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Abstract

However cartographies of music are constructed, they invariably suggest some authentic relationship between particular sites of vernacular musical creativity and a social and economic context that has contributed to a certain distinctiveness. Thus, the literature is replete with accounts of supposedly distinctive Mersey and Otago sounds, New Orleans jazz or Nashville country, and the 'mutually generative relations of music and space' (Leyshon et al., 1995, p. 424). In the conventional narrative, styles are generally deemed to have originated from particular individual and collective scenes associated with key musicians and bands, and talked up as a means of promoting these styles and places. Local ties engender credibility as expressions of local identity and distinctiveness, and 'credible places invest music with commodity value' (Connell and Gibson, 2003, p. 116). However, music creation and reception are more often little to do with place, and yet music still gains some degree of success even in circumstances where it would seem to oppose any notion of a link to locality. A particularly extreme and unusual example of this is the association between Elvis Presley and the small Australian country town of Parkes. This chapter examines how that particular and peculiar relationship emerged, and how it has been sustained and nurtured. In the process, we challenge notions of creativity and its role in local development.

Keywords

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Outback Elvis: Musical Creativity in Rural Australia

John Connell and Chris Gibson

However cartographies of music are constructed, they invariably suggest some authentic relationship between particular sites of vernacular musical creativity and a social and economic context that has contributed to a certain distinctiveness. Thus, the literature is replete with accounts of supposedly distinctive Mersey and Otago sounds, New Orleans jazz or Nashville country, and the 'mutually generative relations of music and space' (Leyshon et al., 1995, p. 424). In the conventional narrative, styles are generally deemed to have originated from particular individual and collective scenes associated with key musicians and bands, and talked up as a means of promoting these styles and places. Local ties engender credibility as expressions of local identity and distinctiveness, and 'credible places invest music with commodity value' (Connell and Gibson, 2003, p. 116). However, music creation and reception are more often little to do with place, and yet music still gains some degree of success even in circumstances where it would seem to oppose any notion of a link to locality. A particularly extreme and unusual example of this is the association between Elvis Presley and the small Australian country town of Parkes. This chapter examines how that particular and peculiar relationship emerged, and how it has been sustained and nurtured.¹ In the process, we challenge notions of creativity and its role in local development.

Parkes is a country town of about 10,000 people in inland New South Wales, now made famous nationally, and increasingly internationally, by an annual Elvis Festival. The festival has transformed a rather sleepy, anonymous service centre in the Australian bush into the southern hemisphere's Elvis capital, even though Elvis had never been anywhere near Australia, let alone Parkes. Through the festival Parkes has slowly gained a new identity and a sustained annual boost to its economic development. A single music festival has stimulated tourism and regional development, through drawing a community together and creating a new element of what has been seen as the 'post-productivist economy': the switch towards service industries,

rural tourism, and the creativity economy (Gibson, 2002). The social and economic processes behind festivals generate new forms of identity, capital formation, and social change. Music festivals have sometimes been actively incorporated into attempts by places to reinvent themselves (sometimes in surprising ways), yet festivals have certain limitations – not least the kinds of music and the kinds of patrons – that sometimes result in social divisions and antagonism. Festivals do not always succeed, but the Parkes Elvis Festival has succeeded against apparently insuperable odds.

Back story

Parkes is about 350 kilometres west of Sydney. Like many other inland country towns, it has slowly lost population, it has higher than average unemployment rates and low levels of participation in the labour force, and its population has become increasingly dominated by those of retirement age. It has long been a service centre in Australia's wheat–sheep belt, but that agricultural base is declining, though the North Parkes copper mine provides economic diversity. However, other than its historic radio telescope ('The Dish'), a vital link in the 1969 Apollo moon landing (which became, in 2000, the subject of a popular Australian feature film of the same name), Parkes has few obvious visitor attractions.

