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Moomba

A festival for the people

Craig Bellamy, Gordon Chisholm & Hilary Ericksen

city of Melbourne

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City of Melbourne
PO Box 1603M
Melbourne, Victoria 3001 Australia
+613 9658 9658
www.melbourne.vic.gov.au

National Library of Australia
cataloguing-in-publication data

Bellamy, Craig.
Moomba : a festival for the people.

ISBN 0 9578702 7 2.

1. Melbourne Moomba Festival - Anniversaries, etc.
2. Festivals - Victoria - Melbourne.
3. Melbourne (Vic.) - Social life and customs. I. Chisholm, Gordon. II. Ericksen, Hilary. III. Melbourne (Vic.). IV. Title.

394.25099451

This publication is also available on-line.
www.melbourne.vic.gov.au
ISBN 0 9578702 8 0

Front cover: Gateway Neon Arch. Designed by David Humphries for the 25th Anniversary of the Moomba Festival, 1979. Photographer: Robyn Beeche (© Public Art Squad).

Back cover: Moomba Garden Party, 2002. Photographer: Catherine Acin

Foreword

For 50 years the drama and fanfare of Moomba have captured the hearts and imaginations of Melburnians. This festival for the people is truly a celebration of our city and of the diverse communities that breathe life and character into its public spaces and give strength to its cultural fabric. For many, myself included, Melbourne's annual festival was keenly anticipated through childhood, and it remains a spur to youthful memories of carnival rides, colourful parades and exciting new experiences. Moomba continues to create those experiences and memories for successive generations of festival-goers.

The City of Melbourne is proud to have hosted Moomba since its beginning, and is thrilled to have celebrated its 50th anniversary in March 2005. A festival such as this could only have remained popular and successful through the energy, effort and commitment of those who have supported it through the decades. Many of those individuals are acknowledged through the brief history of Moomba recounted here – and I thank them for their tremendous work. But there are others not mentioned by name whose efforts are also part of the Moomba story and whose contributions have helped make it the much-loved institution it is. My thanks go to all who have contributed to Moomba – not least the festival-goers, without whose support there would be no Moomba.

Our festival has evolved with our city, constantly realigning itself to express Melbourne's distinctive and dynamic city culture. The City of Melbourne values such celebrations of people and place, and as Moomba moves into its sixth decade it remains central to the city's community-festival program.

John So
Lord Mayor of Melbourne

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Acknowledgements

The City of Melbourne would like to thank the following individuals — many of whom have been intimately involved with Moomba through the years — for sharing their knowledge and memories of the festival: George Abel, Malcolm Blaylock, Andrew Bleby, Jenny Ford, Laurel Frank, Liss Gabb, Paddy Garrity, Adam Grubb, Janina Harding, Max Kirwan, Sylvia Kleinert, Cheri Le Cornu, Maggie Maguire, Dan Mitchell, Trina Parker, Martin Paten, John Paxinos, Ian Pidd, Chris Reidy, Ray Thompson, Emma Willoughby and Michael Wittingslow.

Historical Milestones

1951 Australia celebrates 50 years of federation with a parade and the staging of the theatre production An Aboriginal Moomba: Out of the Dark.

1952 Melbourne holds its final Labour Day procession.

1954 Queen Elizabeth II visits Melbourne for the first time, and crowds gather in the city centre to witness the royal spectacle. Melbourne City Council and City Development Association see an opportunity to realise a long-held vision; they propose an annual festival for the people.

1955 The first Moomba Festival is held in March 1955, with Beverley Stewart leading the parade as Queen of Moomba.

1956 Television is introduced into Australian homes and the following year the parade is broadcast, beginning Moomba's long relationship with television.

1961 The Moomba Masters waterskiing event is introduced onto the Yarra River.

1963 Queen Elizabeth II visits Australia on her royal tour. The Moomba Festival is moved from 11 March to 25 February to coincide with her visit, and it is extended from 11 to 15 days.

1967 English actor Robert Morley becomes the first King of Moomba.

1972 John Farnham is crowned King of Moomba, and the Moomba Showboat is launched. Lesley Clucas, a 21-year-old student, falls off the RMIT float and is killed.

1976 The first Birdman Rally is held.

1977 Mickey Mouse is the controversial choice for King of Moomba; a pie is thrown in his face during the parade. ABBA plays to Moomba crowds at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl and is given a civic reception at the Melbourne Town Hall.

1978 Bert Newton becomes the first Melbourne-born King of Moomba.

1981 As part of the Moomba program, legendary rock band AC/DC plays at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl.

1982 A network of independent artists announces plans for a weeklong Fringe Festival. Supported by Moomba, the first Fringe Festival coincides with Moomba the following year.

1985 Trade unions reclaim their heritage, holding a Labour Day concert in the Melbourne Concert Hall and marching with banners in the Moomba parade.

1986 Melbourne International Arts Festival is established, initially named Spoleto Festival.

1987 Paul McNamee is crowned the last King of Moomba and Marita Jones the last Queen.

1996 The Australian Formula One Grand Prix is held for the first year in Albert Park.

1998 Denise Drysdale is crowned the last Moomba Monarch.

1999 Controversy reigns as Zig and Zag are about to be crowned Moomba Monarchs. The monarch system ends and the festival is declared a republic.

2000 The first of Moomba's three tram parades takes place.

2003 Moomba is renamed Moomba Waterfest and the Young Ambassador title is awarded for the first time.

2005 Moomba celebrates its 50th anniversary.

Prologue

In 2005, Melbourne's Moomba Festival became half a century old. Since its establishment in 1955, the festival has become something of an institution, unfolding in the city's parks, along its streets and on the waters of its Yarra River. The festival is as familiar to post-war Melbourne as the AFL and the Melbourne Cup have been for more than a century. Moomba has touched the lives of millions; it has had hundreds of administrators, tens of thousands of performers and legions of spectators. It is the event at which numerous teenagers have stolen their first kiss, at which the streets have come alive with colour and fanfare, and at which fireworks have lit up the night sky.

Moomba provides something for everyone and has at times had up to 200 different events spread over 11 days, and most of them free. From the flower and cat shows of the early years to the world music of more recent years, from waterskiing to parades of decorated trams, and from street theatre to world-class opera, Moomba has sought to respond to the times and to engage a diverse audience in a popular community festival. It is of little surprise that it has been subject to criticism for its populism. But Moomba's success can be best measured by the

Moomba parade, 1967.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

Post-parade crowd, 1979. *Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection*

Beverley Stewart, Queen of Moomba, 1955. *Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.*

great numbers of supporters who come to the city annually to participate in the entertainment.

Moomba is marked by both continuity and change. It has reinvented itself through the years to remain relevant and vibrant to festival-goers, who, since the mid-1980s at least, have had no shortage of events to choose from. With its changing festival directors, administration and funding; its backdrop of shifting social, cultural and political environments; and the inevitable criticisms to which such populist events are subject, Moomba necessarily has a rich and complex history. The story of Moomba is in effect a composite of many stories. But there are some continuities that form a core to the past of this outdoor festival. These relate primarily to place and the nature of the events that have occurred, and still do, in those places.

For many festival-goers the most memorable experience is the grand parade down Swanston Street, which has served historically as the defining event of Moomba. At its height from the 1950s until the 1970s, it drew hundreds of thousands of people to central Melbourne. In the early years these pageants embodied the glitz and high times of the 1950s, livening up what was a lifeless city centre. Horse- and tractor-drawn floats — sometimes swan shaped or festooned in flowers — created an incongruous procession against the grey, Victorian façades of Swanston Street. Women with wooden perambulators pushed their way through crowds to catch a glimpse of the scores of clowns or of Blinko the Bunyip. Men in hats held babies in bonnets to watch a procession that would include a float of a colossal Merino sheep made of plastic blooms or gold prospectors celebrating the founding industries of Victoria's economy. A clown on towering stilts, Alexander Jurman, was a regular in the early years of Moomba, as were the flamboyant floats of Myer Emporium and the Gas & Fuel Corporation.

The crowning of Moomba royals — a festival tradition from 1955 until 1998 — and the months of devoted float preparation culminated in a visual feast seen by thousands on the streets and on television. Moomba has always been connected to, and in some ways a product of, television in Australia, which was introduced in 1956, the year the Olympics were held in Melbourne. The selection of Moomba sovereigns and the themes of many floats were often determined by popular television shows. The first parade to be televised was that of 1957.

Australian Wool Board float, 1963.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection. Photographer: Ivan Pope

Alexandra Gardens, on the south side of the Yarra River, has long hosted a key element of Moomba. It is here that the carnival has traditionally showcased its Ferris wheel, gaping-mouthed clown heads, fluffy toys and vertiginous thrill rides. Virtually from Moomba's inception until 2002 the Wittingslow family ran the carnival. Close to Alexandra Gardens, the Sidney Myer Music Bowl in King's Domain has staged several Moomba music concerts. Treasury Gardens, too, has been home to Moomba events, most notably the Herald Outdoor Art Show, established as an independent event in 1953, and the Garden Party, which took place between 2000 and 2002.

If Swanston Street and the inner-city parks are seminal places in the history of Moomba, so too is the Yarra. As Melbourne has come to appreciate this central artery, Moomba has embraced the Yarra and the new urban developments that flank it. Historically much neglected and maligned, the muddy river that runs through the city's heart has been the stage for many sporting feats and aquatic displays; for example, the Moomba Showboat, the Dragon Boat Races, the Moomba Masters and the Birdman Rally.

One of the largest and longest-running festivals in Australia, Moomba has survived in spite of its critics, and it commands a strong place in the social history of the city. It often unflatteringly reminds us of where we have come from and what we have become, but that too is part of its charm. For generations it has been an event where Melburnians celebrate their sometimes-conflicting cultural identities, but to embrace Moomba is to affirm its inclusive philosophy.

Chinese dragon on show, 1957.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

Wittingslow carnival, c. 1990.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

Moomba parade crowd, 2005. *Source: City of Melbourne.*

While at its inception it was a commercially driven festival, Moomba has always sought community involvement. In early festivals post-war migrants typically displayed their ethnicity through traditional costume and performance, and in the mid-1960s, with a turn towards a more arts-oriented program, Aboriginal, Jewish, Italian and Latvian arts featured prominently. Multiculturalism has been widely accepted since the early 1990s, and from this period particularly cultural diversity has been well represented in Moomba. In accordance with Council's City Plan objectives, this unique community festival is a celebration of identity, culture and place.

A Festival for a Modern Melbourne

Separation Day float, 1951.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

Moomba has its roots in prosperous post-war Melbourne, in a period of soaring economic growth, high immigration and elevated birth rates. During this time, many mainly Anglo-Australian residents of the long-established inner suburbs left for the city's affluent middle suburbs. Inner suburbs such as Fitzroy, Carlton and Richmond were seen as slums to be abandoned. The economic mobility afforded by the new wealth of the period allowed many families to pursue the 'Australian dream' of owning a large, modern house on a quarter-acre block. Meanwhile in the inner city much of the Victorian stonework of 'Marvellous Melbourne' was being transformed into a new architectural idiom. From the rubble a modern and efficient new Melbourne emerged, with a disciplined workforce that entered the city by morning and deserted it by five. The earliest Moomba festivals breathed life into this moribund centre, and by the mid-1950s a family trip to the city was a welcome reprieve from the routines of suburban life, especially for the generation of children who became known as the 'baby-boomers'.

Festival lineage

Moomba was first launched on 12 March 1955, *The Age* boldly pronouncing that 'Moomba will be the city's bid to rival such famous international civic highlights as the Pasadena Tournament of Roses, the Edinburgh Arts Festival, and the Nice Battle of Flowers.'[1] Melbourne City Council and a group of businessmen operating under the title City Development Association (CDA) administered the early festivals. CDA was an enterprise of business luminaries such as Norman Myer, of Myer Emporium, and Edgar Coles, of GJ Coles Ltd. The council and CDA believed that the central city would die — as had been the case with many American cities — if inner-city retailers did not attract residents and tourists, and the purchasing power of both.

The idea of a large festival for the people had been a vision of council for many years, but two world wars and the Depression had prevented the realisation of the proposal. It was not until 1954, on his return from an overseas trip, that city councillor Maurice Nathan revived the idea of an open-air festival. Not everyone thought Moomba was a good idea. Some felt it was a deliberate attempt by 'the establishment' to eradicate the century-old Labour Day procession and the celebrations that venerated workers' achievements. Letters to the editor expressing opposition were published in Melbourne's press.

