The Bangtail Hunter. Ted Egan.
15 selections, instrumental and vocal, stereo.

Fair Dinkum Daise. John Ashe.
10 selections, instrumental and vocal, stereo.

Songs with an Aussie Slant. John Ashe.
12 selections, vocal and instrumental, mono.

Reviewed by Jerry Pocius.

Historically, geographically and culturally, Australia is related in many ways to the United States and Canada. Colonized initially by British settlers, this country which is approximately the geographic size of the United States, soon witnessed a large-scale migration to its shores from western, eastern, and southern Europe. These migrants brought with them the cultural traditions of their homelands, yet, unlike that of the British Isles and North America, this tradition has never been extensively studied by folklore scholars. That Australia "should have been so utterly and completely ignored by folklore scholars of all countries, including her own," relates at least in part to her close ties with mother England, and the denial of the existence of a distinctive Australian culture.

Throughout the 19th century and into much of the 20th century, settlers from the British Isles frequently attempted to transform their new home into a "little Britain." Australian flora was considered inferior, and trees and shrubs were imported from the British countryside to civilize the Australian landscape. Education was frequently synonymous with British Universities, and even today the best students are sent to Britain for advanced studies. The model of Britain provided a contrast to a land first settled by convicts.

During the 20th century, this attitude gradually began to change. As communication and transportation developed, ties with areas other than Britain became stronger. Australian history and culture was gradually recognized as valuable, especially since the country is now striving to formulate a unique identity. Today, it is an honor to trace your ancestors back to convicts departed to Australia, and the highest status is afforded those who can claim descent from one of the convicts who arrived on the first fleet at Sydney.

This shift in attitude has greatly influenced the popular arts in Australia. Artists, writers and musicians are now frequently using themes, neglected in the past, which are considered distinctively Australian. These themes often use traditional, as well
as contemporary material. A new group of singer-songwriters is now emerging which intends to produce distinctively Australian music by blending these two streams of traditional and contemporary Australian themes. Ted Egan's The Bangtail Hunter, John Ashe's Fair Dinkum Mate! and Songs with an Aussie Slant provide examples of this new mixture.

In his album, The Bangtail Hunter, Ted Egan has concentrated on compositions which are concerned to a large extent with that magical Australian region—the outback. Australia is the most highly urbanized country in the world, and Egan's rural themes provide a welcome contrast to the suburban environment of his audience in Australia's cities. Rural characters and events are dominant in most of Egan's songs, from the opening selection, "The Bangtail Hunter," which is a description of the annual round-up at "the Alice," Alice Springs, to the final composition, "Characters of the Outback," a series of sketches of several odd outback characters that Egan has met during his travels.

Three selections deal with another dominant Australian theme—drink. In contrast to many North American narratives which describe feats of superhuman strength, Australian tales often concern superhuman consumption of large amounts of drink, a comment on both Australian values and climate. "The Drinkers of the Territory" describes the "bloody good drinkers" in the Northern Territory, while "The Parragundy Stiffener" describes a deadly brew served by an Irish pub-keeper.

The Bangtail Hunter includes several traditional Aboriginal songs such as "Murra ga Murra," "Gurindji Blues," written by Egan, deals with a controversy surrounding Aboriginal land rights, a theme not unknown in North America.

The liner notes on Fair Dinkum Mate! describe John Ashe as one of "the last of the dinkum Aussies," "dinkum" being an Australian slang word for true or genuine. The notes go on to explain that the Dinkum Aussies are found in the rural areas. In spite of the claims of the liner notes, many of Ashe's compositions deal with a life-style that is not distinctively rural or Australian, but one which characterizes many societies in the industrialized West—middle class, suburban living. His themes frequently deal with love and marriage, the raising of children, and monetary security.

Falling in love on a beach in the Queensland resort area of the Gold Coast is the theme of "Then a Boy from Coolangatta Met a Girl from Parrematta on the Beach at Coolangatta" on Songs with an Aussie Slant. The rhyming Aboriginal place names enhance the "cute" quality of the song, a quality that Ashe obviously includes in many of his compositions.
Ashe provides a "Warning to all maidens to take care and beware" in "Then she Sheila from Bilgola met the Stinker from Inaminina" on Fair Dinkum Nate. The villain seduces several girls, and Ashe provides the double-standard solution: "take care or take the pill."

"Broken Hearted Parents," on the same album, contains the complaints of parents about child-rearing in a permissive age, focusing specifically on the harmful effects of the "films and "telly."

The Australian success story is sketched in "Cutta da Cane" on Fair Dinkum Nate. An Italian migrant working as a sugar cane cutter in Northern Queensland sings of "Bella Australia." His hard work enables him to save money, and hopefully he will eventually purchase his own land. His final wish is to be buried in a "bella tomb" in his new homeland.

Ashe's albums also contain material that has been found in oral tradition, including "Nine Idles from Gundagai" on Fair Dinkum Nate; and "Holy Den" on Songs with an Aussie Slant. These have been extensively rearranged, and contain elaborate musical backings.

Very little information is given about the musicians on these three albums. A didgeridoo player is listed for one of Kyn's selections. A female chorus backs many of the songs on all three albums, giving many songs a 1960s quality. Instrumentally, the backing is unimaginative, and Ashe's albums deliberately do not contain any arrangement which might resemble the "Nashville sound."

These three albums present just one example of the current movement to delineate a culture that is distinctively Australian. As the editor of an Australian country music journal recently related to me: It is most evident to me that currently Australian music is in the throes of evolving its own particular brand of music, taking its first tentative steps from a national all-embracing level as it were. It's going to take some years yet but I do believe some sort of evolution is currently under way, borrowing or a little of the music of many nationalities which is so much a part of a country such as Australia which has grown as a result of mass immigration from other parts of the world, particularly during the past 30 years.

Musically and lyrically, these albums cannot be considered outstanding. Their content, however, clearly reflects the growing interest in
determining the distinctive elements of the Australian culture. In a nation which will soon be the most middle-class country in the world, increasing emphasis will be placed on the ethos of the outback, the swagge, the overlander, and the bushranger. Yet, in spite of Ashe's claims, the dinkum Aussies, as in many of his compositions, may ultimately be found in the suburbs of the island continent.

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