In the early 1990s, the establishment of the Elvis Presley Festival in Parkes was entirely the result of a chance whim, when a couple of local people devoted to the memory and music of Elvis initiated the event despite local ridicule and without resources to manage and publicize even a small local festival. The first Elvis Revival Festival was held in January 1993, coinciding with Elvis' birthday. It attracted about 500 people from as far away as Adelaide, Melbourne, and Sydney, and set the theme for those that followed, with Elvis and Priscilla (Elvis Presley's wife) lookalike competitions, a street parade with vintage cars, shop window displays of memorabilia, Elvis movies at the cinema (since closed), and concerts, one of which was at the local, fortuitously named Gracelands Club. The first festivals were largely ignored by the local media as inappropriate for a country town or trivial (despite the dearth of news in midsummer). By contrast, the national media have regularly covered the Festival, invariably because of its curiosity value, regarding it as a celebration of tackiness and kitsch. Coverage of the Festival every year has focused almost exclusively on the multiple, gaudy, jump-suited Elvis lookalikes (locally referred to as Elvii – see Figure 17.1). Since Elvis has long been dead, or so most people believe, the Festival has no apparent link with musical creativity. Indeed, it is, on the surface, the complete reverse – characterized by hundreds of Elvis impersonators of diverse skills (and ages and sexes) rather than musicians playing their own compositions.

The festival extends over the weekend closest to Elvis' birthday (8 January 1935), gradually being drawn out to earlier in the week and longer into



Figure 17.1 Elvii at the 2007 Elvis Festival Street Parade

the next week. It involves diverse forms of Elvis entertainment, usually centred on an annual theme: cowboy, speedway, Hawaiiana – usually linked to Elvis movies. Saturday sees the street parade of vintage cars (and vintage Elvis impersonators), with market stalls (ranging from memorabilia – rarely

'real' – to country handicrafts) in the main park area. The park is the venue for the main sound and lookalike competitions – Elvis, Priscilla, Lisa Marie (Elvis' daughter), and Junior Elvis – and the day concludes with several feature performances (ticketed events) in different local clubs by touring professional Elvis impersonators, some from as far afield as the US. The highlights of Sunday are the highly attended Gospel Church Service, further competitions and performances and the unveiling of a new plaque on the Elvis Wall (at the park where the Festival first began) to commemorate another 'legend' of Australian rock 'n' roll music (often one of the previous night's top-billing performers). The wall itself surrounds gates that are a replica of the gates of Presley's Graceland mansion in Memphis. Local clubs participate in various ways: the local lawn bowling club has urged visitors to 'kick off your blue suede shoes' and have a game, while the harness racing club presents 'Elvis at the Trots'. An Elvis celebrant is available for couples to marry or renew marriage vows, which has gradually become extremely popular. Elvis buskers occupy all the street corners (and there is a prize for the best), and the King's Castle – an Elvis Museum – is open to visitors.

Visitor numbers have steadily increased over the years. By the early years of this century the street parade was drawing a crowd of around 2500, with 100 or 200 at most of the commercial events, and more than 500 estimated to have come from outside the town. In 2006, organizers estimated that over 5000 people participated in the festival. Estimates for 2010 suggest that as many as 10,000 had come into Parkes at the peak time on Saturday morning. By 2012 numbers were locally said to have passed 15,000, rather more than the population of Parkes itself. For the first time, in 2002 media coverage became international, with Japanese film crews setting up noodle tents to feed hungry Elvises. The kitsch element of the festival was growing too. While the Parkes Shire Council eventually provided financial support, and the festival is now partly locally funded and sponsored, it is run largely voluntarily by a committee of locals, tourism promoters, and Elvis fans, with all profits going to local charities.

By the 18th Festival in 2010, which coincided with what would have been Elvis' 75th birthday, there were some 140 distinct events spread over five days (ranging from Bingo with Elvis and Hunka Hunka Breakfast with Elvis, through dozens of musical events, to the Elvis Golf Challenge), approximately 400 or 500 Elvis impersonators (not all of whom, fortunately, sang), and 10,000 visitors, half of whom were from the nearby region. By then the Sunday morning Gospel Service had become the single largest event, with more than 2000 people attending. Five years earlier the key parts of the Festival – the main open-air stage and markets – had moved from a peripheral location to the very centre of the town, where they were more accessible to shops. Elvis had come to town.

Nostalgia fills the soundwaves. Visitors to the festival have always been somewhat older than those at other music festivals, and it is dominated by

people from the 45–65-year-old cohort, who make up over 60 per cent of all visitors. In 2010 some 84 per cent of surveyed respondents were aged over 45 (Gibson and Connell, 2012), neatly reflecting the popularity of Elvis with people who experienced their youth when Elvis was alive and an active performer. There were fewer younger people, and many of them saw the event as a fun, 'kitsch', or 'retro' event, rather than about nostalgia or reminiscence. They were more likely to dress up and lend the festival extra atmosphere.