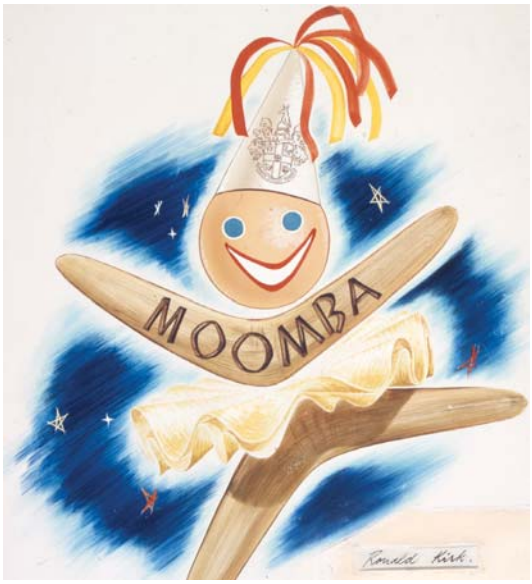
The trade unionists' annual Labour Day procession down Swanston Street (originally called the Eight-Hour Day March) commemorated building workers' win of the eight-hour working day in the mid-19th century. On 21 April 1856, stonemasons working on the University of Melbourne marched on Parliament House to press their claims for a regulated eight-hour day. The skilled workers were in a good position to have their claims met. Melbourne was experiencing a building boom and some of the city's great public buildings, such as the Public Library (now known as the State Library of Victoria), were under construction. Victoria's building workers were the first in the world to gain a 48-hour working week, which delivered them Robert Owen's ideal of a balanced day: eight hours' work, eight hours' rest and eight hours' recreation.[2] While this was an important achievement for the building workers, conditions for

1. 'Moomba reign begins today: Henley, then city lights go on', Age, *12 March 1955.*
2. Today there is a commemorative statue opposite the Trades Hall in Lygon Street, Carlton. The '888' inscribed on its top signifies the popular slogan of the movement: eight hours' labour, eight hours' rest and eight hours' recreation.

women and child labourers in particular remained unchanged and unreasonable for decades.[3]

As well as an eight-hour day, trade unionists gained a procession and a fair with a sports carnival to celebrate this achievement. And in 1879, some 23 years later, workers were awarded a paid holiday — Labour Day. The Labour Day procession was at its height in the late 19th century and was one of the largest and most important public events in Melbourne. Countless onlookers would line Swanston Street to see the parade with its decorated floats and magnificent hand-painted and embroidered banners, the latter held aloft by proud union workers. But by the 1950s the social and political environment had shifted significantly and the popularity of this procession had waned. This allowed the space for Moomba to take root. The last Labour Day procession was held in 1952, just four years short of a century of commemorating the eight-hour day.

In 1951, a large celebration was held in Melbourne to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Australia's federation. This included an arts festival and a parade of floral floats through the city streets. This festival, too, would have a bearing on the fortunes of Moomba, which was launched five years later.



Ronald Kirk's illustration for the Moomba logo, 1955.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

In 1954, Queen Elizabeth II visited Melbourne on her first tour of Australia as sovereign. She was the first reigning monarch to visit these southern shores and Melbourne erupted into royalist fervour. Streets and buildings were extravagantly festooned, a royal pageant was staged and some 17,000 schoolchildren performed for her at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Melburnians came out in extraordinary numbers to witness the proceedings and to catch a glimpse of the 27-year-old Queen of the Commonwealth. A festival for the people had been an idea for decades, but the public support for this event, coupled with a more felicitous economic environment, gave the idea the impetus it needed to get off the ground.

What's in a name?

One of the federation jubilee events of 1951 was an Aboriginal theatre production called An Aboriginal Moomba: Out of the Dark. It was staged at the Princess Theatre with an all-Aboriginal cast. Organised by the Australian Aborigines League at the urging of Pastor Doug Nicholls, this performance sought to promote Aboriginal rights and culture in southeastern Australia, thus operating as a political tool. Intense colonisation of the southeast had rendered Aborigines of the region almost invisible, and the theatre production hoped to redress this.[4]

When a name was needed for Melbourne's new festival, Bill Onus, president of the Australian Aborigines League and a performer in the earlier jubilee event, suggested 'Moomba' to the Melbourne City Council. The name had been successful for the theatre production and the council believed it to mean 'let's get together and have fun'.

Debate about the meaning of the word emerged 14 years later, however, when Monash academic Lorna Lippman claimed in a letter to the *Age* that 'moom' meant 'bottom' and 'ba' meant 'up'.[5] Over time this has been glossed to mean 'up your bottom', or even 'up your bum', the irreverent transliteration fixing firmly in the public imagination. The debate played out very publicly in the papers, with allegations of inauthenticity and a hoax lying behind Lippman's claim. In response to the publication of Lippman's letter, Lin Onus, the son of Bill (who had passed away the previous year), countered the implication of Aboriginal inauthenticity by claiming his father suggested the word knowingly as an intervention against the confidence and dominance of white society.[6] Academic Sylvia Kleinert has argued that 'Moomba', like the word 'Koori', was part of a private language of southeastern Aboriginal peoples. It was a language directed, she says, 'against the hegemonic authority of assimilation policies . . .'[7]

Etymology aside, it is fair to say that the reason 'Moomba' was chosen as the festival name — to

3. *See Victorian Trades Hall Council, www.vthc.org.au/about_history/history1.html; accessed 24 November 2004.*

4. *For an overview and analysis of this performance see Sylvia Kleinert, 'An Aboriginal Moomba: Remaking History',* Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies, *vol. 13, no. 3, 1999, pp. 345–57.*

5. *Lorna Lippman, 'Letters to the editor',* Age, *6 December 1969. For further discussion on this debate see Kleinert, pp. 353-54 and Keith Dunstan,* Moomba: The First 25 Years, *The Sun News-Pictorial and the Melbourne Moomba Festival Ltd, Melbourne, 1979, pp. 5–6.*

6. *Lin Onus,* Age, *19 December 1969.*

7. *Kleinert, p. 349.*

acknowledge the presence of Aboriginal people in the southeast — has largely been forgotten. But whatever the word's actual meaning, it was given to the festival for political reasons at a time when Aborigines did not have land rights or even citizenship. It was a progressive gesture for its time, and this is the foremost significance of the name. Its literal translation, or at least the impulse to pin it down, should not detract from this.

Managing Moomba

The first few years of Moomba were some of the most tumultuous in its history. In *Moomba: The First 25 Years*, a publication produced for the 1979 silver jubilee of Moomba, Keith Dunstan says, 'directors changed overnight and committeemen stormed out of meetings':

[Moomba] has had to endure bureaucratic jealousies, internal committee fighting more savage than you would see even in the upper reaches of Parliament – and even more dangerous – surely the most rapacious and consistent campaign of classic Australian knocking that we have seen.[8]

The administrative tensions in the founding years – and indeed throughout the history of the festival – have been largely about the very nature of Moomba and about the festival's funding. The CDA worried about the economic contribution of Moomba to the city, while council worried about its cost. Yet while tensions were high between the council and CDA, they also existed between political factions within council, those on the left concerned about the commercial imperative of the event. Even at state government level — especially under Liberal premier Henry Bolte (1955–72) — support for Moomba was not guaranteed, which was reflected in the government's paltry sponsorship. Melbourne's Truth newspaper once quoted Bolte as describing Moomba as a hillbilly festival: 'get together and have fun . . .', Bolte said, 'that is not culture . . . that is more on the hillbilly style'.[9]

Poster advertising the Moomba Fanfare & Rodeo, 1957.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

In 1957, the council contributed £9000 to the budget, the state government £5000 and other contributors £16,000.[11] Today the festival costs around $2.4 million to stage, with council contributing close to $2 million and sponsors around $400,000. But this cost is meagre compared to what some market researchers estimate is Moomba's annual economic contribution to Melbourne. In 2004, a conservative estimate of the direct economic impact generated by Moomba is said to have been at least $17 million.[12]

In 1958, tensions between CDA and the council became untenable. CDA wanted the festival to be more international in scope in order to attract sufficient numbers of tourists. In 1959, CDA even sought to establish a new £50,000 upmarket festival of the arts. But due to political differences, the council sacked CDA's Moomba chairman, Robert Gardner, before this idea came to fruition. Like many Moomba controversies, this one occupied the pages of Melbourne's dailies. Gardner later surmised that Moomba might have developed along the lines of the Adelaide Festival had CDA continued at its head.[13]

The first four festivals were managed through this fragile relationship between the CDA and council, but the tensions of mid-1958 led to a new administrative regime: a corporate-style board of management, the vision of which would be orchestrated by an artistic director. After a bitter

8. Dunstan, pp. 3–4. See Dunstan, pp. 9–13, for a detailed account of the Machiavellian machinations of Moomba's administration through its first five years.

9. 'Hillbilly Moomba-by Bolte', Truth, *14 March 1964.*

10. Dunstan, Moomba, *p. 9.*

11. Dunstan, Moomba, *p. 11.*

12. Sweeny Research, study no. 13830, Moomba Waterfest, March 2004.

13. Dunstan, Moomba, *p. 13.*

battle over the board's composition, council won out and a 13-member board was appointed, comprising seven councillors and six business representatives. The board operated under Moomba Festival Ltd, an incorporated subsidiary of the Melbourne City Council, with five council shareholders. Over the following 10 years the board grew to an extraordinary 24 members, but in 1969 this unwieldy and factionalised body was pared back to just 12 members.[14] Several committees had had a role in directing and administering the many events that comprised Moomba, and this convoluted bureaucracy guaranteed a certain level of tension in the administration of each festival.

Moomba's governing structure continued largely unchanged until 1990, by which time the financial pressures of the festival had become unsustainable and economic rationalism was seeing new models of management introduced more generally into business and local government. In 1991, the financial and creative management of Moomba was made subject to competitive tendering. This was a radical shift in the festival's management, for Moomba had always had an integrated administration and the new tendering process would divvy it up between three contractors. The parade went to Reidy Henderson Productions, which introduced the innovative River Spectaculars; outdoor events went to Flying Start Productions, which brought cutting-edge street theatre to the festival; and all remaining functions went to Wittingslow Amusements, the carnival family that had been part of Moomba since the 1950s.[15] Des Wittingslow engaged Moomba employee Maggie Maguire as the marketing–public relations representative. Over a 12-year association with Moomba, Maguire held many positions, including those of general manager and board member.

Two other options were considered at this time as a means to relieve the financial pressure on Moomba, though neither transpired. In the first instance, council considered the privatisation of the festival. Second, the state government proposed that Moomba merge with the four-year-old Comedy Festival. The government made this merger announcement without first consulting council, and it attempted to strong-arm council and the board by threatening to withhold funding worth $200,000 if the proposal were refused.

Sir Douglas Nicholls, Moomba Board Member and 1973 King of Moomba.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

When the three tendered contracts ran their course in 1994, a single contract was awarded to the Wittingslows. They ran the festival along the lines of the earlier years, with Malcolm Blaylock appointed as artistic director. Under the auspices of Michael Wittingslow, the family retained this contract until 1999, when it went to Arts Projects Australia (APA), which managed Moomba for the three years to 2002. Under the governance of APA, Moomba went from a 10-day to a four-day festival, which it has been ever since.

In 2003, Moomba's administration was returned to the City of Melbourne, where a dedicated internal branch now manages it. With this changing of the guard, the festival was re-branded Moomba Waterfest and put under the directorship of a council taskforce and under the management of Jenny Ford.

14. Age*, 30 September 1969.*

15. Maggie Maguire, interviewed April 2003.

Moomba on Parade

The parade is emblematic of Moomba and it traditionally occurs on the morning of Victoria's Labour Day, in March. Different approaches have been tried over the years, such as night parades and ambitious river pageants, but a daytime procession almost always takes place on Swanston Street. This significant thoroughfare has long been the stage for labour marches, ANZAC parades, sports parades and various civic protests. As historian Andrew Brown-May has said, ever since the foundation stones of the city were laid, Melburnians have utilised the streets for processions of civic display.[16]

A procession for the people

The first processions were called the Flower Parades and they boasted fairytale themes and ornate floats, the latter showcasing the consumer goods of a newly flush post-war city. Film footage of the inaugural Moomba parade shows a giant Gulliver reluctantly tied to the back of a truck, a blubbery Humpty Dumpty and the festival guest, American novelty-trombonist bandleader Spike Jones.[17] Later that decade, floats included 'screwball' medical students, with patients attached to blood-transfusion units, in turn attached to beer bottles; a Chinese dragon, which became a parade regular from the Chinese community; and floats touting the benefits of using electricity, and even glass. Unselfconsciously declaring the concerns of the period, the State Electricity Corporation float of 1959 sported the slogan: 'electricity makes your home a dream castle'.

