



# When I Think Back...

by Neville Williams

## **Old-time Music Machines: a surprising collection, in a spectacular situation**

In a recent visit to the Southern Highlands of NSW, I stumbled upon what may well be the largest private collection of vintage music machines in Australia. What's more, poised on a rocky outcrop only a couple of hours up the Hume Highway/Expressway from Sydney, it offers one of the most scenic vistas in the state...

It all came about because, as a family, we needed a break from household routines. Not a prolonged fishing-touring-athletic holiday; just a few days in a comfortable room in a hotel/motel, with someone else to do the chores and worry about the meals. If it was cold or wet, we could linger in or on the bed. Warm sunshine, on the other hand, might lure us out into the surrounding countryside.

What better locale to consider than the Southern Highlands of NSW which, given the springtime rains, could be expected to offer colourful display gardens, broad green pastures and lush bushland...

From NRMA literature, we selected the Ivy Tudor motel in Bowral — which, with its own setting and associ-

ated Tudor styled restaurant, proved to be an acceptable and economical 'home away from home'.

On the way through Mittagong, we had picked up a random handful of brochures from the Visitors Information Centre in Winifred West Park, just off the Hume Highway. They offered plenty to interest the women folk, in the way of craft shops and displays; but not so much for 'Pa' beyond the Bradman Museum, an old book 'antiquariat' — and, out Robertson way, an exhibition of Old Time Music Machines.

As things worked out, I only got to visit the last named because we happened to find ourselves at Robertson, with the Music Machines only about 6km further on along the

Illawarra Highway leading to the Macquarie Pass.

On arrival, a modest notice invited visitors to pay \$4 each to inspect the display and enjoy the view (refreshments extra). 'Please sound your horn', it said — presumably to alert the occupants of another visitor!

As far as I knew 'the view' was as from the parking area itself — of rolling hills, essentially no different from what we had enjoyed en route. Nevertheless, we did as bidden and sounded the horn.

Almost at once a lady who introduced herself as Dawn Neels appeared and apologised that her husband, Kevin, "was down working on a new boardwalk". He would show us around the museum in a few minutes



**The patio and tearoom at the Old Time Music Machine Display at Robertson, just outside Sydney, NSW. Beyond it is the vista to the north-east. Pictured opposite is the view eastward out over the ocean. Note the free-range animals in the immediate foreground.**

— but in the interim, we might like to have a look at the view.

## Coastal vista

In the meantime, it was evident that creatures great or small were also signalling our arrival, as evidenced by a chorus of 'hellos', 'hellow cocky' and invitations to 'scratch cocky's comb'! A small deviation revealed several large cockatoos in an aviary — plus a caution from Dawn not to accept their invitations, because they were liable to grab probing fingers in their formidable beaks.

As far as the Neels were concerned, they were presumably a preferred alternative to barking watchdogs!

We were thereafter conducted down a sidewalk into what was essentially a large glassed-in verandah, facing east and set up with tables and chairs as a sunny tea room. And from there, through the windows, was 'the view' — certainly nothing like that from the parking area by the roadside.

The house and verandah, we realised, were perched on a rocky outcrop of the mountain range which overlooks the flatland fringing the eastern seaboard of NSW. Immediately beyond the house, the property sloped down to grass-covered hillocks which had been cleared of rocks and scrub and replanted to pasture deer — plus as many native animals as fancied the environment.

In the middle distance other similar mountain spurs punctuated the coastal plains to the north and south. Out beyond them, forming the horizon, was the ocean. And that distant



*An 'impossible dream' that became a reality. Kevin Neels, now in his mid sixties, photographed in the forecourt and shrubbery that occupies the Neels' family site atop a mountain outcrop at Robertson, NSW.*

smudge of blue, due east of where we were standing? That was Lake Illawarra, a popular holiday resort — as viewed from 20 or more kilometres away!

By this time Kevin had arrived and pointed out that, on a clear day, with binoculars, one could make out Centrepoint Tower in Central Sydney, visible over the outcrop on the far left.

Dawn had already drawn our attention to Lake Illawarra. South of that were the plains behind Nowra and, to the extreme right, we would be looking out over the Bateman's Bay area. As I indicated, quite an extensive vista!

## Picturesque rail link

About 100m down from the house and partially hidden by shrubbery was the railway line. Railway — what railway? Ah yes, the once controversial freight line that links Port Kembla to Moss Vale, from where it has convenient standard gauge access throughput NSW and to Brisbane, Melbourne, Adelaide and across to Perth.

