise desk and ticketing, she's occasionally acted as roadie, and has supervised the packing of cars and trailers. These day-to-day jobs on the tour have been done with help from either her sister Roberta or, for most of the tour, a close friend of the band, Jenny.

I deposit home-made chocolate brownies and biscuits in the kitchen, setting them up alongside fruit brownies made by Veronica for the audience. Bob's wife, Kirrily, comes and says hello, followed by their son Marley, who heads straight for the goodies. Their daughter Matilda is running around with her best friend and next-door neighbour, Sophie. Dave, who plays banjo, bass and bagpipes in the band, greets his wife Karen as she arrives with their kids.

The band's fiddle player, Sue, is pacing around, looking fractious. I ask if she's okay. "Yeah, it is just that my

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family is meant to be here already and they're running late. They're going to miss it."

Not long after, Sue's partner, Michael (who is also Veronica's brother, Bob's uncle) arrives with their son Elijah and his son Gabe, in time for the show.

This final gig of the tour seemed to have been largely arranged for the families of the band, and there was little advertising for it.

In the way of family get-togethers a mix of tension and excitement fill the room. But once the band starts playing things calm down, a group of kids occupy the dance floor, twirling, swaying, skipping and running along with the music.

Family, Authenticity, and Commercial Practices in Australian Country Music

I open with this fieldwork account to illuminate how the presence and involvement of family, through parents, spouses, aunts, uncles, children and even close friends are central to the experience of what it is to be a country music artist in Australia. In the case of Bob Corbett and the Roo Grass Band, for example, band members make choices to involve family in the activity of "being" a band—touring, performing, engaging with fans—and these choices have emotional value for them, but are also yoked to broader discourses of family which circulate in the field of Australian country music.

This field story reveals that "family" is not something carved off from artists' public engagement with the field of Australian country music but is central to it. Discourses of and around "family" are implicit in the practices of Australian country music artists and are strategically used by artists to define what country music is and what is valued in the field. Crucially, the discourse of family is used to support claims to authenticity within country music culture.

Ideas about and associated practices concerning, "authenticity" permeate the culture of country music. The discourse reaches across all aspects of the field, and all participants in the scene are compelled to at least turn their minds to questions of authenticity, and develop strategies for dealing with them. Value is conferred on artists seen to convey so-called "true" and "genuine" personas. Indeed the country music community demands something referred to as "honesty" from performers.

It needs to be noted that country music is a commercial popular music form and culture. Many agents in the scene have an uneasy symbolic relationship with the commercial aspects of country music, but it is a basic premise within the field: the music exists to make money. This is not to say that financial and popular success (in their quantifiable forms: money made, units sold, crowd sizes, radio spins) is the only thing valued in

country music. As a form of cultural capital, authenticity is also valued. But within Australian country music a tension exists between the part of field underpinned by commercial logic and the idea of the popular and those underpinned by notions of creativity, independence and musical integrity.

Authenticity is deployed to distinguish country music from other styles of music in a number of keys ways. Authenticity can be taken as an essential quality of music, which “honestly” reflects or expresses an identity or experience (e.g., Australian national identity, rural experience, heartbreak) (Watson, *Volume 1*; Watson, *Volume 2*; Sanjek); as a proper way of relating music, artist and audience (Smith); as a ideological watchword which tempers commerciality (Sanjek); or as something “fabricated” or constructed in the codification of the genre (Akenson; Peterson; Carriage and Hayward). I am not positing authenticity as a feature unique to Australian country music. A number of authors have highlighted the role authenticity plays in many forms of popular music to navigate, understand or obfuscate the functions of the commercial music industry and shape its output (Frith; Sanjek; Barker and Taylor).

The scholarship on country music and popular music in general often explores how authenticity is inscribed in the products of country music, rather than the processes and practices behind those products: the everyday, extra-musical activities of participants in the scene. This article is concerned then with how discourses of authenticity are sutured to business, musical and promotional practices, and how such tropes function alongside discourses and practices concerning “family” in the negotiation of commercial realities in Australian country music. Rather than looking at end products, my research takes a ground-up approach, exploring what people are doing and how they talk about their practices and decisions. Discourses of “family”, and practices around kin, provide one of many possible entry points for this exploration.

Methodology

This article is based on ethnographic research on Australian country music. Between 2012-2014 I spent many months of focused immersion with Bob Corbett and the Roo Grass Band at festivals and on tour. This research was part of broader participant observation I conducted which included attending more than 150 country music events across New South Wales and Queensland. I also conducted hundreds of informal interviews at these events, as well as in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key informants, including band members Bob Corbett, Sue Carson, Robbie Long, and Michael Carpenter (sometimes drummer).