The Myer Emporium was an important fixture during the first decades of the parade, spending several thousand on its floats and on the skilled staff that constructed them. The first float created by the Myer display staff was for the Retail Traders Association. It comprised an elaborate horse-drawn float complete with a regal clown and scantily clad young women beneath a canvas top.

One of the most celebrated float designers of the period was Myer employee Freddie Asmussen, designer of Myer's famous Christmas window displays. Asmussen designed around 20 Moomba floats and won the prize for the best float at least a dozen times. He and the other staff often worked tirelessly into the night to complete their creations.

Retail Traders Association and Myer float, designed by Freddie Asmussen, 1963. Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection. Photographer: Ivan Pope

Gas & Fuel Corporation float, 1963.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.
Photographer: Ivan Pope.

16. See Andrew Brown-May, chapter 7, 'Taming the beast: street processions', Melbourne Street Life: The Itinerary of Our Days, *Australian Scholarly/Arcadia and Museum Victoria, Melbourne, 1998.*

17. Melbourne: Films of the Fifties, *produced by the National Film & Sound Archive, 1996.*

Coca-Cola float, 1967.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

A float Asmussen designed for the themed 'Heroes and Heroines' parade in 1971 featured Tze Hsi, the imperial princess of China:
Beautifully dressed in a richly coloured kimono with a long jewelled train, she and her ladies in waiting are in a Chinese temple garden. The garden is dominated by an enormous peacock, the tail of which sweeps up four and a half metres high and which opens and closes. The peacock is decked out in layers of thousands of magnificent blue and green turquoise fibreglass 'feathers'.[18]

Drama on the parade route and off was not uncommon. On one occasion, an Asmussen float depicting a tropical island paradise hit a bridge in Richmond on its way to the parade. Papier-mâché showered down and the float was virtually in ruins. With speedy repairs, the team patched it together in time to make the parade.[19] In 1959, too, Asmussen had to endure the humiliation of becoming a spectacle. He had searched assiduously for one of Melbourne's original cable trams; it would become a float that recognised the city's public-transportation heritage. After careful restoration it was entered into the parade. But as Dunstan notes, Asmussen's glory was short-lived:
...cable tracks were not the same gauge as electric tram tracks, so Freddie had to mount his tram on special trolleys. It was just after they turned into Bourke Street, the trolley wheels caught in the electric tram tracks. There was an appalling grinding noise underneath, steel wheels collapsed and the tram gave a sickening list to port. Don Ingersole, the procession director, had no choice, he had to pull the tram out of the parade, and humiliated, it was carted off to the showgrounds. If ever there was an occasion when Fred Asmussen was close to tears this was it.[20]

But the Moomba parade has also seen tragedy, and none so shocking as during the parade of 1972, when 21-year-old Leslie Clucas fell off the RMIT float, 'The Tower of London'. The young student was crushed by the semitrailer carrying the float. Today, a student lounge at RMIT is named in her memory.[21]

Although Myer and other sizable businesses could invest serious money in what were effectively 'mobile advertisements', many floats were neither pricey nor lavish, but simple, confident civic displays put together by community groups and non-profit organisations, such as the Surf Lifesaving Association of Victoria and St John Ambulance. Procession groups were primarily from Melbourne, although some were from country Victoria and others from interstate. The parades of the 1970s had a mixed representation of community groups, corporate enterprise and political interest groups.

Festival themes have been common through the history of Moomba, providing sometimes curious, sometimes predictable touchstones of social interest, and providing a focus for what were inevitably eclectic processions. The theme for the 1970 parade was 'Fantasy and Australian History'. It included a float modelled on the Endeavour —

Southern Cloud float, 1967.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

18. Peter Fitzgerald, 'Good man in the crowds', Herald*, 27 February 1971.*
19. Fitzgerald, 'Good man in the crowds'.
20. Dunstan, Moomba*, p. 19.*
21. 'Girl killed in Moomba procession', Age*, 14 March 1972.*

marking the bicentenary of Cook's first voyage to Australia — a float from the Colonial Days Re-enactment Society and one from the Australian Soviet Friendship Society. The Royal Australian Navy Band and the St Vincent de Paul's Boys Home Band marched in the procession, as did the Victorian Highland Pipe Band and the 4/19 Prince of Wales Light Horse Regiment Band. While these were the more predictable participants of this history-themed parade, the floats from Kentucky Fried Chicken and Coca-Cola seemed only to signal (no doubt unconsciously) the overpackaged, drive-by history of a rapidly globalising world. Thematic coherence is rarely complete at such events and the usual assortment of clowns and street theatre also participated in the parade.

At some times more than at others, Melbourne City Council has had a firm hand in coordinating the parade, with the council financing and building many of the floats. On numerous occasions, and for creative and ideological reasons, it has been censorious with regards to just who would participate. In 1990, Burt Cooper, creative director at the time, said that this year the parade would be: *…shorter, sharper and tightly choreographed. We will scrutinise every entry and we have flatly banned any that we considered were below standard or featured people in everyday clothing strolling along and waving to the crowd.*[22]

Later that decade, with Victoria under Kennett governance (1992–99), a coalition of independent groups planning to join the procession under the

Street decorations, 1963.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection. Photographer: Ivan Pope.

Coles float, 1961. *Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection. Photographer: Ivan Pope.*

22. The New Moomba Comes to Town, *Moomba Promotion Brochure, Howie & Taylor Publicity, 1990.*

name Public First were expelled at the eleventh hour for sporting an anti-privatisation banner. Administrators argued that the float was banned because they wanted a parade free of political and religious messages.[23]

The same rationale prevailed in 2003. The Chinese community group Falun Dafa (Falun Gong) was excluded in the lead up to the event because the Moomba Waterfest Taskforce deemed it to be a political organisation and not consistent with the philosophy of the event. While the Falun Dafa did not participate in the parade that year, it successfully argued through VCAT that the action was discriminatory. The group participated in the 2004 parade. Stringent 'creative guidelines' mean that no group can promote its organisation without the approval of event organisers.

In 1963, the state government, too, was prescriptive of Moomba, as it coincided with the visit of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip. Anne Maree Cafarella, the queen of the people's festival, led the parade that year; the Queen of the Commonwealth watched from the steps of the Melbourne Town Hall. In this Swanston Street spectacle, Australian egalitarianism was ironically highlighted in this meeting of monarchs. This Moomba is said to be one of the only such occasions in which premier Henry Bolte took an interest, decreeing that only government floats or those of particular industries could participate in the parade. Additionally, the procession time was shortened to a mere 33 minutes, and no participants could reveal bare flesh for fear of offending the royal guests.[24]
In other years controversial entries have reflected prevailing public opinion. With the intensification of the Vietnam War, for example, political protests were regular, and in 1966 a group of anti-war protesters briefly stopped the parade. In 1962, there was a public furore because the Bullen Brothers Circus was in town and planned to display caged lions, tigers, gorillas, monkeys, camels and elephants in the Moomba pageant. Impassioned letters were published in local papers and the outrage was so great that the circus parade was cancelled.[25] This may have led to Moomba's later fostering of 'progressive' circus events, such as world-renowned Circus Oz. The company was formed in 1978, partly with sponsorship from Moomba and the Adelaide Festival. The Moomba committee invested $50,000 in this new venture.[26]

Circus Oz is not the only act or event to have benefited from Moomba's support. Trades Hall arts officer Paddy Garrity recalls that in the founding years of the community-based Women's Circus (the early 1990s), some performers got their first taste of working in the arts by partaking in the parade or else marshalling this event, thus realising the social and feminist objectives of the organisation.[27] In 1982, a coalition of independent artists announced plans for a fringe arts festival to take place in Melbourne. With the close of the Pram Factory, artists had been travelling to the Adelaide Fringe to present their work, so a need clearly existed for a like event to be staged closer to home.[28] In its first year, 1983, the weeklong Melbourne Fringe coincided with Moomba, which supported it in its infancy. The festival soon secured a place on the events calendar. Consciously an arts festival, Melbourne Fringe became aligned with the Spoleto Festival (which in time became the Melbourne International Arts Festival) when it was launched three years later.

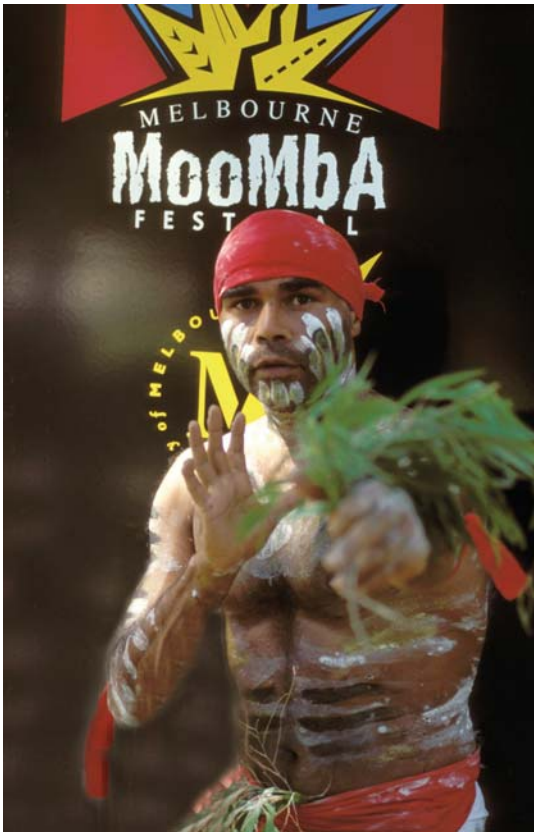
Surf Lifesaving Association procession, 1963.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection. Photographer: Ivan Pope.

In 1979, the left wing of the Labor Party inaugurated an event to rival Moomba. Jim Simmonds, opposition spokesman for Labor and chairman of the new Festival of Labour, claimed that Moomba was little more than 'an advertising campaign on wheels' that had been devised to displace a celebration that recognised the achievements of ordinary

23. Victoria Gurvich, 'City parades its best face for Moomba', Age*, 2 March 1996.*
24. Dunstan, Moomba*, p. 23.*
25. Dunstan, Moomba*, p. 22.*
26. 'Michael Gawenda, 'Our very own pop top', Sun*, 18 February 1978.*
27. Paddy Garrity, interviewed December 2004.
28. Melbourne Fringe, www.melbournefringe.com.au/corp_site.html; accessed 1 December 2004.

working people.[29] Australia's pre-eminent historian, Professor Manning Clark, was invited to launch the Festival of Labour in Reservoir Civic Centre, but in his absence Overland editor Stephen Murray-Smith launched it.[30] It was an eight-hour-day festival like that of old and included arts and crafts, industrial and safety displays, and a parade. It had a strong educational bent, which helped raise public awareness of the union movement's roots. It was coined an 'alternative Moomba', the *Sun* calling it 'a sincere but modest attempt to re-establish the traditional celebrations of the eight-hour day'.[31] The prudent response of Moomba's general manager, Alan Murphy, was to welcome increased diversity in Melbourne events.

In the mid-1980s, the unions looked again to the past. To the chagrin of many unionists, Labour Day was coming to be known as 'Moomba Day', effectively burying the historical relevance of the public holiday and popular celebrations.[32] In response, Trades Hall established the Trade Union Labour Day Celebration Committee to conceive and implement an event that would acknowledge the history of the union movement and regain its traditional day of celebration, complete with a commemorative procession of workers behind union banners. Finance and resource issues led the Trades Hall to team up with Moomba for the parade, although it established a host of other events separately. In 1985, some 16 unions marched behind colourful banners, and for the next four years the union contingent of the Moomba parade included floats.



Paul Wright, Garden Party, 2001.
Photographer: Catherine Acin.