Kevin said that the link carried from one to three trains per day, mostly comprising two powerful diesel/electric locos and 40 or more modern double-bogey freight waggons. They carried coal, wheat and other bulk loads



to and from ships berthed in Port Kembla. He had been told that such a train, carrying a full load down the mountain to Port Kembla, could wear out a set of brake shoes in one trip. On arrival, new shoes had to be fitted.

The link was also available to vintage passenger trains travelling from Sydney Central to Moss Vale via the main southern line, then across to Port Kembla, and back to Sydney via the south coast line. At best, the train would be hauled all the way by the historic, green, streamlined 3801; but if this was in demand elsewhere, a vintage old black steam loco might be used instead. In mid summer, when a stray live coal could start a bushfire, the operators might substitute a suitably elderly diesel loco.

At this juncture, it seemed appropriate to turn our attention to what we had really come for and inspect the old time music machines, housed in a separate and quite large rectangular building. Here we were in for another surprise.

Instead of a rather sparse display, old time sound machines were stacked closely on shelves against all four walls, with labels, literature, records and sheet music. Down the centre of the building there were two — or was it three? — further rows of shelves, again crammed with music machines and memorabilia — plus oddments of other memorabilia which Kevin and Dawn hadn't had the heart to discard. More about those later.

### Tinkle, tinkle...

Appropriately, for a display of music machines, we were shown two or three music boxes that pre-dated phonographs. At a formal dinner, they would provide a gentle tinkling background for the hush that preceded the first course.

The most common type had a central rotating cylinder, spring driven, with an ordered array of pins protruding from its surface. As the cylinder rotated, the pins would pluck springy reeds not unlike those in an harmonium, each sounding a particular musical note.

By such means, a music box could play a familiar tune, or even a number of tunes by interchanging cylinders.

Ironically, one of the music boxes on display was surmounted with a tiny make-belief turntable and soundhead,



*Before the phonograph — a novelty music box. A spring driven mechanism rotates the 'sails' while also driving the spiked roller which plays a tune by plucking 'reeds'.*

which would have suggested to a casual onlooker that they were listening to a tiny gramophone.

A more decorative example was built into a model windmill. The same spring which drove the cylinder also



*An 'Edison Standard Phonograph'. In 'mint' condition, it is loaded with a blue celluloid cylinder (carton in foreground). On the wall behind is sheet music and brochures from the period.*

drove the sails, combining a peaceful continental image with a gentle sound. What an idea for a modern cassette lookalike!

### Edison phonographs

From music boxes, our attention turned to Edison type cylinder phonographs, with the normal expectation of seeing two or three now-rare examples, plus a half-dozen or so cylinders. But Kevin Neels had far more than that to offer. When I thought to keep count or tabulate them in some way, it was already too late to start; but there must have been a dozen or more, in groups scattered around the display.

I did note that the oldest one was an original Edison player dating back to about 1905. It was still functional, ready loaded with a cylinder dated 1899!

The smallest example was in a group of 'portable' machines, cylinder and disc, with 'portable' signifying — in this case — small enough to move easily from room to room.

At the other extreme was a handsome 'Edison Standard Phonograph' in a polished wood table-top cabinet, plated mechanism and handsomely finished horn. By way of further embellishment, it had been loaded with a cylinder that had been either coated with or made from a blue celluloid-like material.

As we walked up and down the aisles, Kevin chatted on about brand names and models, occasionally turning one on to illustrate what he was saying. Clearly most of the machines worked, most were fitted with records, and he knew instinctively which lever or handle to push or twist.

On the wall, at the far end of the room, were several glassed-in shelves, each containing 100-odd cylinders in their original cylindrical cardboard cartons.

Most appeared to carry the Edison brand. Fairly obviously they had been collected and treasured by an enthusiast, the best part of a century ago and had escaped the fate that has long since befallen most other such collections.

Elsewhere, Kevin demonstrated a rare example of an Edison 'Diamond Disc' player, based on Edison's own version of a disc system, using vertical (depth) modulation and played with a diamond stylus. For its day, it offered

outstanding performance but suffered the penalty of differing from what had become the standard format.

To round off Edison's contribution to music machines, Kevin pointed to what looked rather like a cylinder phonograph but adding: "It's not really all that old; it's a Dictaphone". Suddenly, history seemed to have become less remote.