As with most festivals, visitors usually come from nearby. But it is the long-distance visitors – the 30 per cent who come from Sydney and beyond – who stay several nights, spend substantial sums of money, especially on evening club performances, and are 'serious' Elvis enthusiasts, often members of Elvis fan clubs and rock 'n' roll clubs (such as Lithgow Workers Rebel Rockers Dance Club), and are more likely to come repeatedly. By 2010 the Elvis Express, a special train from Sydney, had become a reunion of old friends, singing, dancing, and reminiscing, eating Elvis Cupcakes and Love me Tender Chicken, and enjoying NSW Rail's own tribute artist (who entertained each carriage in turn) throughout the journey (Figure 17.2). Many fans were frequent visitors. As one returning for the fifth time stated:



Figure 17.2 Elvii welcoming visitors to Parkes train station

We're actually members of Lithgow Workers Rebel Rockers Dance Club...we're also members of the rockabilias federation and the rock'n'roll council...It's a great time for us to get out and have time with our friends...so we have meals out together, just relax and dance our socks off and it's just a great interaction with our mates and meet up with people we've met before over the years.

Most people attending the Festival, not surprisingly, came for fun, relaxation, and a sense of community. Only a little less important as a general rationale was 'Because I'm an Elvis fan'. The Festival involved many people who were there because it was a fun weekend, and for whom a generalized nostalgia was sometimes of significance. The actual theme was not necessarily the key to participation, but there was a large minority for whom being an Elvis fan constituted the main reason for participation, and who eagerly anticipated the festival year after year. As one such participant noted:

I wanted to come for years but my Dad, whose birthday was the same day as Elvis's, was ill for a number of years, so I did not come. But my dad has passed on and is up with Elvis in heaven singing along. This is my first year and it's been fabulous.

Many saw the festival as an opportunity to let their hair down: 'I put all my Elvis things on this morning. I can't wear it around Warwick [Queensland] because people would think we were a bit queer, but here we can express ourselves.' For others nostalgia dominated: 'It brings back your youth. And it's just the joy you experience now. I play Elvis music every day. Not many days go by that I don't actually sing Elvis music... I spend about five hours a week doing Elvis things.'

The Australian Elvis Presley Fan Club always took up one of the stands at the Festival, and offered not merely memorabilia but trips to the US, from (blue) Hawaii to Las Vegas and Memphis itself, and its stand was a central meeting point for club members. The more expensive concerts were also designed primarily for the keenest fans. The main ticketed concert in 2010, by the acclaimed tribute artist Mark Anthony, was designed to be as far as possible, in content and structure, an authentic replica of a Las Vegas show from the 1970s, incorporating banter with the audience and a number of songs that never became familiar hits. Authenticity was prized. Nonetheless, some 'true fans', subscribers to the global Elvis Information Network, found Parkes unappealing:

I find the whole Parkes Festival to be distasteful to Elvis' name. There were too many drunken Elvis look a likes and B grade impersonators. These festivals should be a positive reflection on Elvis and not parade a bunch of buffoons and people out for a good time.

What a big joke the Parkes Festival is. Elvis was the greatest singer the world has ever known and Parkes lets him down badly. They need to be told to talk about his music and his charisma not his hackneyed (thanks to the media) mannerisms.

(http://www.elvisinfonet.com/parkes_2009_issues.html;
accessed 14 January 2009)

For real fanatics, Elvis was not to be trivialized in any way, but they were a tiny minority who stayed away afterwards. A handful of others sought a 'pure' festival, in which no music other than Elvis could be heard and only Cadillacs of Elvis' era could be in the street parade.

Many festivals invite some degree of participation beyond applause and a sense of 'being there', or even dressing up as Elvis. This is particularly evident at Parkes, where almost every street corner has an Elvis busker (and visitors are invited to vote for their favourite), numerous competitions exist for impersonators of various kinds, karaoke offers chances for the less brave, and dressing up is part of the fun: seeing and being seen. Many visitors are there as much to participate, and perhaps win, as to passively observe, but especially the many tribute artists of various degrees of skill, dedication, and enthusiasm. For most impersonators, who prefer to be known as tribute artists, this is the event of the year. As one tribute artist from Tasmania observed in 2007,

[Q. What was your main motivation for coming to the festival?] Well Elvis, do you need any other reason than that? This festival means everything because I just reckon Elvis was the King and there will never be another and look what he's created. You only have to look around to see what he's created and around the world. You know, you can't get much bigger than this. [Through impersonating Elvis] you can act out a bit more, you get to meet more people through it, they seem to come up to you . . . whereas if you were casually dressed they wouldn't give you a second glance. It gives you a bit of adrenalin; you know . . . you feel a bit like the King probably would have felt.