Leading up to this event, in 1984, was a building workers' dispute at Melbourne's Arts Centre. The union was annoyed that ordinary workers would not be able to afford the luxury of using the facility. Through the efforts of George Fairfax and George Seelaf, the union secured free use of the Arts Centre annually on Labour Day. However, in the wake of the announcement, one unionist reignited the tensions of old between Labour Day claimants. His antipathy towards Moomba was clear:
We've achieved the opening of the Arts Centre for union workers to come to a function run by the unions for the unions on Labour Day in competition against the Mickey Mouse procession they have on St Kilda Road.[33]

An indignant Bob Moors, then general manager of Moomba, defended his festival from the rival Labour Day events: Moomba, he said, 'has a reputation for its high standard of community involvement which is envied by other states of Australia'.[34]

These union commemorations continued into the early 1990s, support for them diminishing by 1994. By the late 1980s, Moomba had become highly professionalised in both its planning and choreography. In the Australian bicentennial year of 1988, the theme was 'Australia's Great Achievements'. Renata Slusarski, Moomba's artist in residence, helped community groups build banners, flags and papier-mâché animal and bird suits to create a 'twirl of colour and movement down Swanston Street'.[35] The colours that year were blue, signalling the sky, yellow for the beach sands and red for the desert sands. Community artists designed and produced more than 200 papier-mâché models of Australian flora and fauna to be worn in the parade. One float depicted a stark, white ghost-gum protected by 'ghoulish apparitions'. And in a nod to the shared history of Australia, the procession included an Aboriginal float, and later in the day Aboriginal dancers performed in the park. Marching was out and choreography was in, and all participants were made to dance. In triumphant nationalism, participants had to paint their faces green and gold. It was said that the 1988 parade

29. 'Now Moomba for the workers', Herald, *11 November 1979.*
30. 'Festival more than a blast from the past: Labor look to the future', Age, *6 March 179.*
31. 'Moomba has a rival', Sun, *3 March 1979.*
32. Paddy Garrity interview.
33. Age, *18 April 1984.*
34. Bob Moors, 'Letters to the editor', Age, *21 April 1984.*
35. Greg Burchall, 'EG's guide to Moomba', Age, *4 March 1988.*

was watched by up to 350,000 people on Swanston Street and another two million on television.

But while the festival may have gained in sophistication, funding became an increasing problem through the 1980s. Gavin Anderson, the Moomba board chairman from 1986 to 1990, even said running Moomba in the 1980s was 'crisis management'. 1988 was something of a watershed when council baulked at a parade sponsorship deal worth $250,000 that was struck between the Moomba board and Alan Bond's Swan Breweries. The effects of the recession were beginning to bite and this sponsorship deal, the largest Moomba had ever been offered, was welcomed by the board in such straitened times. Swan Breweries was one of only a few corporations prepared to sponsor the festival's cash-hungry parade and its contribution was significantly greater than other offers. But some councillors challenged the brewery's sponsorship because of Bond's association, through his investments, with the Pinochet regime in Chile. Besides this, there was also the issue of a Western Australian brewery upstaging Victoria's Carlton & United Breweries in its hometown, though publicly that issue was played down.

The upshot of this quite political and public debacle between the council on the one hand and the board and Bond on the other was that alcohol producers would no longer be accepted as Moomba sponsors or donors, and that under the directive of Lord Mayor Winsome McCaughey council would help Moomba secure new sponsors. It is arguable whether the latter occurred, but there is no doubt that the withdrawal of Swan Breweries sent a signal to other large corporations that they, too, could withdraw their support for Moomba. This had profound ramifications for the festival and it changed the face and nature of the event immensely. This was nowhere more evident than in the parade, which for decades had displayed the commercial interests of Melbourne. From 1989, the parade was scaled back in size and its focus turned more fully to the community and the cultural diversity of the city. The festival that year was the first alcohol-free Moomba since the festival's inception.

Reshaping Moomba

The 1990s were difficult times for Moomba, which was in danger of being superseded by the growing number of competing events. Although the parades had improved and became more highly skilled, Moomba had to compete with an abundance of very professional entertainment activities. It is fair to say that the Kennett government's slogan of the decade, 'Victoria on the move', flagged the fact that the city was being turned into something of a spectacle year-round. The new casino, the Formula One Grand Prix, the refurbished Regent Theatre and the panoply of inner-urban developments all marked Melbourne as a global city.

Responding to the council's late 1990s' call for a new feel to the by then 'middle-aged' festival, Adelaide-based APA tendered an initiative that would reshape Moomba creatively for the forthcoming millennium. The company sought to have the festival engage more fulsomely with the arts through street theatre, performance art and cutting-edge local and international acts.

In the 2000 to 2002 festivals, Melbourne's iconic trams became the key feature of the parade. Andrew Bleby, general manager of Moomba 2001 and 2002, underscored the place of trams in the city's environment and the public's heart, by claiming that Trams on Parade gave Melburnians something meaningful with which to identify.[36] The trams were not sponsored by retailers and nor did they advertise them; they were the result of artists working with communities to celebrate the people and culture of Melbourne.

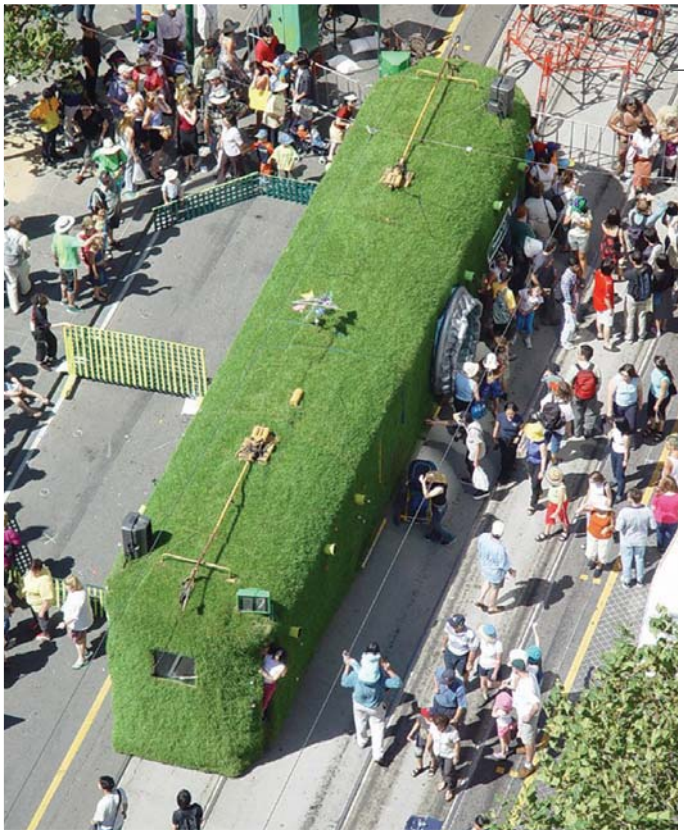
Koori Living Culture tram, Trams on Parade, 2001. Photographer: Matt Irwin.

36. *www.theage.com.au/frontpage/2001/03/13/FFX3AYUG8KC.html; accessed 16 July 2003.*

Durga tram, Trams on Parade, 2001. *Photographer: Matt Irwin.*

In 2000, Liss Gabb, parade director 2000 and 2001, presented 14 trams in the parade, along with 700 performers. The parade included a tram covered in 'grass', looking something like a football oval, and an Indian tram celebrating the city's multicultural heritage and Calcutta's similar tramway system. The low-slung, overhead tram wires were an inspiration for the use of trams in place of the traditional parade floats. They also helped keep in check the escalating costs associated with creating the massive floats of old.[37]

The trams took months of work to conceptualise and complete. The Preston depot — which had long been a construction and maintenance centre for Melbourne's trams — became a creative hub for the teams of artists and community groups that drilled, cut, painted and decorated a whole fleet of 'floats'. Dan Mitchell, festival director 2002, recalls taking the trams along Brunswick Street at 2am on Moomba eve. Amazed onlookers marvelled at the incongruous sight of an historic Bendigo tram with its stained-glass windows aglow or the beautifully decorated Polynesian- and beach-themed trams as they trundled through the streets of Fitzroy.[38]



Hallowed Turf tram, Trams on Parade, 2001.
Photographer: Matt Irwin.

37. Ian Pidd, interviewed April 2003.

38. Dan Mitchell, personal communication, December 2004.

Garden of Earthly Delights, Trams on Parade, 2001. *Photographer: Matt Irwin.*

In 2001 and 2002, many international artists were included in Trams on Parade, which moved in the opposite direction to that which the parade usually did. Originating along St Kilda Road, the trams crossed the Yarra at Princes Bridge and terminated in Swanston Street, where the city's major thoroughfare was transformed into a carnivale-style street party. Melbourne Town Hall, Flinders Street Station and the trams themselves became stages for a program of world music and dance performances. World music has been staged in Alexandra Gardens as part of the Moomba celebrations for some years, but since 2003, the line-up, which also features local artists, has been as part of Waterfest's River Rhythms program and includes pre-event community workshops.

The parade of 2001 was not without controversy. The *Herald Sun* reported that many families who watched the parade were shocked and angry to see topless adults in glistening paint.[39] This was part of a performance by the well-regarded French troupe Ilotopie, which had travelled to Melbourne especially to perform at Moomba. The public were also allegedly shocked by a partly naked couple eating grapes in a transparent plastic bubble. Never mind that Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* inspired this performance and that the performers were unquestionably non-sexual. Under the directorship of APA, professional artists engaged with communities on the streets as much as on stages, with performances free of charge. These two acts were simply part of the new vision for Moomba and the controversy something of a media beat-up.

In the end APA's arts direction proved too extreme, particularly given the intention to discontinue some of Moomba's staples — such as the Wittingslow carnival and the Birdman Rally — and to shift the focus from the river to the city streets and laneways. It soon became clear to those involved that it was impossible to balance APA's arts-based festival with the council's overarching vision and its ownership of the event. A timely administrative restructure of the City of Melbourne provided a perfect opportunity for Moomba's management to be brought back in-house once APA's contract ran its course. Re-branded Moomba Waterfest in 2003, the festival has been realigned with its traditional philosophy of being a community festival, and once again its activities centre on the Yarra River.

French artists Ilotopie, 2001. *Photographer: Matt Irwin.*

39. *Rachael Hodder & Daniel Hay, 'Moomba PG: family fury at shock parade',* Herald Sun, *13 March 2001.*

The Royal Faces of Moomba

The Moomba monarchy has been one of the most celebrated and controversial components of the festival over the years. First introduced was the Queen of Moomba in 1955, and in 1967, the first Queen of the Pacific and first King of Moomba were crowned. At times, all three royals reigned concurrently, but by 1988 this gender-specific system was supplanted by a single representative monarch. In the tradition of European popular carnivals, Moomba's monarchy was intended to mock the notion of royalty, although many Melburnians seemed to miss this burlesque gesture.

Moomba recently introduced a new role of honour — one at arm's length to its regal forebears. Beyond Blue representative Carrie Stoney gained the title of Young Ambassador in 2003 and Deaflympian basketballer Sam Quinn was awarded the title in 2004.

Queen of Moomba

The Queen of Moomba would generally lead the parade, and in the early years rode on a swan-shaped float. This ritual began with the crowning of the first queen, Beverley Stewart. In keeping with the gender politics of the day, Moomba's queen was chosen by beauty contest. The entrants were short-listed to around 30 contestants from submitted photographs, and in a second round they were short-listed to about a dozen.[40] A panel of judges then assessed the feminine virtues of each young woman:

Candidates for the title are required to be not less than seventeen or more than twenty five on 1 January. The girls are judged in street clothes and evening wear by a panel of judges representing many diverse interests. The ideal qualities required are charm, intelligence and physical appearance.[41]

Patsy Earp, Queen of Moomba, 1967. Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

40. *Dunstan,* Moomba, *p. 41.*

41. Moomba Festival Program, *1964, not paginated, Victorian Public Records Office.*

The finalists were judged on their self-confidence, poise and ability to discuss a range of subjects. This included answering a number of gruelling questions: How many sheep are there in Australia? What is the population of Australia? Who is the prime minister of Australia? And when did Moomba begin?[42]

The winner of the 1959 quest was 19-year-old Honni Freger. Crowned during the era of the White Australia policy, she was floridly described by a *Sun* reporter as: 'a tall, blonde, beautiful German migrant who loves to run barefoot along a beach at dusk'.[43] Significantly, Freger was the first 'new Australian' to become Queen of Moomba.

Many of the contestants went on to pursue careers in modelling or fashion, or else enter similar contests popular at the time. Prizes consisted of money, travel and the honour of representing Moomba at a number of community events during the year ahead. In 1962, for the first time the honour was extended to representing Australia internationally, with visits to Hong Kong, Manila, Tokyo and Singapore. Some years the prize also included a car. In 1961, 19-year-old Erica McMillan was crowned Queen of Moomba and took away a sporty Ford Cortina. But the young woman's luck ended in calamity only weeks later, when she was killed in a motor accident in her new vehicle.[44]

In 1987, Marita Jones was crowned the last Queen of Moomba.

Queen of the Pacific

The Queen of the Pacific was an equally popular beauty contest, held from 1967 to 1977. The quest had the objective of promoting goodwill across the Asia–Pacific region, the winners acting as ambassadors promoting tourism and trade between Australia and the various nations. In 1973, the contest attracted 17 international entrants, all of whom dressed in traditional costume as was tradition. The event was held at a banquet in Hotel Australia and broadcast nationally on HSV-7. It was compered by Brian Naylor and attended by the premier of Victoria, Rupert Hamer (1972–81).