My mind flicked back to the early days of this magazine — then *Radio & Hobbies*. About the time I moved into the editorial chair, L.B ('Lance') Graham was setting up the Australian Radio College (ARC) and its associated companies based in Broadway, Sydney.

Knowing that their success would depend on customised tuitional documents and on prompt personal replies to correspondents, the ARC office was planned around the use of dictaphones — essentially Edison style recording and playback machines, with electric motors and 'Pause' and 'Repeat' buttons. Lecturers would talk into them and typists could transcribe their words into printed form.

## Technology re-applied

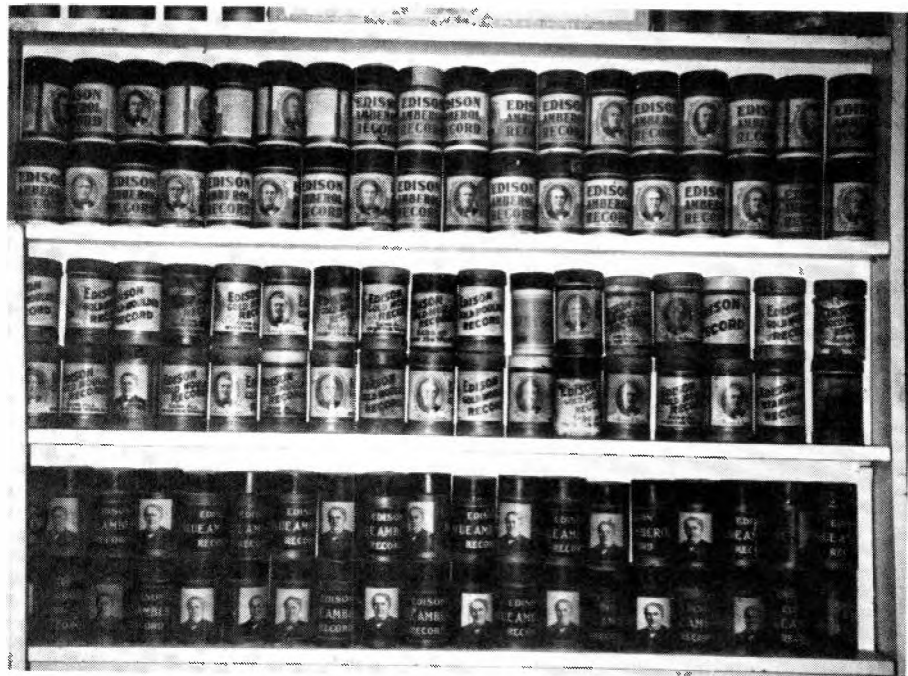
Dictaphones used special cylinders with a generous wax-like coating, soft enough to be impressed with a groove modulated by the sound of a normal voice through a speaking tube. Yet they were durable enough to reproduce the voice through a stethoscope tube, a sufficient number of times to allow a typist to type and double-check the content.

After completion, the cylinder could be run through a machine which would 'shave' and smooth the surface ready for re-use.

A former confrere Philip Watson, who worked in the ARC office at the time, told me that the machines were very reliable, economical and convenient to use, and remained in service long after equivalent Edison players had been superseded in the entertainment market.

So if you were once a student of the Australian Radio College, the chances are that some of the notes and reports that landed on your table started out as wiggles in wax — dictated and recorded mechanically by courtesy of Mr Edison...

If Edison's phonographs rendered the music box obsolete, traditional disc-based gramophones played an even greater role in bringing about a complete social revolution. That at



*One of several racks containing Edison cylinders. They were probably part of a music lover's prized collection from around the turn of the century.*

least is the message that comes through in a visit to the Old Time Music Machine display.

The original phonograph, I gather, was conceived by Edison as a communication device to complement the telegraph and telephone. It certainly looked like a 'machine', and Edison is said to have had reservations about its promotion as a medium for entertainment.

By contrast, the disc system lent itself to economical mass production of entertainment recordings, to double-sided pressings, simple packaging, storage and handling. Marketing and the patent situation were more flexible and disc gramophones brought a wide variety of over-the-counter entertainment into otherwise silent homes around the developed world.

## Memories triggered

Families would save up for a gramophone and gradually build a collection of favourite discs. They would play them when they felt so inclined, invite friends over for a musical evening, and share impromptu dance routines down the hallway.

