Going for a Song: The Cultural Politics of "Waltzing Matilda"

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Authors
Seal, Graham

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Abstract
An examination of the copyright history of Australia’s unofficial national anthem, ‘Waltzing Matilda’, provides an insight into the political, economic and cultural relations between Britain, the United States of America and Australia. In particular, the extent to which Australia’s cultural industries are a surrogate or proxy for the larger interests of global powers is demonstrated. It is argued that this surrogacy has, and continues to have, a potentially constricting effect on the circulation of matters of cultural concern through the Australian national community.

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Waltzing Matilda is an important song for the people of Australia. So much so, in fact, that it is not at all uncommon to hear it referred to as the 'unofficial anthem' of the country - and, one that many may actually prefer to Australia's actual anthem, Advance Australia Fair. It is, perhaps, the most recognizable representation of a particular point in Australian history - that point when the country was still largely 'untamed', when bush-rangers were as infamous as the outlaws of the American wild west, and when drifters could make a living moving from place to place.

To go waltzing Matilda(3), waltzing Matilda
You'll go waltzing Matilda with me. I'm an innocent victim of a blinded alley(4) And I'm tired of all these soldiers here 
No one speaks English, and everything's broken
And my Stacys(5) are soaking wet
To go waltzing Matilda, waltzing Matilda
You'll go waltzing Matilda with me.

Tom Traubert's Blues is evidently based on the Australian hymn Waltzing Matilda (written by A.B. "Banjo" Paterson). So it's tempting to assume both songs deal with the same subject-matter. For a long time the story has been told, that Tom Waits wrote the song for the violinist Mathilde Bondo, one half of the duo Lasse & Mathilde. And that's the truth, Mathilde assures us: 'He was in Copenhagen in 1976 to perform in a tv-show, in which I played the violin. Waltzing Matilda should be Australia's national Anthem. Up until 1984 'God Save the (bloody) Queen' was Australia's Jingo Jingle. 'God stuff' the whole bunch of silver spooners as far as I'm concerned. It's a song so bitter sweet, one that conjures pride and shame, loss and victory, a yearning for what might have been. Then there is the question of performance, of artistry. I know of Eric Bogle, John Williamson and the Pogues performing The Band Played Waltzing Matilda and of the three I by far enjoy the Pogues version the most. Bogle and Williamson sing it beautifully and express the emotive basis of the song well enough.