The 1971 winner was 19-year-old Nelia Sancho from the Philippines. Following her Moomba interlude, Sancho was arrested in the Philippines first in 1973 and then in 1976. The by then politicised Sancho was charged with subversion for allegedly being the treasurer of the outlawed Communist Party and for illegally possessing a firearm.[45] Ten years after her second arrest (at which time she was imprisoned for 28 months), the *Age* reported that Sancho was the organiser of the 1986 International Women's Day in Manila.[46] She is now the Filipino coordinator of the Asian Women's Human Rights Council. Needless to say, there's a delightful irony in Sancho's 'career path' from beauty queen to women's rights activist.

The winner of the final Queen of the Pacific quest was Lei Maa of Hawaii. Linked as ever to television, Moomba axed the Queen of the Pacific contest in 1977 due to the lack of television ratings and thus sponsorship for the event. Besides this commercial imperative, the impact of second-wave feminism was being felt across Australia and changing social attitudes recognised the implicit sexism of beauty contests. Yet it took another decade before the Queen of Moomba contest would be scrapped in 1987.

King of Moomba

The first King of Moomba was British actor Robert Morley. This founding king travelled down Swanston Street in a shining Rolls Royce convertible in 1967. The following year another British actor was crowned. Alfred Marks was from the East End of London, and when a local reporter asked what his qualifications for the job were, he replied with all the charm of a Cockney:
When I was eleven there were rival gangs around a fruit market in the East End. And desperately, I always wanted to be a member of the bigger rival gang. One day when I was in my best Easter suit, someone from one of the other gangs said to me 'would you like to be King of the Golden Apples?' 'All right, just sit there on this box and call out Apples, Apples, give me the Golden Apples'. Which innocently I did and they cobbled me with every rotten apple in the market.[47]

In 1969, Italian baritone Tito Gobbi was crowned king. But this being the third consecutive year of a European monarch, the public was becoming disenchanted with the system. There was a stream of letters to the press calling for an Australian monarch, and threatening letters were delivered to Gobbi himself at his hotel. One warned he would be pelted with eggs if he went in the parade, at which point he 'abdicated'. Moomba management did, however, persuade Gobbi to change his mind, and the Italian claimed that the public support that he did receive convinced him that he was indeed wanted as king. He rode in the parade with world boxing champion Lionel Rose at his side (who would dare throw eggs at him now?). *'[It was] the biggest audience of my career,' Gobbi said, 'I am so happy I did not abdicate. I am proud to be king of Moomba.'*[48]

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42. Dunstan, Moomba, *p. 41.*
43. 'Moomba: Honnie will be queen', Sun, *25 February 1959.*
44. Dunstan, Moomba, *p. 43.*
45. Australian, *19 June 1978.*
46. 'A personal Filipino revolt', Age, *2 May 1986.*
47. Anthony Hill, 'He's King of Moomba', Sun, *21 February 1968.*
48. Herald, *10 March 1969.*

Daryl Somers, King of Moomba, with Dame Edna Everage and Linda Knight, Princess of Moomba, 1983.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

A 22-year-old John Farnham became King of Moomba in 1972. The *Sun* described him as a 'likable English migrant', who is 'King of Pop, King of Kids and today Johnny Farnham was King of Moomba.'[49] Farnham said his ascension to the 'throne' was a major thrill and he pledged to do all he could to be worthy of the honour.[50] But Farnham was another victim of Australian nationalism. When a reporter questioned his birthplace, he hit back: *'What do you have to do to be Australian? …I am an Australian and bloody proud of it.'*[51]

After such widespread discontent over the descent of the male royals, there could be little argument over the heritage of 1973 King of Moomba, Aboriginal pastor Doug Nicholls (custodian of the Church of Christ on Gore Street, Fitzroy), or the 1975 king, Australia's own Rolf Harris. The multi-talented Harris was so pleased that he wrote a Moomba song and painted a self-portrait, depicting himself clad in royal regalia.

The most controversial of the kings was Mickey Mouse, who was crowned in 1977. While this icon of popular culture could be admired safely from a distance, his incursions into an Australian institution of popular culture would not be tolerated. This was an affront to Melburnians, who revealed some strong anxieties with regards to the cultural imperialism Mickey represented. The papers ran hot with letters and articles attacking the mouse. During the debacle, controversial historian Keith Windshuttle was quoted as saying he 'sees the mouse plague as American imperialism on the march. From Mickey Mouse to H-Bombs is not such a long way.'[52] In the same *National Review* article, *Age* art critic Maureen Gilchrist was quoted as saying: 'Disney is revealed as the most unpleasant, sexually hung up, patronising, predatory, autocratic individual who created a utopia

49. 'King John for Moomba', Sun, *7 January 1972.*

50. 'King John for Moomba', Sun, *7 January 1972.*

51. Dunstan, Moomba, p. 32.

52. Martin Sharp, National Review, *April 1977, quoting Keith Windshuttle from the March edition.*

Mickey Mouse and Sharyn Duncan, King and Queen of Moomba, 1977. Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

that is not only unrealistic, but unnatural.'[53] Emotions were clearly running high.

Local station HSV-7 had invested substantial money in Mickey, buying the rights for and launching *The New Mickey Mouse Club* on Australian television. The US owners of Mickey Mouse had a 50-year reputation to protect, and Mickey was under strict rules to behave. Because Mickey could not talk, he was given a contentious 'court jester' to act as his mouthpiece — entertainer Ugly Dave Gray. The *Age* newspaper put it: 'The great risk of the exercise is preserving the pure, unblemished image of Disney's famous character.'[54]

Mickey's detractors began a Blinky Bill campaign, with a mock crowning ceremony of the popular Australian bush character in City Square.[55] After crowning Blinky Bill, the group sought to gatecrash the royal ascension of Mickey at the Melbourne Hilton. But the protesters were unsuccessful in their attempts at derailing proceedings.

The controversy of Mickey was compounded when the Perth *Independent* reported: 'Mickey Mouse fans throughout the world will be disappointed and shocked about the latest news about the rodent. Mickey Mouse is really a girl.'[56] Mickey had been outed as Patricia O'Carroll, a Disney employee who had worked on Disneyland's Disney on Parade show. O'Carroll was apparently given the role of the mouse because the costume did not fit a man.

During the eagerly anticipated parade, Mickey, who travelled in an open-top car with the court jester at his side, was given a police escort. However, neither police nor jester proved particularly effective as one of the two clowns frolicking just behind the car squashed a pie over Mickey's face as the entourage reached Princes Bridge. The clowns were arrested for offensive behaviour and each received a fine.[57]

The outrage over Mickey's ascension obviously mined deep into public consciousness, for it even inspired a theatre performance. Some two years after the crowning of the mouse, playwright John Romeril's musical, Mickey's Moomba, was staged in Melbourne's Pram Factory.[58]

Longtime television entertainer Bert Newton was a much safer choice for King of Moomba than Mickey was, and he was crowned the following year, in

53. Sharp, National Review*, April 1977.*

54. 'Disney slips us a Mickey', Age*, 7 January 1977.*

55. Writer Dorothy Hall created Blinky Bill in the 1930s.

56. 'A moustake', Independent*, 9 January 1977.*

57. Dunstan, Moomba*, p. 39.*

58. 'Return of the regal rodent', Herald*, 21 February 1979.*

Frank Thring, King of Moomba, 1982.
Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

1978. Appeasing the anxieties of some, no doubt, he claimed: 'I am a product of Melbourne, I love Melbourne very much. I sometimes think I'm Melburnian before I am Australian and I am generally thrilled.'[59]

Newton was not the only popular Australian television personality to make the ranks of royalty. Ian Molly Meldrum became king in 1985, but it was an honour ambivalently embraced by Meldrum, who confessed:
At first I didn't want to do it and knocked it back because I thought that it would be too much. But the response from people has been fantastic. I was at the cricket the other day and the boys in Bay 13 at the Melbourne Cricket Ground were all yelling out 'Moomba' and 'hail the king' . . . not to mention a few 'hail the queen'.[60]

Frank Thring was crowned in 1982. With a career that included many Hollywood productions, this doyenne of film and theatre looked nothing short of majestic in his regal garb and riding on a thespian-inspired float designed and constructed by Melbourne Theatre Company staff. Arguably Thring did what Mickey could not; he bridged the gap between Hollywood and Moomba, two geographically and imaginatively distinct institutions of popular culture.

Moomba Monarch

The tradition of King of Moomba and Queen of Moomba came to an end in 1987; a single ruling monarch replaced these honours the following year. A number of prominent women became monarchs, including television personality Jo Pearson, singer–performer Marina Prior, Aboriginal runner Cathy Freeman and television personality Denise Drysdale. In 1990, the Moomba monarch was not a celebrity at all, but a local Melbourne taxi driver, David Hanison.

Moomba faced one of its worst disasters in 1999. Clowns Zig and Zag had been Moomba regulars for 43 years and were to be crowned festival monarchs that year. Melburnians had grown up with the pair, who first joined the parade in 1956 in a £10 toy car. As well as featuring in Moomba, they made other regular appearances: they performed for charities such as the Royal Children's Hospital Easter Appeal; they had their own show for the first 13 years of television; and prior to that they were employed by Frank Thring senior at radio 3XY.[61] They were festival favourites to generations of children and were in every way Moomba icons. But just prior to the crowning of these festival stalwarts, it was revealed that Jack Perry, who acted as Zig, had sexually assaulted his granddaughter 20 years earlier. Perry had pleaded guilty to the charges five years earlier in Heidelberg Magistrates Court. Following discussions with the Moomba committee, general manager Cheri Le Cornu announced that Jack Perry and his partner had renounced the title of Moomba Monarchs by 'mutual agreement'.[62] There was no question, however, about their future with Moomba; the pair could not continue as the affable festival comics.

Longtime Moomba devotee Joan McGalliard recalls the innocence of a childhood punctuated by the annual festival and reflects on the impact the departure of the clowns had on her. The pain of Perry's granddaughter, she says, '*…I cannot imagine, but even my sense of loss is palpable*'.[63] From letters published by the *Age*, it was clear that others, too, were devastated by the news and mourned the loss of the familiar faces of Zig and Zag. Needless to say, simply through his proximity to Perry, Doug McKenzie, who played Zag, was a second unwitting victim of Perry's crime.

The festival continued without a monarch, and so that year Moomba became its own republic. Ironically, the demise of the monarchy occurred the same year that Australians rejected, in a national referendum, becoming an independent republic.

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59. 'Now Bert's king', Herald, *19 January 1978.*
60. 'It's up king', TV Week, *9 March 1985.*
61. Shane Moloney, 'You and me, can we ever be monarchs?', Age, *8 March 1998.*
62. Jodie Menzies, 'Abdication won't stop the carnival', Age, *7 March 1999.*
63. Joan McGalliard, www.mcgalliard.org/content/Words/1.html; accessed 4 November 2004.

The reigns

Year	Kings	Queens	Queens of the Pacific
1955		Beverley Stewart	
1956		Fay Chapman	
1957		Patricia Bramwell	
1958		Norma Jones	
1959		Honni Freger	
1960		Pat Tudor	
1961		Rhonda Parker	
1962		Gillian Munro	
1963		Anne Maree Cafarella	
1964		Ria Luyben	
1965		Pauline Verey	
1966		Erica McMillan	
1967	Robert Morley (British actor)	Patsy Earp	Betty Lim Saw Yim (Malaysia)
1968	Alfred Marks (British actor)	Judy Fenelon	Baby Santiago (Philippines)
1969	Tito Gobbi (Italian opera singer)	Janine Forbes	Hiroko Suzuki (Japan)
1970	Johnny Famechon (champion Australian boxer)	Fiona Ross	Deirdre Bruton (New Zealand)
1971	Oleg Popov (Russian clown)	Carolyn Gibbs	Nelia Sancho (Philippines)
1972	Johnny Farnham (singer) – Lou Richards as court jester	Debbi Scott	Abigail Banglos (Hawaii)
1973	Sir Douglas Nicholls (Aboriginal minister)	Janice Bridgeford	Irene Soetanto (Indonesia)
1974	Robert Helpmann (ballet dancer, choreographer)	Marianne Perrott	Doris Dodge (California)
1975	Rolf Harris (entertainer)	Aurora Laurins	Fransisca Warastoti (Indonesia)
1976	Barry Crocker (entertainer)	Julie Costa	Suzie Cross (Australia)
1977	Mickey Mouse (direct from Disney) – Ugly Dave Gray as court jester	Sharyn Duncan	Lei Maa (Hawaii)
1978	Bert Newton (television personality)	Deanna DeBona	
1979	Graham Kennedy (television personality)	Michelle Worsley	
1980	Paul Cronin (actor)	Elizabeth Egan	
1981	Lou Richards (sportsman, television compere)	Kim Formosa	
1982	Frank Thring (actor)	Sharon McKenzie	
1983	Daryl Somers (television entertainer)	Linda Knight	
1984	Kevin Bartlett (champion footballer)	Kim Kermonde	
1985	Ian Molly Meldrum (entertainer)	Anne Erikson	
1986	Peter Brock (racing car driver)	Ingrid Johansen	
1987	Paul McNamee (tennis player)	Marita Jones	

	Moomba Monarchs
1988	Jo Pearson (television personality)
1989	Con the Fruiterer (comedian)
1990	David Hanison (taxi driver)
1991	Tony Shaw (footballer)
1992	Don Dunstan (politician)
1993	The Oarsome Foursome (rowers)
1994	Andrew Gaze (basketballer)
1995	Cathy Freeman (champion Aboriginal runner)
1996	Marina Prior (actress)
1997	Lano and Woodley (comedians)
1998	Denise Drysdale (television personality)

Festivities in the Gardens

Melbourne's founders had great foresight in developing inner-city parks and gardens around the formal grid of Robert Hoddle's central Melbourne. These green spaces form a meeting ground year-round, but Alexandra Gardens, Treasury Gardens and the Sidney Myer Music Bowl in King's Domain have long been hives of activity during Moomba.