As a lad, I recall that my grandfather owned the garage at Bargo on the southern highlands, and repaired or replaced broken gramophone springs as a useful sideline. Householders were routinely warned never to fiddle with the things, in case the spring 'let go'!

For a time my parents also ran a small music agency dealing in players, records, needles and sheet music featuring popular titles.

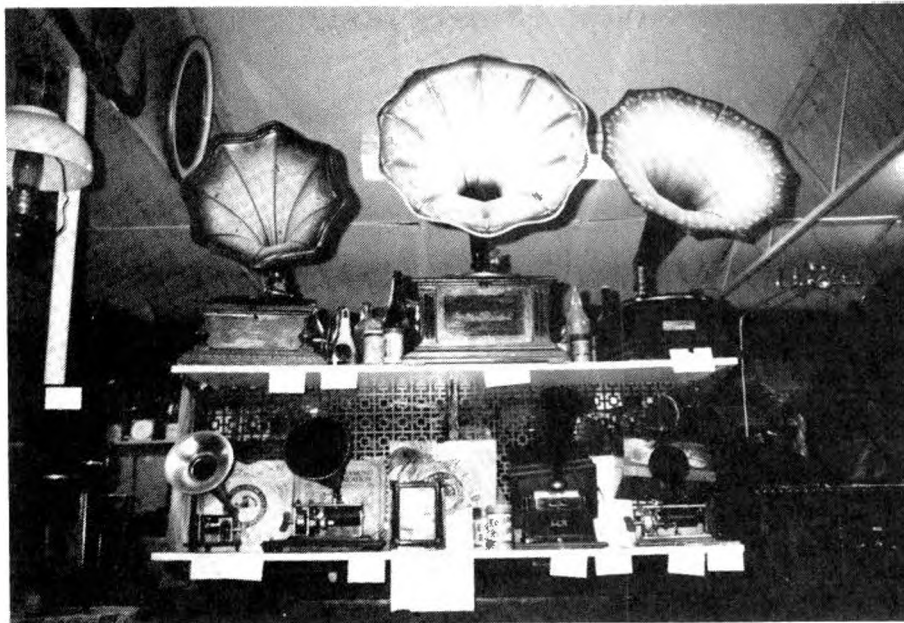
As reflected on the Neels' display, the majority of family gramophones were modest spring-driven table models, fitted with external 8" to 10" (20 to 26cm) diameter horns.

You were supposed to change the needle before playing each new side; in practice, each new record was nearer the mark!

On the shelves, the jumble of players, horns and handles, the casual scattering of Regal-Zonophone '78s (traditionally 2/6d each) and the background of old promotional leaflets shuffled the calendar back 60 years or more...

Gramophone horns in the 20s and 30s often tended to be rather vulnerable, but one I noticed in the Neels' collection was deliberately collapsible. In my school days, I had a collapsible drinking mug involving three or four tapered aluminum rings. Extended, they sealed one against the other to form a mug about the size of a teacup. Collapsed, they would fit into my shirt pocket.

The same principle was used to provide an acoustic horn for the portable disc player mentioned earlier. Expanded, six or more tapered aluminum rings became a make-do horn to 'amplify' the sound; collapsed, they folded down out of the way.



*Surmounting a rack of vintage oddments are three table-top players with eye catching horns sprayed (l to r) green, blue and pink. Large, smoothly tapered horns 'couple' the vibrations of the diaphragm more efficiently into the air in the listening room.*

### Colourful sound

By contrast, three table models were on display with full-size horns that had been professionally sprayed to attract attention and emphasise their conical shape. One was finished in an olive green shade, one in mid blue and the third a delicate pink. Kevin said that vendors could arrange for horns to be sprayed before delivery, for a few extra 'quid'!

As distinct from metal horns some gramophones had built-in 'horns', which usually meant that the tone arm fed the sound down through the motor board and out through a fret in the front of the cabinet. It was a tidy arrangement, but there was scope for argument as to whether the sound was as clear and as loud as through a proper horn!

One player that did catch my attention was said by Kevin to have been especially popular for demonstrating records in a showroom. A cross between a table and a floor model, it had a wooden cube-like body, with the bottom corners extended to form 'legs'.

The turntable and tone arm sat on the top of the cube — just — protected by a lift-up lid carrying the name (I think) 'Homophone'.

There was a fret of sorts on the front, but whether the sound emitted from

this or from underneath, or both, I am not sure.