Another experienced the Festival in similar vein:

It gives me an opportunity to portray that charismatic feeling back to an audience. Dressing up takes it to a higher level. You're giving an experience that's similar to an Elvis experience . . . I don't think you become Elvis . . . but you take people on a musical journey. Women come up and say – they're 50 or 60 years old – 'Tonight I was 18 again'.

Putting on the costume enabled both fantasy and metamorphosis. Some tribute artists also made significant incomes from concerts and sales of CDs.

In 2005 the Festival eventually established its own sales venue, Elvis Central, where wigs, sunglasses, Priscilla eyelashes, and various other souvenirs were powerful income earners. Fans returning to Sydney on the Elvis train ‘displayed their new objects to others [and] openly (sic) discussed the shrines they had constructed in their houses’ (Mackellar, 2009, p. 16). Acquisition enhanced status. For particularly committed fans of Elvis, there is no other means of expressing devotion, without lengthy and expensive travel to America. Many wore T-shirts or jewellery that could only be purchased in Memphis, and proudly talked of visiting Graceland and of the home ‘museums’ they had built from memorabilia. Many wore carefully and expensively made replica costumes. Many fans entertained each other – by reminiscences, exchanging and demonstrating knowledge, showing off their mementoes, dress styles, performances, and customized classic Cadillac cars – so that the festival was both pleasure and ‘serious leisure’ – demonstrating a high level of commitment and a detailed knowledge of all things Elvis (Stebbins, 1996). For a handful of fans, the visit to Parkes was akin to pilgrimage (cf. King, 1994); a pale reflection of the trip to Graceland in Memphis, but the closest that Australia can offer. For those at the main tribute concerts ‘there appeared to be a suspension of disbelief that enabled them to overlook the fact that this was not the real Elvis’ (Mackellar, 2009, p. 17). Such testimonies indicate the manner in which festivals – even the most seemingly esoteric or incidental – transcend daily life and bring a range of meanings to individual lives. Nonetheless, other responses hinted at the presence of ‘postmodern’ tourists (or post-tourists), visiting Parkes for the humorous and kitsch (‘everything was sensational, baby! uhh huh huh!’; ‘eating at Gracelands – wow – I’ve been to Gracelands!’). Yet, for particularly committed fans of Elvis, there is essentially no other means of expressing such devotion, without lengthy and expensive travel to America. Parkes has become a necessary part of their lives.

Place identity

Until quite recently, Parkes rarely mentioned the Festival in any of its standard tourist publications, preferring to advertise itself as the town with ‘The Dish’, and as a prominent regional commercial centre. Its longstanding tourism brochure simply ignored the Festival. Only since about 2007 has it been officially mentioned, although by 2012 it had finally made the cover of the Parkes brochure: ‘Home of the Dish and the Famous Annual Parkes Elvis Festival’. Initially the Festival was seen as trashy and trivial and unworthy of a town that sought to proclaim itself a prominent regional centre.

As the Festival grew, and more local people were involved, sentiment became more positive. Our survey of local residents immediately after the 2009 Festival found either substantial support, or mere indifference, with little significant hostility. For some it was ‘the best thing that has ever

happened here'; an 81-year-old noted, 'it's great for the town and the people'. Another woman argued: 'Those who only think of the Dish live in the past and we have to be more creative now.' While some preferred to stay away from the crowds or said that Elvis was 'not my thing', just one 61-year-old woman was bitterly opposed: 'I hate it; it closes off the main street, there's no access to businesses. Since the first one really rude people came from Sydney. Prices go up. We should promote the dish and our good restaurants, but we're under the thumb of the council.' Likewise, 'Hungover and drunk Elvises in the parade on Saturday morning isn't exactly a great image for the town.' Rowdiness and late-night drunkenness were sometimes frowned upon, while some complained 'you can hear it from where we are' – as some were prepared to find fault wherever they could. However, most convincing of all was the woman who explained:

I hated it when it first started. It was ridiculous and stupid and wasn't the image that was at all appropriate to our town. But over the years I watched and could see that it was making money and wasn't so bad. Last year I took in homestays and had six more visitors this year – lovely people and I made over \$600.