Carnival times

Unlike in Europe, where carnivals celebrate harvest and symbolically invert traditional relations of power, carnivals in Australia have rarely been more than an event at which people gather to have fun, ride showground machines and eat fairy floss. Moomba is no exception to this, and since 1959 a carnival space of rides and amusements has featured in the festival's program. Moomba's carnival has traditionally consisted of an eclectic range of activities that includes thrill rides, art shows, a craft market and displays of fireworks. Some have compared the carnival to Australia's agricultural shows, which stem from its colonial past.[64] Moomba's carnival usually centres on the Alexandra Gardens, tucked between the Yarra River and Queen Victoria Gardens, which adjoin King's Domain. These landscaped gardens were designed in the English picturesque tradition and have been a place where Melburnians have gathered for more than a century. Much of the carnival activity was recently re-sited to Birrarung Marr, nestled between the Yarra and Federation Square.

Until 2002, the Wittingslow family ran the rides at Moomba, and at times through the decades it has coordinated a broader program of outdoor theatre and dance, as well as the parade. The family has been involved in the carnival business for three generations, providing entertainment in towns up and down Australia's eastern seaboard. Founder Tom Wittingslow developed a taste for the business in the early 1930s, during the Depression. He ran carnival stalls such as Ball in the Hole, where cash prizes

Wittingslow carnival, 1963. *Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection. Photographer: Ivan Pope.*

64. See Kate Darian-Smith and Sara Wills, Agricultural Shows in Australia: A Survey, Australian Centre, *University of Melbourne, 1999.*

Wittingslow carnival, 1981. Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

were offered, and Guess Your Weight, for boxes of chocolates. Spruiking for customers, he would call:
Roll up, roll up, ladies and gentlemen,
Guess your weight within four pounds,
Ladies by observation,
Gentlemen by a little investigation.[65]

Tom Wittingslow was sent to Singapore during the Second World War, which put a halt to his carnival ambitions. He later wrote in an ex-servicemen's journal that he did not intend to continue in the carnival business after the war. But he changed his mind after witnessing the success of a friend at an RSL carnival in Geelong.[66]

The first ride he put together was a merry-go-round, which was constructed from the base of a 1940s' artillery gun, and was in use up to the 1988 Moomba. Many more rides were added over the years, occupying increasing space in the gardens. A familiar sight for many venturing along Alexandra Avenue in late summer was a long line of trucks entering the gardens. They left mounds of white canvas that later materialised into the ubiquitous Moomba thrill rides.

The Wittingslow family introduced the first thrill ride, the Cha Cha, in 1959. It was painted bright orange, red and blue, and was strikingly similar to an oddly proportioned Hills Hoist. Later rides included the infamous Mad Mouse, the Corkscrew, the Pirate Ship, the Matterhorn, the Galaxy, the Break Dancer and of course the Dodgem Cars. In an effort to prevent Melburnians becoming accustomed to the carnival's 'terror', a new thrill ride was introduced every two years or so. Tom's son, Des Wittingslow, would travel through Europe and the US looking for the latest rides. But Tom was not always convinced the latest, largest or fastest ride would please the Melbourne crowds. Grandson Michael Wittingslow recalls the time Des brought back the Turbo, claiming it was the greatest ride of its time. He remembers it was 'big news' in the metropolitan papers. As the machine slowly rose in the gardens so did the indifference of Tom. But as the Turbo's lights flicked on, the machine's explosive power surprised even the carnival patrician.[67]

Fairy floss will always have a prime place in festival-goers' memories of Alexandra Gardens, as will the chips, hot dogs and doughnuts once sold from stalls in the gardens. But following the carnival's 1981 Food & Wine Festival, food became a celebration in itself, rather than simply a sideshow. Around 40 BYO restaurants were invited to open stalls at which to sell entrée-sized meals, and some 20 wine producers were invited to sell wine by the

65. Tom Wittingslow, 'Show business, fun and gambling', http://home.vicnet.net.au/~antitank/Publications/It_Happened/Chapters/Tom_Wittingslow/wittingslow.htm; accessed 2 December 2004.

66. Wittingslow, 'Show business, fun and gambling'.

67. Michael Wittingslow, interviewed May 2003.

glass.[68] The Wittingslows introduced this mini-festival in Fitzroy Gardens to provide an opportunity to promote Melbourne's restaurants and Australia's wines. The mid to late 1990s saw a more international approach to food, an approach that celebrated the diversity and richness of culinary traditions rather than Melbourne's restaurant scene. World food stalls were set up in Alexandra Gardens, their popularity reflecting Melburnians' growing taste for international cuisines.

A carnival dynasty, the Wittingslow family has contributed significant energy, influence, resources and spirit to the Moomba carnival, and so has earned an enduring place in the festival's history. But issues of safety, risk management and rising public liability — issues that have wrought changes in the carnival scene internationally — have had an impact on the delivery of the carnival. Besides these concerns, council wrestled to achieve a balance between the Wittingslows' desire to secure the high profile of their carnival in the Moomba program and the council's obligation and desire to develop other activities that would inspire the festival-going community and reflect both its diversity and the changing times. These issues came to the fore early in the new century and protracted negotiations took place to try and resolve them. Despite this, Moomba's long and productive relationship with the Wittingslow carnival family came to an unceremonious end in 2002.

Since the Wittingslows' departure from Moomba, the carnival has a diminished profile in the festival program, although it remains a prime attraction for many festival-goers and for families in particular. Much of the carnival now takes place across the Yarra in Birrarung Marr, although some rides remain in Alexandra Gardens.

Arts in the outdoors

Alexandra Gardens are not the only gardens to have been utilised for Moomba. The Herald Outdoor Art Show was a feature of the festival from its inception until 1994, and was held in Treasury Gardens, on the corner of Spring Street and Wellington Parade. Conceived of by *Herald* editor A.K. Thomas, the Outdoor Art Show began its life as an independent event in 1953, but once Moomba was established it was incorporated into its program. To avoid art politics, Thomas decided that rather than have a selection committee comprising critics and established artists, a ballot system would be used to select artworks for display. This, it would seem, was Australian egalitarianism operating on unfamiliar soil. Perhaps predictably, many disgruntled art critics routinely lambasted the show, especially for its lack of distinction between good works and bad, which were routinely hung in close proximity.

The show was popular. In 1972, more than 2000 entries were received, from which 1000 works were selected for exhibition. The Outdoor Art Show exhibited a number of artists who later went on to achieve considerable success. For example, in 1956, the National Gallery of Victoria purchased its first John Olsen painting at the show, and in the same year Arthur Boyd exhibited his 1954 painting Mother and Child. Despite the last show being held in 1994, the popularity of the event is evident in the fact that the Moomba office still receives requests from members of the public keen to enter their artworks.

The gardens in which many Moomba events unfold remain important sites for Indigenous Victorians. Aboriginal culture has been a significant component of the festival ever since the name Moomba was suggested by Bill Onus in 1954. Onus was involved in the festival from its inception until his death in 1968, for the first four years demonstrating boomerang throwing to amazed children. An important Aboriginal activist, Onus worked tirelessly to improve the living conditions of the Aboriginal

Strange Fruit, 2001. *Photographer: Matt Irwin.*

Inflatable sculptures, 1979. *© Public Art Squad. Photographer: Robyn Beeche.*

68. 'Wine, Food Moomba', Jewish News, *20 November 1980.*

Frank Yamma and Piranpa, Garden Party, 2001. Photographer: Catherine Acin.

community and campaigned hard for the 1967 Referendum, which challenged constitutional discrimination against Aborigines and delivered them the vote.[69]

Indigenous participation has varied through the festival's history. In the early 1960s — when the Moomba board attempted to address the carping criticisms of populism — Aboriginal art featured in the festival's new emphasis on high arts. Exhibitions of Aboriginal artworks were held first at Myer Emporium and in later years at the gallery of Walton's in Flinders Street. Along with short essays on other contemporary arts, the program guides of the period provided festival-goers with an introduction to Aboriginal art. Besides the gallery exhibition, Aboriginal arts and crafts were also showcased in the open air, at stalls set up in Alexandra Gardens.

In the late 1990s, Moomba's Indigenous program was brought together under the title Wadamba Bic. Established in 1997 and running for three years under the direction of Colin McKinnon, the program took its name from the language of the local Wurundjeri people.[70] That year's festival program said the welcoming ceremony was 'conducted by local Wurundjeri elders, [as] a significant cleansing ceremony enabling traditional Aboriginal owners to endorse the usage of the site and to celebrate and begin the Festival'.[71] Wadamba Bic's mix of traditional and contemporary arts and culture included dance, music, a cultural village and children's workshops, all of which took place in Alexandra Gardens. The immense multimedia Aquascreen that was part of the River Spectacular was a further element of the festival that in 1998 celebrated Indigenous culture.

In 2000, Garden Party replaced Wadamba Bic. Located in Treasury Gardens, Garden Party was an afternoon–early evening event, with contemporary Indigenous music its highlight. Its program has included renowned musicians Archie Roach, Ruby Hunter, Troy Cassar-Daley, Yothu Yindi and 1989 Aboriginal of the Year Jimmy Little, as well as emerging performers. While music was undeniably the main attraction, this Aboriginal program also featured crafts, storytelling and bushtucker cooking classes. Waterfest continues the Indigenous program, but rather than being the self-contained program that Garden Party was, it is now integrated as a variety of events through the broader festival program.

Music has always been a part of the festival. In the early years the program included opera and Australian folk music, and during the 1970s, festival

69. Victorian Aborigines Advancement League, Victims or Victors? The Story of the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1985; and Victorian Aboriginal Education Association and the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Aboriginal Education: 1901-2001', http://vaeai.org.au/timeline/1965.html; accessed 4 November 2004.*

70. Moomba Festival Program*, 1997, State Library of Victoria.*

71. Moomba Festival Program*, 1998, State Library of Victoria.*

organisers responded to criticisms of Moomba being too strait-laced by introducing rock and other forms of live music into the program.

Swedish pop group ABBA performed at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl in 1977. Tickets were a steep $12.50 for seats and $9.50 for space on the grass. By Waterloo, the third song played, fans were said to be ecstatically clapping their hands overhead. ABBA performed three concerts to 15,000 fans, who had waited up to 38 hours to buy tickets. The group did not come to Australia just to perform at Moomba. It was out here on tour and festival organisers seized the opportunity to incorporate the popular act into the program.

In 1981, legendary Australian rock band AC/DC played at the Music Bowl. The crowd of thousands went wild, clashing with both the police and other fans. Eighty people were arrested and the future of the Music Bowl was put into jeopardy. As festival-goers returned home, 'railway officers struggled to keep drunken and drugged youths off trains so families could have a safe trip home from Moomba activities'.[72] Other popular musical events have included Neil Diamond, who played to rain-drenched fans in 1976, the Swinging Sidewalks and the Melbourne punk band I Spit on Your Gravy.