Kevin assured me that there was nothing special about the particular disc but for whatever reason, the 'whatever-it-was' seemed acoustically more efficient — and louder — than usual!

Kevin observed that the museum did not contain many examples of floor

model console gramophones. They had been relatively expensive, and people had tended to adapt the often handsome cabinets for other purposes rather than discard them. They took up floor space in a museum, which was a further consideration.

### 'Yer gotta larf!'

Incidentally, one of the gramophones was fitted with a novelty which I had read about but, I doubt, actually seen before — a novelty dancing man. One end of a sprung platform was anchored to the motor board; the other end could be clipped over the turntable spindle. As the turntable rotated, the platform was jiggled up and down.

Supported on the platform was/is a clown-like figure with loose, dangling arms and legs which vibrate, such that the clown appears to be performing a tap dance.

Kevin said that it's always good for a laugh in the museum, particularly if he chose a record where the music happened to be 'in sync' with the antics of the dancer...

As a variation from the above, he has another player fitted with two clowns on the platform, dressed as pugilists. Sometimes they merely appear to threaten one another; at other times they clash in a frenzy of arms and legs. Again, it's good for a laugh.



*Sundry radio receivers from the 20s and 30s, which have been donated to the museum. Kevin professes to know nothing about radio, as much as anything because it did not feature in his family life as a 'bush kid'.*

Rounding off the display are a couple of old-time juke boxes, intended for use in clubs and amusement parlours and accommodating a dozen or so hits on standard 10-inch 78s. Both are still in working order, one being of historic interest in that it came from Sydney's original Luna Park, prior to the fire.

Other items on display include several radio receivers from the 20s and 30s. Kevin professes no special interest or expertise in old radio sets, the ones on show having been passed on to him by well-wishers.

The same applies to an early domestic 'Singer' sewing machine and various old-time tradesmen's tools which have found their way onto the shelves. They serve a purpose if a visitor is heard to exclaim: "I used one exactly like that!"

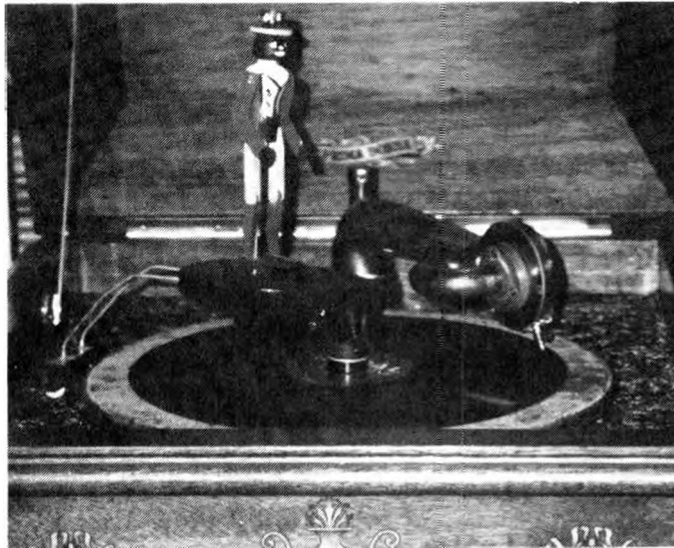
### How it came about

It was at about that stage in our tour of inspection that Dawn Neels suggested that we might like to head for a cup of tea on the verandah. She explained that they could cope with light refreshments and barbecues, but were not licenced to function as a restaurant. More to the point, as far as I was concerned, was that a tea break would give me the opportunity to ask Kevin a few biographical questions for this article.

Both his grandfather and father, it appears, had been 'homesteaders', his grandfather having taken up a small property and built a slab house at a place called Koorawatha in the Lachlan Valley, NSW. He himself had been born in the formality of Goulburn Hospital but the rest of his boyhood, other than those first few days, had been spent in the pioneer style family home.

Merely earning a living took up so much of his father's time that Kevin, as the eldest of five children, had to chop the wood and do much of the 'man's work' around the home. The favourite meal in the Neels' household was rabbit, with Kevin once again being the chief provider. Quote: "I was a typical bush kid!"

Around 1941, the family moved to



*Affected by the rotating spindle, a sprung platform vibrates and causes this diminutive clown to perform a tap dance.*

the Southern Highlands area, then on to Kiama on the coast and later to Windang near Lake Illawarra.