Bob Corbett was recognised by the “mainstream” Australian country music scene in 2012 after winning the [Star Maker](#) competition. Since the win Bob and the

band's success within the field has increased—higher album sales, larger crowds, more airplay, recognition, sponsorships and nomination for Golden Guitar Awards (the main Australian country music industry awards). They play a mercurial mix of styles including bluegrass, Western swing, pop folk, and rock. At the core is a concern with storytelling and live, acoustic based performance is central. Bob and the band are primarily engaging with the field of Australian country music (through festivals, media, and self-identification), rather than the folk or bluegrass scenes, which, while related, are distinct fields with different logics, rules and relations.

The conceptual framework for this article is indebted to Pierre Bourdieu. In using the term “field” to talk about Australian country music, I understand it as a discrete, relatively autonomous social microcosm, which is located within the social space of Australian society and the broader music industry, yet it is ruled by logics which are “specific and irreducible to those that regulate other fields” (Bourdieu in Bourdieu and Wacquant 97). Australian country music consists of systems of relations, which define the occupants of the field—country musicians, country music stars, or country music fans (to name but a few)—and shape the products and practices of the field. Bob Corbett and the Roo Grass Band are participants in the field of Australian country music, and work to differentiate their position, and gain a monopoly over authority and influence within the field—to be recognised as successful, authentic country music artists (Bourdieu and Wacquant 100). This framework allows analytic space for exploring and understanding a tension between authenticity, as a form of cultural capital, and the commercial imperatives of country music as a popular music form.

Family Bands and the Family Business

The significance and foregrounded presence of “family” within Australian country music is a result of the history of the field in which family bands have been prominent. The practice of touring with your spouse, children or other kin has been connected to a discourse of the “Family Band” in Australian country music. Slim Dusty and his family, as pioneers in the Australian country music industry, and arguably the most commercially and culturally successful artists in the scene's history, are held up as an example *par excellence* of the country music canon, and provide the model for how country music should or could be done as a family. Slim, his wife Joy, daughter Anne Kirkpatrick and other extended family worked as a “family band” touring, performing, songwriting, recording, and being country music artists. As the “first family” Australian country music band (Baker; Ellis) they dominate the social and cultural imaginary of Australian country music. They represent a tradition of family involvement in the business of country music as a way of dealing with the practical realities of touring, providing emotional support and enjoyment, and as a part of a relatively conservative set of values

drawn from country life. These features work together to discursively distance the “family band” from the commercial music industry and imbue integrity and naturalness in those artists’ engagement with the music business.

Bob Corbett and the Roo Grass Band is a family band: fiddle player Sue is Bob’s aunty; her partner Michael Stove, Bob’s uncle, was an original member of the Roo Grass Band. But more than that, the band understands themselves as a “family”. Sometimes-drummer in the band, Michael Carpenter, talked at length about the “Roo Grass Family” when I interviewed him, including the affective value he places on those relationships:

I love it when Bob says... ‘Michael’s been a part of the Roo Grass family for a long time’ ... it’s a very country music thing to say ... when Bob says it, it actually means something, there’s a certain level of weight to it, because I know the way he treats his bands, I know the way he treats the people who are involved ... it does make them feel like they are a part of something special and so, and that’s beyond just doing a gig ... it kind of creates this sense of loyalty that is important to me.

The other members of the band also understand and value their involvement with the band in a similar way, and it spills into the chemistry the band has on stage, and the enjoyment they derive from playing together. The idea of the family band opens out beyond the actual band as well: the “Roo Grass Family” includes friends, fans and others with strong ties and involvement with the band.

Practical, on the ground support (both on tour and also at home) offered by family to artists in Australian country music is a significant source of capital for those artists. However, participants also talk about this family help as a chance to spend time together, and couch it within discourses of loyalty, love, fun and commitment. Practices and discourses of small, DIY business are also sutured to discourse of family, as a way of reinforcing the fierce independence from big business and record companies. The fieldwork account at the beginning of this article reveals some of the work done by family on tour for Bob and the band, mainly through the presence of Bob’s mum, Veronica, as defacto tour manager. During the gig Bob offered a series of acknowledgments for the tour. After thanking the audiences and tour sponsors, he moved on to family:

Bob: I’d like to thank my aunty Roberta, she came along and helped us on a tour leg ... Ah, I’m going to forget people, I’m going to leave the special ones to last ... I would like to thank Kirrily personally, but as Sue said, all partners and stuff, so I love you Kiz. But the most special one of all: Mrs Veronica Corbett [loud applause and cheers]. She’s the backbone! Of the tour, so thanks mum, thanks for everything.

Veronica: Absolute pleasure Bobby.