Winning over the majority of local people was eventually possible. A year later, in 2010, a more detailed survey found overwhelming support, recognizing the short-term economic benefits at Festival time and the longer-term benefits from tourism, and at least 20 per cent said that their views had changed over the years, and they were now more positive about the Festival. Many had participated and become involved as volunteers or additional paid staff (Gibson and Connell, 2012). The majority of local people had not just come to terms with the Festival, but now actively embraced it. One local man, dressed in a jumpsuit with guitar, stated:

I've gone all out; there's no half measures in this town. I've got the wig and the suit, the rings and don't forget these awesome sunnies... it's tack-alicious! I think if we were anywhere else we'd get bashed but around here you just get bought beers; it's f***ing fantastic.

By the mid-2000s the mayor, and councillors, routinely dressed up and accompanied the train on the large stage to Parkes; crowds of several hundred welcomed the train, and draped visitors in leis (not only in the Hawaii-themed years). The Festival had become part of Parkes life.

Change of any kind can be unwelcome, and proponents of change, including festivals, are often derided – however erroneously – and ignored as blow-ins who do not have roots in or understand the local community. Australian country towns can be conservative, while it is one of the characteristics of most small towns that they are inherently divided – by religion,

politics, sport, class, and also race – divisions which may spill over into music festivals, with concerns over who is excluded and who benefits. Conflicts can ensue over local spaces, resources, and the direction and meaning of the event (Gibson and Connell, 2005). But, as Australia and other countries move toward a ‘post-productivist countryside’ (Gibson and Connell, 2012), where agriculture is augmented by other sectors, notably service provision, so the role of festivals becomes more important, more invaluable, and increasingly welcomed as a boost to society and economy.

Economics

The Festival increasingly benefited the local economy. By the mid-2000s, Parkes had reached its limit in terms of accommodation, which consisted of 13 motels with about 1000 bed spaces. Not only was Parkes full of festival attendees, but towns such as Forbes, some 35 kilometres away, were also full. Dubbo, even further away, was almost booked out by the end of the decade. Routinely, by the end of one festival signs went up outside all the motels that Parkes was already booked for the following year; one more indication of the strength of return visiting.

In 2004, Parkes established a ‘tent city’ on the edge of town where visitors could hire tents and have access to basic facilities, and where caravans could also be parked. Two years later, Parkes also established home hosting, modelled on similar schemes in the larger NSW towns, to meet continually expanding demand, ensure that more revenue from accommodation remained in Parkes, and provide a friendly and homely experience. Both hosts and guests were enthusiastic about the programme, and many guests returned to the same host in subsequent years. Almost all the hosts joined the programme to support the local committee and the town; just a couple were in it ‘for the money’. While most hosts were genuinely altruistic and enjoyed meeting people, the income generated was valuable at a time of economic stagnation. As one host said: ‘it’s been the saviour of the town with the drought’. Through the programme, revenue went directly into the hands (and pockets) of local residents, increased interest in hosting, and widened local support for the Festival (Li and Connell, 2011).

Like many small festivals, the Festival itself made no money in its early years, and costs were significant, which meant that local support was subdued or non-existent. By its second decade that was changing rapidly. Visitor surveys in 2004 indicated that the economic impact of the festival had already become considerable. Visitors then spent an average of A\$440 per person over the festival weekend, translating to a direct injection of over A\$1.1 million into the local economy. Accommodation (averaging A\$142 per person), food and drink (A\$134), and entertainment (A\$51) were the most common forms of expenditure, with smaller amounts spent on souvenirs (A\$43) and other services such as fuel (A\$28). For a town of its size,

that expenditure was considerable, because there were relatively few services in some categories and multipliers spread that revenue through the local economy. By 2010, the direct visitor expenditure contribution of the festival to the town was over A\$3 million. Moreover, the impact of the Festival was felt much further away, in towns such as Forbes where people stayed, in campsites, motels, and caravan parks in a number of towns nearby or en route, and likewise in petrol stations and cafes far away from Parkes itself. Regional impacts were considerable.