Meanwhile, his father was working in the steelworks at Port Kembla, at a job which was said to have demanded 'Superman' qualities. In the so called 'hot mill' the men had to guide red hot steel bars, with tongs, to and through

rollers until they conformed to the required dimensions. This was on the basis of 20 minutes on, and 40 minutes off! It was work that Kevin himself could not cope with.

### An 'impossible' dream

Details aside, the changes in lifestyle explain how, complete with ferrets, he came to be snaring rabbits on the road leading from the Highlands to the Macquarie Pass — thence down the mountainside to the coast. This was in an old Chev car.

On a day that lingers in his memory, the ferrets stayed down the rabbit warren and, unwilling to 'dig them out', Kevin sat on a rock and waited for them to show. It was then that he noticed the magnificent view, and formed a seemingly impossible resolution: "If ever I get around to building my own house, it will be on this very rock!"

Years later, a 'For Sale' notice

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appeared on the land and inquiries turned up a seemingly impossible proposition (for Kevin), based on 'quick sale' by the end of the week. But 'somehow' he managed to raise a loan and commit himself to paying it off...

When the time came to build a house, it was painfully clear that Kevin would have to organise most of the work himself. An architect friend helped sort out the formalities, and a couple of 'brickie' mates laid the foundations and showed him how to proceed. The project grew 'a bit like Topsy', with bits added and ideas incorporated as they could, when they could and in spite of the sometimes high winds over the crest.

"And where was Dawn all this time", I asked, "facing the debt and giving expression to your dream?"

Said Kevin: "She backed me all the way. Sure, I had to work hard but every time I looked up, she'd be right there behind me doing her share!"

To Dawn, my question: "How did you feel about Kevin's obsession with old gramophones and old records?"

Dawn: "I shared his interest. I loved the old music. My one reservation: I didn't want the stuff in the house — stacked in cupboards and under beds!"

### A '£2' gramophone

That led naturally to a key question, addressed to Kevin: "Tell me, how did a bush boy like Kevin become involved in gramophones in the first place?"

Kevin: "I first heard a gramophone at a neighbour's place, as a kid. I told Mum about it and pestered her to get one ourselves."

"Mum managed to get one for two pounds. She bought it for me and I got it going. We used to listen to it at night before bed!"

"You mean to say that this whole set-up originated from a two-quid gramophone and a few scratchy records?"

"That's about the strength of it!"

At this juncture the conversation was interrupted by one of the womenfolk pointing out what seemed to be a couple of baby deer on the grassy slope below the window — aren't they sweet! Luvverly!

Kevin explained that they would have been born about a fortnight ago and that "the oldies usually hide them for a couple of weeks after birth".

"There's quite a menagerie down there attracted by the food I leave around the place: an old-man peacock, kangaroos, pheasants, guinea fowls, quail, geese, turkeys, ordinary chooks and New Zealand rabbits — they're a distinct strain, a bit bigger than the Australian bush bunny. Years ago, I'd have shot them but, these days, I prefer to sit here and drink my tea and watch them hopping around!"

As if on cue, a mountain lowry or king parrot chose that moment to land in the shrubbery outside the window — a magnificent bird, somewhat sleeker than a crested galah but with a magnificent golden-yellow head and

neck merging into a multi-coloured body and wings.

### Re-living the past

One question remained as I pondered all this: "Tell me Kevin: I can understand a bus load of senior citizens enjoying the outing, the refreshments and the view, but what do the womenfolk make of the gadgetry in the museum?"

Said Kevin: "We've been entertaining bus loads of senior citizens at a professional level for the past couple of years, mainly church groups and PROBIS Clubs. I often welcome them into the Museum by turning on one of the old gramophones loaded with an old time favourite record."

"Next thing I'll see two or three couples dancing down the aisles, spontaneously re-living the past. Again, they sometimes wheel in aged folk who probably don't know where they are. At the sound of the music, you see their heads come up and they'll start nodding to the tempo. I know then that the sound has penetrated the mist of lost years."

'Bush Boy', 'Bush Girl'? I liked Kevin and Dawn Neels, and commend their attitude and enthusiasm.

The one thing I didn't share was their enthusiasm for an impressive old Juke box in their lounge room, rescued from the Pub/Club at Sussex Inlet on the NSW South Coast. Old Time Music Machines are fascinating to revisit, but how fulfilling the sound may be is another matter!

**FOOTNOTE:** 'Old Time Music Machines' is situated at Lot 1, Illawarra Highway, Robertson NSW 2577; phone (048) 851 562. ♦