Pyrotechnic feats

Fireworks are a key feature of celebrations around Australia, and this is especially true of Moomba. Thousands of festival-goers line the banks of the Yarra to watch a blaze of coloured fire overhead. This highlight of the festival draws more spectators than any other single event of the festivities, and by March the festival is almost guaranteed a balmy evening for the pyrotechnic display. While the city centre may no longer atrophy the way it once did, the fireworks display still attracts families that would not otherwise venture into the city centre at night. Traditionally, this display has either opened or closed Moomba, and on occasion it has marked both dates. In recent years the display has taken place on the Saturday night of Moomba, which makes it accessible to a greater number of festival-goers, most notably children. Fanfare and fiction were married in 1975 when the HSV-7 police drama Homicide used segments filmed during Moomba in an episode entitled 'The Fireworks Man'. Made in Melbourne by Crawford Productions, Homicide was the first television drama to be produced by Australians (and, significantly, Hector Crawford was chairman of Moomba just seven years earlier). This episode won director Igor Auzins a Logie Award.

In 1990, Moomba's fireworks achieved notoriety for a less favourable reason. A performance had been conceived to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Tchaikovsky's death; a fireworks display was choreographed to the fourth movement of the composer's Fifth Symphony. During the event, stray fireworks hit the Hyatt Hotel, Shell Oil building and the National Tennis Centre. A whole section of seats was destroyed at the Tennis Centre. The Dangerous Goods Branch of the Department of Labour subsequently wrote a scathing report.[73]

Despite this regrettable event, Moomba's fireworks displays have become evermore sophisticated through years, and during the 1990s were regularly integrated into the River Spectacular shows. This sophistication is nowhere more evident than in the display of 2001. In a finely orchestrated 25-minute show, French pyrotechnic artists Groupe F worked with Australian composers and performers to deliver a piece commissioned for Moomba. Renowned for such performances as its millennium display at the Eiffel Tower and the Barcelona Olympics fireworks, Groupe F presented River of Light to an enthralled Melbourne audience. This was an inspirational piece of theatre that brought together light, sound and performance, all of which unfolded overhead and on the waters and banks of the Yarra.

Moomba Waterfest Fireshow, 2005. Source: City of Melbourne.

72. *'Rock fans and police battle in Moomba riots'*, Courier Mail, *2 March 1981.*

73. *Dangerous Goods Branch of the Department of Labour,* Moomba Fireworks, *Department of Labour, Melbourne, 1990.*

Moomba on the Yarra

The Yarra River has never been one of Melbourne's most treasured assets, and on occasion has been described as floating upside down. From the first days of the colony, the river was used as an industrial sewer and was ignored by Melburnians. The well-known Australian scientist and author Tim Flannery evokes a bleak image of the river during the early years of the colony:
Black Swans dotted the bay in their countless thousands, while magpie, geese and brolga bred along the banks of a limpid Yarra. Within a decade the Europeans had shot most of the waterbirds out of existence and turned the river into a slaughterhouse-lined sewer. The tallow works were surrounded by piles of bones more than ten metres high, and the edges of the waterway were strewn with guts, amidst which pigs wallowed.[74]

Flannery's devastating image of the river has not prevailed for many decades. In recent years in particular the Yarra has been subject to much stricter environmental management, although debate continues regarding its health and cleanliness. Many of the factories that once lined the river have moved away and been replaced by the stylish apartment buildings and fashionable eateries of Southbank and the Docklands. But for much of Moomba's history, the river has been a neglected urban drain, rarely appreciated outside festival days.

In March 1972, for example, several of the Moomba Masters waterskiing competitors complained to the *Sun News-Pictorial* that the Yarra was the most 'polluted place that they had ever skied'. Max Kirwan, one of the founders of the Moomba Masters and a pioneer of waterskiing in Australia, said, 'our river is probably the worst for cleanliness of any major water skiing event in the world'.[75] Yet despite this, the Yarra's natural theatre setting, parkland surrounds and proximity to downtown Melbourne make it an ideal urban arena. Waterskiers were quick to recognise this and by 1958 ski-jumping was already established at Moomba.

Moomba Masters

Max Kirwan, one of the few people who have been involved with Moomba from the start, began waterskiing in 1945. In an interview on Radio National's *The Sports Factor* in 2000, he recalled that changes in the early days of waterskiing were dramatic:
For instance, to jump (we'll put it into feet if you don't mind) about thirty feet [nine metres] through the air was considered to be something in the early days, and it went on from there to fifty [15] and sixty [18] and so on, until finally we decided we had to get to one hundred [30] here in Australia...[76]

Kirwan goes on to explain the central role that Moomba played in developing the sport in Australia by bringing two world-class American skiers to Melbourne: Jim Jackson ('Flea' Jackson) and Chuck Stearns. These skiers were making jumps of around 37.5 metres (125 feet), which Kirwan says '*lifted us into a new realm of water skiing...The two American boys really showed us how to do it, and we learnt dramatically from those lessons.*'[77]

Kirwan was commodore of the Victorian Speed Boat Club, and wanted to promote the new sport of waterskiing around the state. Getting the initial agreement from the Melbourne City Council and the CDA to include waterskiing on the Yarra apparently was not easy. When in 1954 Kirwan approached the CDA to suggest the fledgling sport be included in the new festival, the CDA would agree only if Kirwan could convince the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works to increase the speed limit on the Yarra from five knots to 48 kilometres per hour. He recalls:
Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works... met every month, 54 of them, so I had to take every one of them out in my boat and demonstrate to them the difference between the wash at slow speed and the wash at the fast speed. I had to convince them that there was actually less damage to the banks of the river at high speed than there was at low speed. This took over a year — it took 13 months — because I could only take six of them, three at a time on my boat, and we did two trips at a time. After a year they all agreed that the wash on the lower speed was greater than at the higher speed.[78]

Waterskiing on the Yarra during Moomba has become an international event, and the Moomba

74. *Tim Flannery,* Beautiful Lies: Population and Environment in Australia, Quarterly Essay 9, *Black Inc., Melbourne, 2003, p. 35.*
75. Sun News-Pictorial*, 18 March 1972.*
76. *Max Kirwan, interview with Amanda Smith, 'A plunge into water sport',* The Sports Factor, *ABC Radio National, 10 March 2000.*
77. *Kirwan,* The Sports Factor.
78. *Max Kirwan, interviewed March 2003.*

Moomba Masters Waterskiing, 2005. *Source: City of Melbourne.*

Masters, established in 1961, attracts some of the best skiers anywhere. The event is second only to the biannual world championships, which are held in various cities around the world. But Melbourne is said to put on a much better show. The world ski-jump record has been broken twice at Moomba, which also hosts the Moomba Barefoot Championships. The Australian bicentenary of 1988 featured what many observers believed to be the world's largest pyramid on water, and in recent years waterboarding has also been included.

Moomba waterskiing has been supported by television for more than 40 years and the event attracts thousands of spectators. The length of the waterskiing arena means a large number of people can comfortably watch the event from the banks of the river, just as spectators can watch the often more wacky forms of aquatic entertainment. Recent market research has confirmed that this event continues to have a loyal following, and was in fact one of the most popular events in the 2004 Moomba Waterfest.[79]

79. Sweeny Research, 'Moomba Waterfest'.

Crowds around the houseboats at the Henley Regatta, 1938. Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.

Henley Regatta

Moomba on the Yarra descends from the Henley Regatta, a river event that was founded in 1904. With the establishment of Moomba, the regatta was switched from spring to autumn to coincide with the festival. The Queen of Moomba tradition, too, shares a history with the regatta, as this was preceded by the Miss Henley contest, though for a short time the two ran concurrently. The Henley Regatta was something of a society event, and each year the banks of the river would be lined with lavish, rose-decorated houseboats and canopied canoes. City of Melbourne's Art & Heritage Collection contains photos of an elegant Art-Deco houseboat that was launched in 1938, and ScreenSound Australia — the national screen and sound archive — has copies of Cinesound Review newsreels, once shown in many Melbourne cinemas, which depict rowing regattas on a Yarra teeming with watercraft of all shapes and sizes.

River processions

Images of the Henley Regatta during the first half of the 20th century portray a solid, dignified city proud of its colonial inheritance. But following the Second World War and a loosening of the colonial yoke, Australia increasingly engaged with America. While Moomba included new US-derived leisure activities such as waterskiing, this new engagement was perhaps nowhere better symbolised than in the garish Moomba Showboat launched in 1972.

At a cost of $60,000, the Mississippi-style showboat was a floating stage for the pleasure of the crowds. On top was a brightly lit 'ice spectacular' performed by 40 dancers and singers and a seven-piece show band, with performances every night of the festival. Carlton & United Breweries paid for the boat and HSV-7 paid $20,000 for the show. The showboat would be assembled for each festival and at the close of each it would be dissembled for storage until the following year. The original Moomba Showboat remained in operation for three years, until it went missing between the 1974 and 1975 festivals. Keith Dunstan writes of a last and somewhat mysterious sighting of the showboat in early February 1974:

Cr David Jones, then chairman of Moomba Events' Committee, went to Queenscliff for the day with some friends. 'I saw this mammoth sort of boat,' he said, 'and with the floats and the high decking it looked a bit familiar. I asked a bloke standing nearby — "Oh," he told me, "that's the old Moomba Showboat."'[80]

80. *Dunstan,* Moomba, *p.52.*

Alan Murphy, the festival's general manager, went to Geelong to investigate, but despite his best efforts and those of the police, the Moomba Showboat was not seen again. The brewery donated money for a new boat, Moomba River Queen Mark II, and the tradition of the showboat continued well into the 1980s.

Throughout the history of Moomba, the Yarra has been used to a varying degree for processions and spectacles. At times these have rivalled the traditional Moomba highlight — the parade on Swanston Street. This occurred most notably in the 1990s, when the River Spectaculars became the centrepiece of Moomba. These were first introduced in 1992 by the creative team of Chris Reidy (producer), Paddy Reardon (designer and producer) and Phil Lethlean (lighting designer), whose talents brought together a range of innovative performances and technological effects. A highlight of that first year was Aboriginal performer David Gulpilil dancing by the light of fire and to the sound of the didgeridoo as his barge travelled down the Yarra. Others to perform in the pageants of those early years include the Women's Circus, Handspan and the aerialists from Circus Oz. At this time Southgate was under construction and the 'floats' were built at Southgate and Princes Wharves.

Chris Reidy recalls that 'the atmosphere and levels of interest from the public in the days leading up to the pageant were fantastic', and that the river pageants really offered the first inkling of the dramatic changes that would take place on the river's southern bank once Southgate opened.[81]

These dramatic river processions continued late into the decade: in 1998, a procession of barges carried giant puppets, while displays of coloured lights danced like mosquitoes on the water's surface; from 1996 to 1998, a towering Aquascreen erupted from the Yarra, with a narrative of film and laser images playing on its surface of cascading water; and in 1999, the opening ceremony presented hundreds of drummers beating a heart-stopping tattoo and myriad watercraft floating in formation.

Indeed, many of Moomba's creative directors have endeavoured to leave their mark on the festival, anticipating contemporary popular taste and rising to meet its challenge. Ever conscious of Moomba's 'image problem' and its need to reflect the times, the 1990 publicity brochure promised to 'lift Moomba's image out of the fifties, beyond the public perception of amusement park rides and into a sense of fun and joy and involvement nineties style'.[82] The program thus included Slim Dusty, Peter Allen and Daryl Somers, along with renditions of Tchaikovsky.

Trina Parker, a Melbourne freelance designer, says: 'Many people have experienced Moomba in their

Moomba Showboat at night, c. 1980. *Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.*

81. Chris Reidy, interviewed February 2005.

82. Howie & Taylor Publicity, 1990, Melbourne City Council Art & Heritage Collection.

River Spectacular at night, c. 1990. *Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.*

youth and carry these images of Moomba into their adult life, and often do not realise that Moomba has moved on, even if their images of it have not.'[83] This became clear to a young activist named Adam in the late 1990s, who unexpectedly confronted his perceptions of Moomba after a pre-protest reconnaissance trip to the Australian Formula One Grand Prix track in Albert Park. He had been at Albert Park with friends on a scouting expedition, in the hope of finding a way into the event to stage a protest. Cycling home, Adam crossed the Princes Bridge at the exact time the Moomba river pageant passed beneath. He remembers seeing 'a flotilla of flashy girls, and fire and tribal drumming'.[84] Adam's idea of Moomba was based on his experience of it as a youth, during the 1980s. He was surprised to see Moomba had shifted dramatically, that it could challenge his memories of it and provide something he could identify with.

Dragon boats to birdmen

The Dragon Boat Races were introduced into the festival in 1985, under the auspices of the Victorian Dragon Boat Association. From 2000 to 2003 the association staged the races as an independent event — the International Dragon Boat Festival — on the weekend following Moomba. In 2004, the event was integrated back into Moomba's program, highlighting the festival's renewed focus on the Yarra, but in 2005 it was again held on the weekend following Moomba.