Some of that expenditure went to the local market stalls. In the Festival's earliest years there was virtually no commercial presence, and even in 2002 there were merely a dozen stalls doing a desultory business selling local goods. By 2008 the number of market stalls had passed a hundred, and the main park was so crowded that numbers had to be cut back to 70 in 2009 to allow crowd movement. Stalls sold local rural products – honey, jams, soaps, and handicrafts – though some stallholders came from interstate as part of a national circuit. Only a handful sold Elvis memorabilia. Local businesses – the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, schools, the fire brigade, and so on – had their own stalls, raffles, and barbeques that did good business. Indeed, most things sold well. Much of what is sold has nothing much to do with music: clothes, bags, trinkets, garden furnishings; itinerant stallholders sell everything from national football club merchandise to Harley Davidson gear; woven rugs, garden gnomes, local goat cheese, and hand cream. However, as one visitor observed:

You've got Elvis wine, Elvis beer, Elvis tooth brushes, there's heaps of stuff – it's really tacky....the tackier it is the better it is....I mean people are buying 45 foot Elvis rugs...which is classic behaviour at a festival...the details are irrelevant. People consume all this memorabilia because people are in the spirit of it and that's what a festival does, it changes your behaviour.

The majority of the formal Parkes businesses experienced increased trade during the Festival period, with a quarter of businesses putting on extra staff over the weekend, adding an extra 30 jobs to the town. Predictably, restaurants (43 per cent), cafes (33 per cent) and accommodation facilities (14 per cent) accounted for the bulk of temporary positions created, and retailing positions filled the remaining 10 per cent (Brennan-Horley et al., 2007). These businesses also had the greatest dependency on local suppliers and labour, so were more closely embedded in the local economy than businesses reliant on goods and services (such as books and clothes) imported from state capitals and beyond. Over time, even lawyers, printers, furniture shops, and undertakers gained extra income down the line. More specialist services came from further afield. Portable toilets are big business, as evocatively portrayed in the hit Australian film *Kenny*: portaloos tend to be rented

through hire companies (such as the evocatively named '1300 Dunnys'). Carting empty (and full) portable toilets around by truck can be both expensive and messy, so the market is broken up into regional providers. Over time the businesses that benefited most from the influx of visitors stayed open much longer; Saturday afternoons and even Sundays were much less 'dead' than in earlier years or on other weekends, and further multiplier effects ensued. Elvis had been taken on board.

The Festival has consciously sought to involve local businesses and local organizations, and even link itself to The Dish, by organizing events there and running excursions to it. By 2012 there were more than 150 associated events, from bingo, shooting, and golf with Elvis to art exhibitions, and exhibitions of llamas and (blue suede) ewes. In 2013 the Festival broke what was described as a world record, through a successful Paddock to Plate attempt at The Dish, where a new record was smashed for converting a standing crop of wheat into a baker's dozen loaves of bread in under 18 minutes. Elvis might have preferred meatloaf, but it again emphasized the closer relations that had gradually been developed between Festival and community.

Elvis has not left the town

A tiny group of enthusiastic individuals battled against the odds to establish a festival out of season in honour of a performer with no local ties whatsoever, who was scarcely everyone's favourite musician, in the face of public ridicule and institutional exclusion. Local media ignored it; the national press were incredulous. Its genesis was derided as frivolous and inappropriate; it struggled to overcome floods and bushfires in early years, coped with an oppressive climate, but was bolstered by the support of the local rugby club and eventually the council and tourist board. Even still, there was opposition from many local people who hated the noise and congestion and, above all, saw the image of a latter-day Elvis as inappropriate for a town that prided itself as the centre of wheat growing in New South Wales (Gibson and Connell, 2012). Achieving inclusive social goals was never the aim, but Parkes succeeded despite the scepticism and downright opposition of some townsfolk, concerned about the image and status of the town. While some prefer the link to an Australian icon – The Dish – and others still object to what they see as a tawdry celebration of popular culture, the town has largely been won over. The Festival successfully challenged and overcame local conservatism. Most are well aware of the economic benefits, and what was once a more divided community has benefited substantially, come to terms with its strange musical identity, and become united in a most improbable way. Over time the residents of Parkes have adopted Elvis. He was never their choice as a symbol, but in the end they have adapted to life with Elvis, just as the wider world has come to see Parkes as Australia's Elvis town.

