

MEGAtavel

Let's Dance Carinda 2018

By Michelle McGoldrick

Outback NSW is not quite the same place as it was in 1983. Thirty five years later, weather extremes across the planet have led NSW into the worst drought in memory. At Carinda, swirls of dust spin through the streets as a reminder that the dust devil never sleeps in the outback. The dry wind is queen out here, it dominates and permeates the landscape, eyes and lungs. But something happened at Carinda in 1983 that put the town on the map forever, something no amount of dry times and bad luck could ever take away from the community - a rock superstar called **David Bowie** came to town.

Melbourne to Carinda is over 1000 clicks on a good day. And on a good day you can see forever on the Kidman Way arterial highway that shoots up through NSW. It's a deeply spiritual landscape despite the wildlife who appear at sunrise and sunset with such unpredictable frequency they're enough to spook any seasoned driver. The road kill count of dead animals on the side of the Kidman Way is testimony to the perils of both prolonged drought and outback driving: carcasses of dead roos, wild pigs, sheep, the occasional goat and wild birds are just as common as live animals in these parts.

But Australian mythology lives on in outback NSW. Free camping areas abound along and off the highway - some in dusty little spots on the side of the road, some on the banks of

rivers, ancient creeks and billabongs. In this country hats are wide, beer is plentiful, towns are needy, petrol is expensive. But camp at your own bemused peril: staying on a river close to the site of the Deniliquin Ute Muster the traveller might experience a rum-soaked guitar novice, or fishermen spotlighting along the low river bank under an almost full moon, or hoons doing burnouts and showing off their mock shot gun displays.

Further up the track, Mount Hope should be on all road warrior's bucket list. It offers a classic outback Australia experience with a free camp ground on red dirt and nothing beats a big bright moon rising over the red landscape at Mt Hope. The one horse pub at Mt Hope is run by a pair of jokester publican brothers whose typical outback wit aligns to a Laurel and Hardy-esque repertoire including the mandatory "look out for the big brown snake hiding in girl's shower" routine. A late night walk around Mt Hope is bound to be disrupted by the sound of an approaching cattle truck which, once parked, may see a well dressed and handsome cowboy climb out of the cabin with a big grin. Amidst the din of irate cattle hooves pounding from the back of the semi, Mt Hope will seem a welcoming and surreal place as the cowboy extends a genuine invitation for all to come and stay at his cattle station 300 kilometres away.

Semi trailers are common in these parts only



they aren't typically laden with cattle - the trucks are piled high with hay reflecting the dire struggle to keep stock alive in these times of extreme drought. It takes a lot of guts and creative thinking to keep outback communities alive when everything around them is dying. But one thing Australian people have never been short on is a big idea. And an outback party has always been the voice of reason when the chips are down.

Let's Dance Carinda festival has been running for three years and our decision to go to Carinda this year was an impulsive idea - but imagination wins over logic any day surely. The festival has only exacerbated the mystery of why a tiny town like Carinda was chosen as the location for a video that portrayed one of Bowie's biggest hit songs "Let's Dance". Driving into the great mecca of Carinda after three days on the road, we had a sense of both anticipation and trepidation that perhaps Bowie experienced when he arrived at the Carinda Hotel: would the community embrace strangers? Would visitors keep pace with the drinking? Would the beer run out? Is it possible to survive on sausages in bread indefinitely?

Outback hospitality is not a myth however. Over three days at **Let's Dance Carinda 2018**, visitors were treated to non-stop small town idiosyncrasies and charm such as a horse with a Bowie lightning bolt painted on its' face, an omnipresent rooster that strutted around the streets like an unofficial mayor crowing at random in 5am mode, buggy rides for a verbal guided tour of the town's forgotten glory and recounts of Bowie's visit to the town.

The Saturday night party at **Let's Dance Carinda** was held at the camp ground and oval. It was a melting pot of cowboy and glam clothes including velvet jackets, star fabrics, western bolo ties, ziggy ear rings, glitter

makeup, a denim jacket with imported Bowie patches sewn onto it, red satin Japanese shirts, and platform shoes. A special treat was a Bowie lookalike (Gary from Sydney) who featured a succession of outfits and make up that gave him an almost spooky likeness to the Great One. The crowd at Carinda seemed happy to sing or dance to anything: Bowie Unzipped, Thin White Ukes, Just Us, karaoke ... as long as the beer was flowing the crowd were happy to keep partying. And finally when platform shoes could stand up no more, revellers dispersed to their camping spots for the proverbial nightly camp site experience consisting of firelight singing, making music, tequila shots, smoke and implausible late night yarns.