In fierce dragon-headed boats, teams of 20 paddlers battle it out on the water, with a helmsman steering each craft and a drummer setting its pace through the beat of a drum. These spectacular races are deeply embedded in Chinese heritage and mythology, commemorating the life of 4th-century BC poet and patriot Qu Yuan. Today the non-profit Victorian Dragon Boat Association uses the event to foster a greater appreciation of Chinese history and culture, and to promote increased community involvement and communication.

The event is popular with festival-goers, with the crowd at times having been estimated to reach

Dragon Boat Race, 2003.
Source: Australian Dragon Boat Federation.

83. Trina Parker, interviewed June 2003.
84. Adam Grubb, interviewed June 2003.

40,000, but in 1993 it was marred by mishap. The Malaysian Airlines boat capsized soon after crossing the finishing line and two of its team members, Ravetheran Ganesan and Zamani Hairan, were drowned. Allegations were made that safety and rescue measures were inadequate, but an inquest did not find the organisers responsible for the deaths. The event's safety and rescue procedures were reviewed in the wake of the accident, and more stringent precautions were put in place.

Other aquatic highlights include the Berry Street Bathtub Dash and the Aluminium Can Regatta, the latter of which offered in 1990 a hefty prize of $10,000 for the best watercraft. Established in 1877, Berry Street Victoria is a not-for-profit community organisation that supports children and families. Berry Street Victoria has supported the bathtub event since 1993, attracting celebrity competitors into corporate-sponsored tubs and at the same time raising the organisation's profile in the community. Besides these events, in 1971, a 'waterski ballet' included six floodlit young women towed by night behind a boat, and the multi-talented clown Lloyd Wicks reading a newspaper while being towed on a 'ski-horse' constructed from a 44-gallon drum.[85]

Berry Street Bathtub Race, 2005.
Source: City of Melbourne.

Flying pig at the Birdman Rally, 2004.
Source: City of Melbourne.

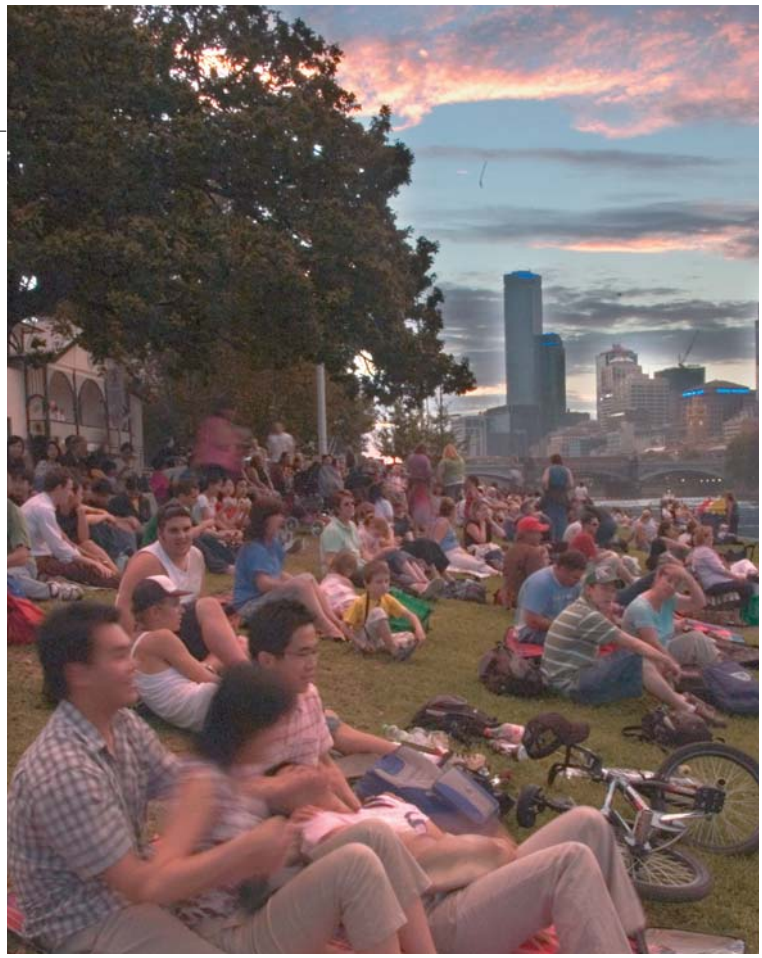
The Birdman Rally has long been a popular perennial at Moomba, bar a hiatus of four years between 1999 and 2002. Entries have ranged from 'spacecraft' to hang-gliders, from bicycle-type contraptions to entrants dressed as chickens and, oddly enough, red bricks. This idiosyncratic event owes something to the wackiness of Ken Annakin's 1965 film *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines*.

George Abel is the originator of the Birdman Rally, launching it in Selsey, Britain, as a fundraiser in the early 1970s and exporting it to Australia when he and his family migrated soon after.[86] Supported by Channel 10 — particularly through the efforts of outside broadcaster Phil Burns — it was first held at Moomba in 1976, when 40 winged aviators leapt from the Swan Street Bridge in a bid for the $10,000 cash prize that lay 50 metres from the jumping platform. In 1984, the greatest distance reached was 27 metres; in 1985, it was 41 metres; in 1989, it was 46 metres; and in 1990, it was close to 48 metres. In 1993, the 50-metre mark was crossed, and the prize-winner collected a cool $25,000. The prize is now worth $5000.

The Birdman Rally has been well supported through years, both by would-be contestants — which in some years have numbered 200 and have had to be whittled back to a more manageable 70 — and by

85. Sun News-Pictorial*, 26 February 1971.*
86. George Abel, interviewed December 2004.

Birdman Rally, 1981. *Source: City of Melbourne Art + Heritage Collection.*



Moomba Waterfest crowd, 2005.
Source: City of Melbourne.

the legions of spectators that routinely line the riverbanks waiting for a good belly laugh. Abel claims that while ABBA was a popular act of the 1977 Moomba, the Birdman Rally that year drew crowds some five times greater in number.

Ray Thompson, a longtime employee of the City of Melbourne, recalls the year he had the job of controlling the traffic to ensure onlooker safety at the Birdman Rally. He had this crucial job during the first year the Formula One Grand Prix was held, which falls on the same weekend as Moomba:
I had the job of closing the Swan Street Bridge. I got authority from the police to close the bridge. The Birdman Rally had 30,000 people — you couldn't breathe. Then a motorcycle cop comes down and says, 'Why did you close the bridge?' And I say, 'Look, I've got all these people here. What do you want me to do?' And he says, 'We have 100,000 people, all in cars, on their way down here and you have to get all these people off the bridge in five minutes.' All the people were on the bridge, comfortable watching the Birdman Rally, then chaos. I had to get them all off, and the infrastructure. It was pure chaos.[87]

While this story certainly underscores the popularity of the Birdman Rally, Thompson puts the debacle down to a lapse in communication. But the story might also have greater symbolic meaning than mere miscommunication in the information era. Perhaps Moomba no longer reigns supreme. Perhaps Moomba is no longer the absolute monarch in a shared space of public events that seems to grow with the passing years.

87. Ray Thompson, interviewed November 2002.

Reinventing Tradition

Welcoming Ceremony, 2001. Photographer: Catherine Acin.

Moomba has been called tedious, predictable, downmarket, parochial, lowbrow, cliché, artificial, too arty and disruptively painful for the council. In 1984, *Age* journalist Garrie Hutchinson said: *The urge to define Moomba is an affliction that few Melbourne scribes have been inoculated against. Is Moomba simply civic boostersim, a cynical money making exercise, or something more positive? By placing everything under one banner from Boomerang throwing, car racing, and greyhound racing, then this is the best case of trying to be all things to all people.*[88]

Moomba has never pretended to be anything other than all things to all people. It has never invoked an image of being upmarket or high cultural, even though many of its events over the last 50 years have been exactly this. The festival has had opera singers in the park, as well as ballet, theatre and countless performances by internationally renowned artists. But primarily, Moomba sets out to achieve popular entertainment in a carnival atmosphere and to be a community festival that celebrates identity, culture and place. This is its foremost achievement, and Moomba's eclecticism and inclusiveness has always been seminal to the festival experience.

Moomba is a festival for the people partly because of its connections to Labour Day. But it has enjoyed the patronage of the 'capitalists' from the very beginning, launching Moomba on the labour movement's very own day and for the good of the local economy.[89] Influential commercial and media interests have always buttressed the festival; GB Coles, Norman Myer, HSV-7 and the Herald & Weekly Times Ltd (publishers of the *Sun*) fostered the festival in its early years and 101.1 FM, Holden and Village Cinemas are among Moomba's more recent partners. Media support has been vital; a marketing report commissioned by the council in 1995 claimed that 40 per cent of people came to Moomba because they had seen it on television.[90]

88. *Garrie Hutchinson, 'Moomba Lives on in its Ambiguity,* Age, *28 February 1984.*
89. *Terry Smith, 'Moomba Pricks the Plastic Centipede',* Age, *11 March 1972.*
90. *ACB McNair,* Moomba Festival Report 1995, *ACB McNair, Melbourne, 1995, p. 11.*

Reporting on the opening night of the 1972 river pageant, Terry Smith cynically described what he saw as Moomba's excessive commercialism:
...the announcer ranted somewhat as follows...'and now the great Moomba Centipede, flown out especially for Moomba by Qantas, brought to you by Phillip Morris, lit up by spotlights from Henna Electronics, which are powered by batteries from Eveready, towed by boats from the St Kilda Marina. ...shown on Channel Seven, as it passed by the Moomba Showboat brought to you by Carlton & United Breweries; read about it in the Sun.'[91]

But Moomba is no more of a business than the many professional sporting events that are an integral part of Australia's cultural fabric. The sponsors have never made the culture of Moomba, but they have jostled to have their names associated with the events that have demonstrated most appeal: the Sun News-Pictorial Queen of Moomba, for instance, or the Australand Moomba Masters. What these sponsors do is commercially support events that may well have difficulty surviving otherwise.

Still, the history of Moomba does have its share of mass-media sound bites and superlatives, such as 'biggest', 'brightest', 'best ever seen', along with hazy estimations of crowd numbers. While crowd numbers are never accurate, there is no doubt that the public still demonstrates its support for Moomba; attendance over the four days of the 2004 festival, for example, was estimated to be 950,000.[92] What this tells us is that in a country that often despises tradition, Moomba is about as close to tradition as it gets. The festival displays a sense of Australian egalitarianism and it has a peculiar charm of its own that continues to woo festival-goers. Well-known local comedian Rod Quantock told an *Age* reporter in 1998:
There is something comfortable and predictable about Moomba. It has all the relevance of a medieval town festival. I don't think that it has the cultural significance of the Melbourne International [Arts] Festival or even the Grand Prix. But to me, it is a festival in the great tradition of festivals, a great chance to sit down and watch the daggiest people from all over Melbourne gathering at the carnival.[93]

Moomba's 50th birthday parade, 2005.
Source: City of Melbourne.

Moomba's history is its greatest asset but in some ways its greatest enemy. In an interview with the *Age* in 1996, festival director Malcolm Blaylock said: *People love [Moomba]; there is a huge base of support. But things have to be forward thinking, or they just die. Because Moomba has had such a long history, there is a body of thought that says that this is all that it is — there is resistance to change, a desire to go back to something rather than go forward. As special as they were in 1955 or 1960, some things would just look silly today.*[94]

Moomba has thus reinvented itself at regular intervals over the years, and this has helped guarantee its longevity. In its current incarnation the Moomba Festival of old is Moomba Waterfest, the program of which is more tightly focused on the Yarra, with many of its activities water based and with an emphasis on sustaining the ecology of the river. This realignment reflects a more general shift towards appreciating the river as an asset of the city — as something to be celebrated and promoted as part of Melbourne's identity in the 21st century. Like the city, and indeed like history itself, Moomba is dynamic. It is the fine balance between tradition and change, and a careful reflection on where the festival has come from and where it is going, that has ensured its survival through the decades.

Moomba carnival, 2001. *Photographer: Matt Irwin.*

91. Smith, 'Moomba Pricks the Plastic Centipede'.
92. Moomba Waterfest Taskforce, '2004 festival report', unpublished, 2004.
93. Padraic Murphy and Melissa Fyfe, 'Moomba Chooses a Face to Front the Festival', Age, *11 February 1998.*
94. Quoted in Greg Burchall, 'Moomba's Bottom Line', Age Entertainment Guide, *8 March 1996.*