Parkes has slowly begun to trade on its association with Elvis, an invented tradition that has stimulated a new place identity and contributed to a resurgent economy (Connell and McManus, 2011). It has done this in defiance of standard assumptions about the links between creativity and local development – that it be participatory, inclusive, and forward-looking, and that it be linked to and develop from an ‘authentic’ or ‘organic’ local sense of place, identity, creative community, or way of life. Indeed, it has turned this completely upside down – the Parkes Festival claims none of these. Indeed, the festival thrives on repetition as much as innovation, and it is the local rugby club, rather than local musicians, that drives its success. What it does have is uniqueness and enthusiasm, open-mindedness, and a distinct niche that has seen off attempts to develop similar festivals elsewhere in the country. Novelty is crucial. So, too, is fun. In certain ways, and in unexpected places, inspiration triumphs over musical authenticity.

Creativity, innovation, and enthusiasm are not merely metropolitan phenomena, despite assumptions that creativity, creative industries, and ‘best practices’ are found in the largest cities, from where they may fortuitously trickle down in watered-down form (Gibson, 2012). Festivals demonstrate that this is untrue, with many small towns gaining significant economic, social, and cultural benefits. Just as in England, where the media have been astounded at festivals and creativity existing in seemingly improbable places (Voase, 2009), so too in Australia metropolitan commentators have slowly acknowledged rural creativity. Local people have created places that are not merely local, but places of exchange and even tentative globalization, which outsiders appreciate and are enthusiastic about (Kozorog, 2011). Music and creativity make that possible. Creativity involves non-economic values and practices, often taking place in marginal, mundane, and unlikely places.

The point here is that creativity itself remains malleable and not at all reliant on compositional originality or authenticity – whether in cities or in the bush. Parkes has created a celebration of heritage, nostalgia, kitsch, fantasy, and popular culture that is as ‘real’ as any celebration of Elvis in Australia could be. Though some locals and outsiders might see the Festival as simply a celebration of kitsch, most visitors did not. Those who enjoyed it most were those who felt that locals from Parkes had entered into the spirit of the event, especially through the Elvis impersonators: ‘the town’s a ‘friendly place’; ‘the whole atmosphere was abuzz with Elvis memorabilia’. By contrast, those who expressed any disappointment commented on the need for more local involvement, and longer store opening times, which, in due course, occurred. Only the inland summer heat could not be ameliorated.

The growing Elvis reputation of Parkes led Greg Page (the yellow Wiggle in the most popular children’s television band in Australia) to choose the town to locate his collection of Elvis memorabilia (the fourth largest such

collection in the world) – forming the basis of a new permanent museum that opened in 2010, adjoining a rather ‘traditional’ local museum. Parkes has become home to, among other things, *the* gold lamé suit (worn by Elvis on the cover of *50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can’t Be Wrong*), Elvis and Priscilla’s marriage certificate, and the last Cadillac that Elvis owned. Its tourism potential in a previously indistinguishable anonymous rural Australian town cannot be overstated, as the museum has given Parkes a year-long Elvis presence and, in a place with no other distinct tourist attractions, provides a rationale for visiting and remaining a little longer, remembering the experience and cementing the connection between Parkes and Elvis.

Beyond its national significance, Parkes has gradually acquired a global presence. Along with 14 other Australian festivals, mostly metropolitan, it is listed in Frommer’s *300 Unmissable Festivals around the World* (2009), where it was also distinguished for setting a new record (in 2007) for the most Elvises (though the local plural form is ‘Elvii’) in one place. For the first time in 2009 an overseas newspaper, *The Independent*, featured Parkes and Elvis in its travel section. Parkes is part of a loose network of sites – from six major Elvis festivals in North America to smaller ones in Porthcawl (Wales), Bridlington (England), Benidorm (Spain), and a range of other towns (Connelly, 2007; Mackellar, 2009) – where annual festivals occur. By 2007, Parkes was locked into gentle competition with the many other towns with Elvis festivals, after it was reported in the Guinness Book of Records as having a record 147 Elvis tribute artists simultaneously performing a single song onstage. By 2010, the winner of the Parkes Tribute Artist Competition was representing Australia in the Elvis Tribute Artist World Cup in Wales against competitors from 16 countries. A handful of overseas visitors took in Parkes as part of a global circuit; as one local resident reported in 2010, ‘I home hosted last year and the German girl who stayed said this is the best Elvis festival she has been to of all the ones she’s been to overseas.’ Success had taken on international dimensions. The complexities and nuances that connect the local and the global have displaced historic identity, in a new form of globalization that links numerous places with circulating popular cultural motifs.