But the crowd were back in party mode on Sunday for a street parade. **The Thin White Ukes** and a handful of fans led a Bowie boogie up the main street to the Hotel Carinda. The only float in the parade, however, turned out to be a motor home driven from Victoria decorated with cardboard lightning bolts hastily put together around Bowie fliers. A dance off then ensued out the front of the hotel after the parade, whilst the Bowie motorhome was seen doing blockies around Carinda streets. The local kangaroo population watched on in shock and awe.

But it was after the parade that the party really started. In the Carinda Hotel the **Thin White Ukes** kickstarted the entertainment. **The Thin White Ukes** have risen to become the ukulele darlings of a worldwide Bowie fan base.



The band wins hearts with their clever, entertaining and sometimes melancholy renditions of both Bowie hits and lesser known gems. A hard working outfit, the **Thin White Ukes** dress to kill: Blackstar jackets, baroque platformed shoes, red boots, long blonde hair and eyes of blue, and a classic Bowie duke suit - this band puts class and glam into any Bowie party.

The bar in the Carinda Hotel was packed by Sunday lunchtime, and to open the show a motley crew of festival goers - who had participated in just one ukulele workshop the day prior - performed an interesting version of "Rebel Rebel". **The Thin White Ukes** had done their best to mentor the ensemble but it's unlikely the performance will go down in Bowie musical history!

Jeff Duff and Bowie Unzipped performed next in the Carinda Hotel bar and they satisfied the cheery crowd with renditions of Bowie hits including the tear jerker "Let's Dance" against the same wall Bowie filmed the famous video thirty five years ago. **Jeff Duff and Bowie Unzipped** are a tight, upbeat and strangely heart warming act with Duff leading the crowd through some very funky numbers like "China Girl" and "Young Americans". Duff is a showman who never stops smiling, and his playful respect for Bowie draws both laughs and sighs from fans.

As the day became night, being in the middle of nowhere threw a challenge to the most hardy party goer, a lesson in 'make your own fun' unfolded. Who knew that dancing to "Nut Bush City Limits" could be so addictive. Or that recounts of the Bowie dog trials held earlier in the day could be so gripping. Or the pleasure in taking a sunset stroll around town with new friends, accompanied by scores of excited roos. Then as night descended a new mix of locals arrived at the hotel to watch the NRL grand final on the big screen. It was an intriguing but completely compatible mix of outback charm and glam rock which fused to make **Let's Dance Carinda 2018** an essential Bowie pilgrimage.

Driving out of Carinda the next day, echoes of the welcome to country by aboriginal **Thikkabilla Vibrations** the day before was pervasive: the sight of a roadkill eagle on the

side of the road made our party stop and bury the once majestic bird in the scrub with dignity. Highly significant in aboriginal mythology, Bunjii [the eagle] is known as a creator deity, and it brought to mind how we'd eagerly danced and joined in with the aboriginal smoking ceremony at Carinda. The eagle's spirit had been set free, just as we felt our spirits had been set free at the Bowie festival - the circle of gratitude and reimagining was now complete.

One hundred k's out of Carinda, glimpses were seen in the rear vision mirror of the red cardboard lightning bolts, stuck on the Victorian motor home for the festival street parade, flying off the vehicle and into the outback to settle into the dirt and scrub. We wondered what they would look like from the sky: the occupants of a light plane would look down at the ground below and see the red lightning bolts in the red dirt wonder what they were and how they got there. Little would they know that Bowie in the outback lives on in unexpected and mysterious ways. Bowie's legacy is of an artist who was generous and giving with his vision, and despite the fact that he has left the planet- his footprint on Carinda and surrounding areas is immortalised forever. In more ways than one.

Finally, the stars looked very different at Carinda. Urban dwellers are used to seeing stars: in cities you can see the odd star in the evening sky, in country areas the sky is decorated with stars. But in the outback the stars are packed across a 360 degree panorama that starts at ground level and free falls across the horizon. Looking into the night at Carinda, the visual and physical sensation was of being enveloped in an invisible glass ball of diamonds beyond which there is only unimaginable darkness. It was not hard to imagine Bowie taking a quiet moment at Carinda, looking upwards into the same luminous night sky, and perhaps pondering the lyrics he penned long before he came to Australia "Oh man, wonder if he'll ever know ... he's in the best selling show ..." under a southern sky in an ancient land, down under.

In the end, going to **Let's Dance Carinda** in pursuit of the ultimate Bowie experience was bigger than Bowie. But then, it always is.



Party time!

Motor Home with Ziggy lightning bolts

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Photos by Michelle McGoldrick except * photo by Rainy King Photography and ** photo by Allison Aldred



Carinda street parade



Carinda Hotel publicans



The crowd inside the Carinda Hotel





Thin White Ukes



Betty and Gary



Jeff Duff

