

Tourism, Culture & the Crisis of Superficiality – Mark Dunbar

(A slightly abridged version of this polemic was published in the Queensland Community Arts Network's *Network News* edition 1, 1999 on Cultural Tourism, along with a 'Letter to the Editor' – see below. Together they created a few ripples with the Woodford Folk Festival people threatening legal action...touched a nerve, me thinks)

Call me old fashioned, but I still believe tourism is nothing more than a velvet glove of colonialism, the continued exploitation of the poor by the rich. It enables the rich to parade their affluence. It despoils cultures and breeds superficiality. It places the rich minority in the position of examiner-subject, while everyone else becomes the examined-object.

Like anthropology, it provides information to titillate the taste of the rich for exotica (and erotica!). Like Christian evangelical missions it disguises its own aims amidst rhetoric of self-righteousness. Like corporate capitalism it strips people and cultures of their means, self-value and independence.

Tourism moves hand-in-glove with the affluent west's maniacal consumerism. It promotes the west's fetish with commodity acquisition as the only legitimate form of material security. It is destructive, dangerous and never benign, no matter how sensitive, generous and considerate be the individual tourist.

That's the world view. In Australia tourism, including whatever is meant by 'cultural tourism', functions according to the same principles.

In its broadest sense, culture is the expression of meaning resulting from our social organisation. As human beings we seek meaning in our existence. Our individual lives are a rich and complex matrix of interactions and relationships with others. Collective symbols, rituals and other forms of cultural expression give definition to our complex and rich lives. Forms of cultural expression hold our collective history within them. They also radiate our present and carry the seeds of our future. They embody the diversity of individual existence within a coherent and meaningful unity. They give meaning to individual lives that cannot be given a dollar value.

Yet contemporary western society seeks to package, commodify and make a buck out of its own forms of cultural expression and that of other societies. In doing so it drains them of meaning, creating sugary cornflakes (con-fakes?) where once we had nutrition. As a result, in this most affluent of worlds, there is a crisis of meaning in people's lives that mirrors our crisis of obesity and diabetes. Even the symptoms of this crisis of meaning (endless searching for truth, wholeness, spiritual fulfillment etc.) get prettily packaged up, ready for sale under the ribboned banner of the 'New Age'. Essentially the New Age sells snapshots of exotic forms of cultural expression to people searching for meaning in their commodified lives. Cultural tourism promotes these and other forms of superficiality (the quick fix) as substitutes for meaningful cultural expression. The consumerist obsession that characterises capitalist societies of the late twentieth century has changed people from being active culture-makers into passive culture-consumers. Tourism, including cultural tourism

aids this process by marketing the exotic, superficial and sexy as significant cultural experiences; and they may well be, but their first master is not social well-being it is the holy dollar.

Perhaps a specific example will help illustrate my point. The Woodford Folk Festival is a good example of what we might term 'cultural tourism' in Queensland. Its location and timing have been fixed to maximise its attraction to 'cultural tourists'. As a young festival it 'outgrew' the small, hinterland town of Maleny. Rather than limiting its capacity and continue to integrate the festival within the life of that small community, the organisers chose instead to relocate it to the hot, dusty plains of Woodford, a site far larger and more accessible to tourists. (Growth at any cost continues to be one of the most powerful signifiers of contemporary capitalism).

The scheduling of the festival at the hottest (and wettest, old hands jokingly refer to it as 'mudford') time of the year is largely to accommodate tourism. While often desperately uncomfortable, it is the holiday season throughout Australia and also our peak season for international tourism. The primary concern it seems, on face value is to maximise the festival's accessibility for tourists. The bottom line is not a festival rich in meaningful cultural expression, but bums-on-seats, and the dollars that generates.

Another noteworthy aspect of Woodford is its demographic make-up. While you may hear a Greek Lira player, or a Vietnamese exponent of the Dan Bao (more likely salsa, Afro-Latin, Reggae, but that's another story), audience representation from Australia's migrant communities is far from proportional to their presence in our population. By and large, Woodford customers comprise middle-class, Anglo Australia, the comfortably off on holiday, letting their hair down in a culturally aware, alternative way.