The Parkes Elvis Festival demonstrates how a small, relatively remote place can stage a festival that generates substantial economic benefits, fosters a sense of community, seemingly against the odds, and in so doing has gaining nationwide notoriety and publicity without any particular local claim to musical heritage. The town has effectively, if belatedly, deployed what can be seen as ‘strategic inauthenticity’ (Taylor, 1997), placing the town on the tourist map, and creating an ‘invented geography’. Parkes’ identity is no longer a wheat town, the home of The Dish, or the ‘crossroads of a nation’, but is now also a place that nostalgically and enthusiastically resonates an American legend. The Festival has invigorated the town, attracted loyal, repeat visitors, and brought a community together on an otherwise hot and

dusty weekend in the tourist off-season because it is unique, well-organized, and enjoyable.

Parke's success is not unique. Elsewhere, 'Opera in the Paddock' and the Four Winds Festival on the fringes of similar small Australian towns have shown that opera and classical music can also become sources of attraction even in seemingly unpropitious locations (Gibson and Connell, 2012). Gympie and Tamworth have developed cultural economies through country music (Edwards, 2012; Gibson and Davidson, 2004). Lithgow, a former mining town in rural NSW, hosts a successful annual Ironfest, described on its website as 'an arts festival with a metal edge, featuring art exhibitions, live music, street performance, historical re-enactments (including the Australasian World Jousting Tournament and a colonial battle re-enactment with three cannons and cavalry)' (Ironfest, 2013). The tiny township of Nundle has successfully combined its nineteenth-century history of gold mining and Chinese settlement in an annual Go for Gold Chinese Festival (Khoo and Noonan, 2011). Heritage, sometimes dubiously, has been invested with new meanings, and festivals and tourism linked to that heritage have replaced traditional forms of economic development, as in Bundanoon, which now trades as Australia's Brigadoon – a displaced home for Scottish heritage (Ruting and Li, 2012). Even festivals celebrating identities seemingly at odds with historic images of rural Australian towns, such as ChillOut, Australia's largest *rural* gay/lesbian festival, held in rural Victoria, have grown successfully despite local fears and prejudices (Gorman-Murray et al., 2008). Multiple examples exist of how images can be developed, civic identities created, heritages produced, and economic development stimulated through music and a range of visible expressive forms (Gibson, 2014).

Heritage can be created, invented, reified, and commodified. Cultural capital can be created and actively deployed. Music can be transferred across continents, embodied with new meanings, and successfully embedded in the fabric of improbable locations. In Australia, arguably more than in other countries, festivals are antidotes to drought and depression, and are part of the regeneration of the countryside. Yet in the end no festival, or even clusters of festivals of different kinds (and most small towns have several), can be a panacea for rural decay. Small towns continue to struggle to diversify economies and retain high school leavers. Others contribute tangibly to regional development. While the Elvis Festival continues to grow, there are limits to festival growth because of competition, accommodation constraints, too frequent repetition, environmental stresses, and high prices. Festivals are not solely about the music, but many towns, in Australia and elsewhere, have used music and creativity to stimulate economic and social activity and new directions of mobility in the face of recession. The Parke's Elvis Festival demonstrates how one small place can stage a festival in a relatively remote location, on a theme of no local relevance, and succeed despite itself.

Note

1. The empirical research behind this chapter includes many hundreds of visitor and business surveys, interviews with festival-goers, organizers, home hosters, and local residents conducted in agreement with festival organizers over the better part of a decade (2003–2012). Those activities were also supported by a Discovery Project grant from the Australian Research Council (DP0560032). We acknowledge the assistance of various researchers at Parkes and on our wider Discovery project, including Chris Brennan-Horley, Jen Li, Elyse Stanes, Anna Stewart, Gordon Waitt, Jim Walmsley, and Andrew Gorman-Murray. Further in-depth analysis of the results of surveys and interviews at Parkes can be found in Brennan-Horley et al. (2007), Li and Connell (2011), and Gibson and Connell (2012).

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