Bob: It's been, it's been a pleasure. You love doing it.

Veronica: I love it.

Bob: Yeah, you do love doing it, it's been great, you know. I don't want to get too, too sentimental, but, um just before dad died, he turned to me and said 'look after mum', and I don't, I don't look after mum, but in a way, just sharing all these experiences, like, we're looking after each other, so, thank you for doing that.

In this account, I am interested in the ways in which Bob, Veronica and Sue talk about the labour provided by family. There are a number of ways that participants talk about the practice of getting family to help do the work of touring and performing country music, which emerge here, and are consistently used by Bob and the band. It is spoken of in terms of "spending time" with each other, and of loving that time. Discourses of enjoyment and sociality permeate Bob, Veronica, and others' discussions of the practical reality of people giving up their time to help. This is part of the cultural capital of authenticity: being a professional country music band out on the road is about more than hard slog, making money and cold business; it is an enjoyable experience, underpinned with love. To be authentic, it should be about more than the dollars.

While the involvement of family in the activities of the band is discussed and understood as a chance to spend time together, an enjoyable experience, there are also discourses of support and help tied to these practices by those in and around the band. It is often acknowledged as a practical reality that family members are involved in the activities of the band (or in maintaining the home front) as a source of free or cheap labour which makes touring and performing possible. Sue acknowledged the importance of family support to the band, particularly as an independent band, in the interview:

Main sources of support? ... the management from Toyota and everything ... after winning Star Maker, that was really great, so they've really helped ... and also family ... you certainly need that support, because you can't, you've got to get out there and do it, that's the only way to do it ... it's very personal support in a lot of ways ... we're not at that stage where, we're not at a bigger level where there's plenty of money being thrown around by record companies, that sort of support.

In acknowledging the role of family at home while the band tours, as well as the "personal support" given to the band, Sue binds the practices of individuals staying at home, minding kids and maintaining home life, to the discourse of family. She is also linking the practices to the band's "independent" status and the lack of "money being thrown around by record companies" as the reason this support and other on the road, tour based work, is essential. Within Sue's account here, and at other times

during my fieldwork, there was a sense that she saw the need for family support as a sign of inadequacy, a sign that the band had not yet “made it” to the level where the support comes from record companies, and there will be money thrown around to support the activities of the band. This touches on a broader set of discourses that circulate in the country music community about professionalism and amateurism, which are also linked to ideas about family.

While the foregrounding of family has value within the field of country music, there is something else going on here. A division is often drawn between “commercial” and “creative” endeavours in Australian country music. By linking practices involving kin and discourses of family, Bob Corbett and the Roo Grass Band position themselves as authentic, or real, grass roots, and with creative freedom, in contrast to being creatively constrained or selling out. Within this division, a reliance on one’s family can be understood in some ways as a rejection of the commercial, business networks of country music. In the case of Sue’s account above there is a sense that it is also a way of negotiating success when you do not have access to a record label or other big business support, which may seem the easier route. Sue’s view differs somewhat from Bob’s in this respect. Bob often expressed pride in the fact that they are “doing it on their own” and boasting an independent DIY model of music business (for example through ticketing, tour organisation and production); a business model that relies on the support of their family, but which is respected and valued within Australian country music.

Conclusion

Artists such as Bob Corbett and the Roo Grass Band all occupy “positions” in the field of Australian country music, and the discourses of “commercial”, “creative”, and “authentic” all work to categorise artists, and their position in the field. Economic and material circumstances limit, enable or influence the decisions to involve families or not: for Bob, a desire to remain in control of his creative output and career, and the need to maximise income to feed his family makes DIY ticketing, and taking his mum and friends on the road a good choice.

But these material factors work with symbolic and cultural factors, in the game of cultural legitimisation about what it is to be a country music artist. The way in which Bob and the band invoked particular discourses of family, loyalty, fun and enjoyment, to talk about the on-the-ground practices of having family involved (or not) in their working lives as musicians is part of the work these bands and artists are doing to represent themselves to the country music community; they are attempting to establish themselves as adequately, legitimately and authentically “country”. In the process they are also shaping what it is to be a country music artist and what is valued within the field—in this case “family”. The constant struggles over what country

music is, what is “authentic” country and what represents success, are struggles over the “schemata of classification ... which construct social reality” (Bourdieu 20). Bob Corbett and the Roo Grass Band are using strategies in this struggle, in this case the strategies link practices involving kin to discourses of honesty and openness by collapsing public and private, heritage and tradition through the family band, and authenticity, professionalism, and success in the way family support can limit the need to rely on record labels and big business.

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Keeping It Real? Authenticity, Commercialisation and Family in Australian Country Music

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