

Waltzing Matilda, courtesy of a tea-leaf near you.
By John Safran.
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In the lucrative world of product placement, writes John Safran, Australia signed up long before 007.

The new James Bond flick *Die Another Day* has copped a bit of flak for having more product placements than Andrew Daddo's *World's Greatest Commercials*, with Aston Martin, British Airways, Vodafone, Finlandia, 7-Up and more than a dozen other companies financial partners in the film.

But the practice of product placement is hardly new or confined to motion pictures. And before you start paying out on the Yanks, you should have a look in your own backyard or, specifically, billabong.

Ever noticed how there are two versions of *Waltzing Matilda*? Banjo Paterson's 1895 original contains the chorus: "Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda my darling?/ Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?/ Waltzing Matilda and leading a waterbag,/ Who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?"

In 1903 a new chorus, which has gone on to become far more famous, was composed by musician Marie Cowan: "Waltzing Matilda, waltzing Matilda/ You'll come a waltzing Matilda with me./ And he sang as he watched and waited 'til his "Billy" boiled./ You'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me."

Why does the original have the swagman leading a waterbag while the later version tells us instead that the swagman waited 'til his "Billy" boiled? Because, as Australian historian Richard Magoffin notes, in the early 1900s a tea merchant, the Billy Tea company, secured permission to use the poem. Cowan was commissioned to "re-jig" *Waltzing Matilda* to refer to Billy Tea and, in possibly the first product placement ever, the "Billy" boiled scene was crammed into the chorus to remind the listener of those finely brewed tea leaves from Billy Tea. The 1903 sheet music clearly shows "Billy", not only with a capital B but in inverted commas to signify its product status.

So when Bill Fitzhugh was bragging around town in 2000 that he was the first author to incorporate product placement in a literary work, hardcore bush poet groupies were not impressed. After Fitzhugh had written the manuscript for *Cross Dressing*, a novel set in the world of advertising, he decided to take its theme to its logical extreme and pursue product placement. He had already sold the movie rights to Universal Studios. Noting that its parent company, Vivendi Universal, also had liquor giant Seagram in its stable at the time, he struck a deal where generic drink references would be replaced by mentions of Seagram products.

Fitzhugh could plead irony when traditionalists attacked him for supposedly selling out. But Fay Weldon had to admit last year that it was just face-value cash-for-comment when

she made numerous mentions of the Italian jewellery firm Bulgari in her subtly titled *The Bulgari Connection*.

Cowan, of course, beat both Fitzhugh and Weldon by many years. And, not to brag, but so did I. I was working as a copywriter at Clemenger Harvie advertising in 1996. My job was to write car brochures, radio ads for hardware shops and in-store home insurance posters. One afternoon a "suit" from account service burst into my cubicle with an emergency job: "I need a poem."

Apparently Mazda had decided to expand its sponsorship roster of sports stars and was going to sponsor a poet to try to lure that lucrative beatnik market.

The lucky bard was Rupert McCall. In exchange for the carmaker's generous backing, Mazda was to score a poem in his new poetry anthology. A Mazda sonnet needed to be composed.

I dashed off a series of stanzas gushingly proclaiming the philanthropic spirit of the Mazda corporation, ending with: "I guess this all just proves what generous folks we are/ We hope that you remember this next time you buy a car". The account service guy reported back to me that the man at Mazda "didn't understand poetry, but it rhymed, so he liked it". I was published in McCall's poetry anthology soon after.

Although I've produced a lot of work over the years - including John Safran's *Music Jamboree: The DVD!*, a two-disc set featuring the entire series - whenever I look at McCall's book I feel a special buzz knowing I've followed in that great Australian tradition, dating back to 1903, of chucking product placement into poetry to try to flog stuff.