Once at Woodford, (or any other like festival) you can experience a vast array of 'cultural product' (to use the current industry spin). You can merrily consume (along with overpriced food & beverage exotica) bite-sized, and easily digestible morsels of all kinds of exotic culture. Without any significant knowledge of the symbols, language and meaning of these morsels, the cultural tourist can only gulp down the most superficial aspects of these treats. What ethnomusicologists have called the 'surface elements' of music. These surface elements amount to the melody, rhythm, lyric and instrumentation at best. But there are non-musical surface elements to titillate your taste buds; these include costumes (or lack thereof), skin color, hairstyle, performance presence (or antics) among other things. How music connects individuals, how it carries and transmits meaning, how it communicates, is a complex question, perhaps defying explanation through words alone. What can be said, in my opinion is that a meaningful musical experience demands far more than the passive sampling of a number of surface elements. An occasional babysitter is not a parent. Likewise, the occasional consumption of music's surface elements is a tepid imitation of a meaningful musical experience.

There are pockets of Woodford Festival where meaningful cultural experiences occur. Instead of passive consumption, informed interaction characterises these moments. The separation between audience and performer momentarily disappears as a shared cultural tradition is explored knowledgeably and lovingly.

The Irish 'session' is, I think a good example of this. The session (where any number of players gather informally to sing and play) is the repetition of a ritual of music making that almost defines Irish music and culture. It is highly participatory; anyone can join in, as long as you know the tunes! It is almost anarchic in its informality and you never know what tunes will be played. It has room for startling innovation along with the maintenance of age-old tradition. It flourishes amidst a banter of stories, jokes, songs, drink and tears. It is unpretentious in the presence of sometimes astonishing musical virtuosity, (I doubt anyone goes to a session with the conscious intention of either showing off their musical prowess or enriching Irish cultural traditions!) Collectively and individually it is a profoundly meaningful event. The session affirms a sense of Irishness while at the same time a sense of humanity for all who participate. But the ability to participate does not come cheaply. To do that you must learn the language, symbols and etiquette of the tradition. This is a lifetime's commitment, a vital part of a commitment to being Irish.

'But Irish music all sounds the same to me', is a comment I often hear from people who drift into a session and experience its surface elements. And they are right! Like all musical traditions the detail, beauty and meaning of the music lies in its nuance, its history and in the performance. You cannot begin to genuinely appreciate the meanings transmitted through the music by casually listening for a few bars. Only those steeped in the tradition (or genuinely seeking to be) can fully appreciate its depth and meaning. The Irish session is an unselfconscious ritual that we can now appreciate in Australia because of migration. It is a ritual mostly closed to cultural tourists (except for the consumption of Guinness) because to partake demands initiation, knowledge and technical facility.

Ironically, 'ritual' is a big focus at Woodford, but not the enriching ritual typified by the Irish session. All through the pre-festival media-sell and the festival itself, there is considerable hype surrounding the 'meaning and significance' of the Fire Event. This year, the ABC made a one-hour documentary wholly concerned with this hallowed burning. Yet year after year (it's only a perverse, innate masochism that keeps pulling me back) I come away from the Fire Event with a profoundly uncomfortable feeling in my guts. The Fire Event could have been designed expressly for cultural tourists. It markets superficiality and pseudo-spirituality in bucket-loads. Yet ultimately it is about as good for you as a three-day old Big Mac.

In essence The Fire Event is a parade and a fireworks display. In case you're worried about my incipient wowerism let me say there is nothing wrong with that. I love fireworks! But these age-old forms of entertainment get cloaked at Woodford with strange cloth. The Fire Event is shrouded in a veil of quasi-pagan symbolism that produces a parody of a meaningful cultural ritual.

Unlike the Irish session, The Fire Event is self-conscious, self-reverential and highly pretentious. Symbols are snatched, hocus-pocus from other, supposedly more 'exotic' cultural practices and tumbled together for the routine. Yet what actual meaning can an Indian elephant (yep, I saw that) or an Indian tabla rhythm have for people with no real knowledge of the culture from which these isolated artifacts are taken? And this is but one example of the scores of cultural references we are yearly presented with in this confused pastiche. A pastiche consciously put together to help us feel we are having a deeply spiritual experience.

Also unlike the Irish session, The Fire Event encourages participation in only the most tokenistic and superficial ways. This year, for example a choir was formed that, after several scant rehearsals, chanted several incomprehensible syllables, ad nauseum. People are encouraged to kid themselves that they are somehow mysteriously a part of a meaningful musical experience. Yet all musicians know that this kind of thing is just a parody of the levels of time and commitment needed to develop actual musical expression.

