

‘A Singing Old Timer’ by Ian M. Johnstone

Written about Jim Howard, an Aboriginal Country and Western singer, who sang to us at Heavitree Gap Caravan Park, Alice Springs, round a camp fire on 29 August 1984, for \$2.00 per adult.

He's lean like a sapling and roughly 6 feet tall,
He has a nasal way of speaking you'd say is natural,
He knows about 100 songs—takes him days to sing them all,
But two hours round the camp fire's most congenial.

His love is entertaining round a night camp fire,
He charges very little and he's worth his hire,
He mimics good old Dusty—almost idolizes him,
Chances he'd object to that seem very very slim!

He drinks a lot of coffee, smokes only ‘roll your own’,
If he ever took up drinking he'd never do it on his own,
He'd rather like to cut a disc but doesn't really care,
His ambition's like a rain cloud—it's very seldom there.

He's been a taxi-driver in Broome in Western Australia,
Singing's not the only thing at which he hasn't been a failure,
He has yet to write himself a song ‘I've left it far too late’,
But he sings 2 bobby dazzers by his wife and by a mate.

His manner's very easy and he has a gentle way,
And a swag of practical wisdom stored away,
His dark brown eyes twinkle from a fine brown face,
And he sets a fine example to the wayward of his race.

He uses muscles round his eyes to signify a grin,
And he uses quaint expressions such as ‘in like Flynn’,
‘Bob's your uncle’, ‘She'll be jake’ and ‘How's your form?’
He does a lot of sitting watching, but you wouldn't call him Norm.

He's not a mad musician but he likes a tuneful song,
The symbols in them help to sort out right from wrong,
There's an ache of memory—sadness in a lonely billabong,
And sweetness to be savoured when you know where you belong.

You wonder how he did so much because he talks so slow,
But it's clear he was a doer—he's still quietly on the go,
His wisdom's of the simple kind and he scorns bulloney,
He has a lot of outback friends and he knew Bill Harney.

He's been in outback places most would call the Never Never,
He has no time for city smartarses who think they're pretty clever,
Although silence is his habit, he likes to have his say,
And his name's Jim Howard. Slim Dusty's protégé.

His face is brown and wrinkled and he has a big black hat,
 He's known years of hardship but he wouldn't call it that,
 He's missed some opportunities but he's not sorry,
 When the time is right and people quiet, he likes to. tell a story.

He suffered in the Depression and he'll tell you in his way,
 How he loaded wool on bullock drays and stooked up hay,
 Just where it was and who was there he couldn't rightly say,
 But he'll tell you how they caught big fish like it was yesterday.

He can cook a mean damper; in his tea he likes a leaf,
 To every sort of government-chap he has a beef,
 But he's generally accepting and takes things as they come,
 And he solves a lot of problems by simply staying 'mum'.

He's done his years of service and has earned some rest,
 He's done more than put his time in—he passed the toughest test,
 His languid limbs look lazy but his movements confident,
 If *you'd* done all that he has done *you'd* die content.

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Hands-on Songwriters

Why was Slim's music such a genuine reflection of country life with all its many facets including our attitudes, landscapes, language, memories, experiences and so on? Well, Slim Dusty performed and recorded over 1,000 songs during his long career. Apart from his own compositions and those of his wife Joy McKean, he sang songs by many other writers including a coterie of genuine bush men and women who often focused on the lyrics leaving the melody to Slim.

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