

IPSWICH – COUNTRY MUSIC CAPITAL

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

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

Considering the success of these two regional cities in marketing country music, some people will be surprised to learn that Ipswich developed many of the ideas that later paid such rich dividends for others. It was before either Tamworth or Gympie became solely identified with country music, that the Queensland city of Ipswich had a thriving country music community. In terms of organization and output of live country music, Ipswich was only challenged by places in the United States of America like Nashville Tennessee where much of the recording and publishing of country music took place, Dallas/Fort Worth where live music was performed in massive bars like Gilley's Bar and Billy Bobs, or Austin Texas for its television show “Austin City Limits”.

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

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

Ricketts was passionate about Ipswich and passionate about country music. He was born into a musical family, his father played several instruments and had a beautiful baritone voice, while his sisters sang and played piano. His brother was a professional singer and guitarist. Ricketts originally trained as a motor mechanic and served some time in the Australian regular army where he honed his skills on guitar.

Ricketts started his professional career as a performer at Tommy’s nightclub in Brisbane, and went on to become a well known country music entertainer. By the time Ricketts started to realise his dream of making Ipswich the country music capital of Queensland, he and his wife Patricia were also caring for nine children (second marriage for both).

The Ricketts family had decided to settle in Queensland’s oldest provincial city, Ipswich, a city with a fascinating history, and proud working class roots. The main thrust of the Ipswich economy in the early years was agricultural, however the massive coal deposits in the area became very important during the 1880s as increased use of steam engines in boats, trains, mills and works required a reliable supply of fuelⁱⁱ. Coal mining in turn generated other industries and railway workshops, woollen mills, sawmills, foundries, brickworks, engineering and boiler making works, and factories followed.

REFERENCES.

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

ⁱⁱ ‘Brief History of Ipswich’. Ipswich Library and Information Service. 15 June 2006. Ipswich City Council. 15 July 2006 <<http://library.ipswich.qld.gov.au/lh/ipshistory.htm>>.