Over ten years now The Fire Event has remained essentially the same, a parade followed by the sacrificial burning of some pseud-symbolic effigy to the hoots and howls of over-inebriated patrons. Apart from the vocal acrobatics, most people experience the event passively. Unlike meaningful cultural expression that develops a language and technique that is dynamic, responsive and creative, The Fire Event is essentially a static, repetitious display that runs to a well-worn formula, year in, year out. Such formulas are typically generated in places overrun by cultural tourism. In Bali, for example each night you can hear the famous Ketchuk, or the Gamelan as the 'cultural' component of your Bali experience. But let's not pretend you're doing anything other than pleasantly aiding the digestion of your (very reasonably priced) prawns.

While the Irish session is full of the struggles and conflicts of a living culture, The Fire Event is profoundly apolitical. At the end of this year's immolation the creator dedicated it to 'world peace'. World peace isn't an issue it is a platitude that every cultural tourist can feel smugly warm and fuzzy about. It limits the risk of division, (thereby maximizing ticket sales) because it says nothing. In contrast, given the current political climate, it could have been so easy to dedicate the event to something as concrete, important and meaningful as the land rights struggle for Aboriginal Australians; but this would risk demonstrating real political commitment and alienating (the paying) white Australian customers many of whom still probably think their backyards are under siege thanks to Eddie Mabo.

The Fire Event is an excellent case study of a locally grown consumer product developed to satisfy the cultural tourism market. It is about as related to a meaningful cultural experience as the Big Pineapple is to pineapple growing. The Fire Event is designed to give the cultural tourist that warm inner glow (hence all that burning?) that does result from meaningful cultural activity without the hard work and time needed; there lies its deception and profound emptiness. Like all forms of cultural tourism it markets superficiality as meaning. It is a sad reflection of the state of our consumer-driven society that most people (at Woodford at least) seem to 'buy it'.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Artists will never be adequately paid if they are true to their art. Artists have powerful commonalities with the poor.

Rosemary Grundy, Network News edition 3, 1998

(In Cuba) musicians are paid on a par with other professions and there are three salary levels depending on skill and experience.

Sue Monk, Network News edition 3, 1998

Dear Editor,

As one community artsworkeer who happily missed the DARE conference because of work (!), I nonetheless took Dee Martin's advice and devoured the latest issue of the Network News over the festive season. I found all the articles to be at least informative and at best, thought provoking. Two in particular stirred in me a desire to respond. They were Rosemary Grundy's piece, *A New Arena*; and Sue Monk's, *Cuba Nueva Trova – Musicians Respond to Imperialism*. While reading these articles, I also attended the Woodford Folk Festival as a musician with two gigs, but basically as a punter. So what follows are some reflections arising from these activities!

Grundy's article depressed me. This was not only because of the terrible example of the sometimes-lethal cocktail of poverty traps and bureaucratic stuff-ups. It depressed and annoyed me because of the silly romantic notions it contained about artists. Artists do not, as Grundy asserts '...have powerful commonalities with the poor'. In most cases they are merely a part of that growing group of people we label as poor! This is not by choice, as I see it, but because we still live in a society that fails to recognise the work artists do as 'real work'. That is why the largest single source of income for most artists is the dole. This low status is not unlike the status of so-called 'women's work'; the countless hours of unpaid domestic work that is not a part of the economic equation as far as our society is concerned. Just as women who mainly do this work are patronisingly romanticised, (the happy housewife with her new Hoover), so too is the work of artists mystified so that we need not, as a society, recognise as professional work the creative activities of artists. It saddened me that someone working in the area of equity and social justice

could write, *'Artists will never be adequately paid if they are true to their art'*. I note that Grundy is a professional community development worker, and no doubt has received an adequate salary for her valuable work. Is she less able to 'critique the dominant ideology' because of that salary? The sad truth is that in the non-mainstream arts industry today most work is not merely inadequately paid for, it goes unpaid.

In stark contrast, Monk's article brought a warm smile to my face. Here was a clear, insightful appraisal of the position of artists in a somewhat different society to our own. In these dark times, when we are told incessantly of the laughing triumph of global capitalism, and our consequent powerlessness to alter its course, it is refreshing to read of any small alternative that not only revives hope, but gives a pulsing example of how things could be different.

Monk's article focuses on the position of artists within contemporary Cuban society. These are artists who are engaged fully in their own cultural development. To borrow Grundy's romanticised language, they are people 'who are prophets, who are dangerous, who express reality and challenge the norms. They are powerful, they are funny...they are embodied beings'. Yet according to Monk, they are also paid adequately for the work they do!

In Cuba today the work of artists is recognised as a vital part of Cuba's social development. It is treated as a profession. Artists are paid and have obligations to work. If Monk's account is to be trusted, (or is she really working for some hi-FIDEL-ity communist take over?) artists in Cuba do not live like the majority of Australian artists, on degrading welfare payments. Instead they have the security and dignity that only adequate payment can provide.

Monk's piece does raise some questions for me. For example she states, *'once accepted as a musician, however, there was security of work'*. I would have liked her to explore more fully how that process of initial acceptance as a professional musician occurs, and how Cuban society regulates (if at all) the number of working professional musicians. But these are mere details in an article that filled me with hope.

The Woodford Folk Festival is an excellent example of the impoverished position of artists in Australia today. A position buttressed by a romanticised and mystified view of artists in society. Woodford is probably the premiere folk festival in Australia. It is certainly among the largest. As such it is a mecca for non-mainstream artists and their work. It is produced by the Queensland Folk Federation (QFF), which has a long historical connection with the political left in Queensland. The evidence of this can be seen in the presence of such icons as the Eureka Bar, the Murri tent, and in the past, the Union Stage.

You might expect this festival that so vigorously espouses such noble causes as reconciliation, conservation, alternative energy and lifestyles, and the consumption of Guinness to be scrupulous in its industrial relations with its main workforce, its artists. Sadly, this is not the case. In fact, in terms of payment, the artists are not seen as workers at all. They are given token payments that reflect a token view of their work. The 'real workers' at the Woodford Folk Festival are the technicians, the sound operators, the security guards, the infrastructure suppliers, the administrators etc, etc. These people are paid adequate wages because what they do is recognised as 'work'. It would be laughable to even suggest that the sound hire companies provide their equipment and technicians for next to nothing, yet that is the proposition put year in, year out to the majority of artists.

Many people go to Woodford believing they are supporting artists. Many even put in hours of voluntary labor to do so. In fact they are predominantly supporting the festival structure and organisation, not its artists.

For the majority of artists seeking a gig at Woodford, the first step is filling in an application form. On this simple form it is stated that many more artists apply to perform at the festival than can be programmed. You are then told to nominate your fee. This is code for do not ask for too much money at the outset, or you will simply be knocked out of contention. There is little doubt that for the so-called 'draw card' acts, the festival does indeed negotiate fees. But the vast majority of people seeking to perform in competition with many others are encouraged to under sell the value of their work. This is the kind of cut-throat individual bargaining over wages that would have Peter Reith salivating swimming pools! It is a sad reflection on the poor position of artists, that despite all this, so many continue to apply.

In Australia today, artists suffer from a kind of collective low self-esteem. They are told so often that their work is not 'real work' that they now believe it! It is infinitely sadder that so-called progressive organisations like the QFF actively exploit this sorry state of affairs.

It would be relatively easy for the QFF to become a leader in the support of artists' industrial rights by simply stating on the application form that they pay minimum award rates for performances. (That is, approximately \$90 per three hour call).

In effect, it has been the exploited labor of countless artists that has made a substantial contribution to the purchase of land and the development of infrastructure at Woodford. Labor is labor. If Woodford had been built by slave labor, or sweated labor or child labor or any other form of exploited labor we would all recoil in horror! Artists continue to subject themselves to substandard industrial practices because they have been forced to swallow the 'big lie' that what they do is not 'real work'. Monk's article suggests that Woodford would be a very different festival in Cuba. It might be a little smaller, but instead of contributing to the erosion of artists' position in society, it would as a matter of fundamental importance, contribute to the material well-being, and consequently the creative dynamism of its artists.

PS. I note that the QFF has received \$100,000 grant from Arts Queensland. It is therefore in receipt of substantial public money. My understanding is that to gain a government grant you are obliged to pay award wages to your artists. Perhaps someone else could comment on this?

Editor's Notes

Arts Queensland confirms that it is policy to support award wages.

Rosemary Grundy is a Catholic nun whose main area of work is community development.