

Lee Kernaghan

Australian of the Year

by senior correspondent Jennifer Martens

Lee Kernaghan loves his country and his country certainly loves him. Not only has the music star sold more than one million albums and won 28 Golden Guitar country music awards, the SSAA member was also recently named the 2008 Australian of the Year. It is an award that Lee describes as “the greatest honour of my life”.

Australian of the Year

The 43-year-old was honoured with the award for his efforts to assist battlers in drought-stricken communities across Australia. His ‘Pass the Hat Around’ charity tours have raised more than \$1 million for those communities. He’s also been a keen participant in the ‘Spirit of the Bush’ music tours - free concerts held in outback Australia that celebrate the efforts of farming communities and raise money for Aussie Helpers (www.aussiehelpers.org.au) - a charity that assists drought-affected farming families across the country.

Lee’s work through the concerts is awe-inspiring, but his generosity doesn’t stop there. All of the profits from his latest hit, ‘Spirit of the Bush’, which he recorded along with mates Adam Brand, Steve Forde and a

slew of new country singers, will be donated to the drought relief fund. The song was written to “salute the farming families who have endured so much for such a long period of time”, said the 2004 recipient. Since its release in July 2007, the single has raised tens of thousands of dollars.

Lee, who is also the 2008 Queenslander of the Year, was presented with the prestigious Australian of the Year award by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in front of Parliament House in Canberra on January 26 this year. Prime Minister Rudd had nothing but praise for the musician. “Lee Kernaghan’s music resonates with every Australian by connecting us all to the spirit of the bush, but more importantly, he gives hope and pride to those on the land when they need inspiration most,” he said.

“Lee is truly an Australian to make us all proud. You would have to travel a long way to find a better, more genuine bloke than Lee.”

Lee’s profound concern for country Australia is reflected in all that he does and says. When he speaks of the families who are struggling from the drought, it is as if he knows each and every one of them and the struggles they are going through.

“My family is so important to me and when I see other families who are suffering through no fault of their own, my heart goes out to them,” he says. I want to be able to help in whatever way I can.”

His ‘Spirit of the Bush’ concert series began after he had toured through the Wimmera Mallee in Victoria last year. The devastation he saw as a result of the drought and the hardship that the people were suffering on a day-to-day basis resonated with him. “What truly brought it home to me was opening the paper and seeing a picture of a farm that was reduced to a barren landscape and seeing a stick in the ground with a white flag flapping in the wind,” he says. “That is what really motivated me to go back down to the Wimmera Mallee to put on a concert that would let our farming families know that they hadn’t been forgotten, and that we wanted to be there to support them.”

The money raised from his concerts has been used for bushfire rebuilding projects and flood relief, for aiding emergency services in South Australia, buying air-conditioners for country schools in Queensland and assisting in the purchase of satellite communications

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Prime Minister Kevin Rudd



Lee Kernaghan - Australian of the Year

equipment for remote ambulance services. The list goes on and on.

Lee says, "Being involved in some of these projects gives meaning to my life and to my career in country music. Looking back over the past 10 years or so, they have really been the standout highlights."

The patron of the Aussie Helpers charity is quick to point out that all of these projects are the result of many hands. "The thing that always comes home to me is that it is a whole lot of like-minded people from the local community getting together and working with passion and determination to make a difference in their town."

While he has Australia's attention this year, Lee hopes to use his 'Pass the Hat Around' tours to shine the biggest spotlight he can on rural and regional Australia, its people, the farming sector and its importance to the nation as a whole. He also wants to encourage people to buy Australian made and grown products, saying, "That is a way that we can as a community, a nation and a people help our farming families come through this severe drought."

Lee's trademark black hat, called the Outback Club, was designed specifically for him by Australian manufacturer Akubra. "I started off wearing an Arena and then I spoke to my mates at Akubra and suggested that they alter the dash a bit and add some eyelets, which made it breath better. They did that and called it the Outback Club hat. I am pretty proud about that because Akubra is a national icon," said the son of platinum recording artist Ray Kernaghan.

The effect Lee has on country Australians is reflected in the distances his fans travel to see him and to support his causes. He recalls doing a 'Pass the Hat Around' concert in Yaraka, Queensland, which is 200km south of Longreach. "I remember flying out there; the mission was to stage a concert and raise enough money to buy a defibrillator for the bush medical clinic and help the local school. The population of the town was only 27 people, but the bush nurse serviced a radius of 150km. I remember flying out there for hours and hours and looking at the scrub and not seeing any homes or towns. When we flew into the town, the population grew from 27 to 47 and I thought I had bitten off more than I could chew with this one."

But just before the sun was going down, he said he saw the most incredible sight of his life. "To the north, south, east and west were clouds of dust. The sheer remoteness of the place meant that people had to be on the road for hours before they could get to Yaraka." By 7pm, Yaraka had experienced its first traffic jam as about 3000 people

rolled up to raise enough money to buy the medical equipment the town needed.

Regular Australian bloke

Although he is the 2008 Australian of the Year and a legend in the making, Lee still finds pleasure in the simple things in life - like spending time with his wife and two sons, five-year-old Jet and six-year-old Rock. He likes being out in the bush and, when his schedule allows, target shooting at his local club. "I don't have much time these days for recreational activities...but I do enjoy shooting off a few rounds with my brother. For me, it is a good mental release," he says.

His sons are too young to accompany him to the range, but shooting is already in their blood, jokes Lee. "Jet had a bit of a 'shotgun' start to life, because I'm pretty sure the day he was conceived I had taken my wife to the gun club and we fired off a few rounds."

Lee got his first gun when he was 10 - "it was just a little slug gun," he recalls. But then when he was 17 and flat broke, he and his cousin Steve bought a lotto ticket. "We won the second division prize - \$1000!" laughed Lee. "We went straight down to the gunshop and I bought a Ruger .22."

The Ruger held pride of place for some time, but his new favourite is his Colt Python. "My brother found it in New Zealand and I just love shooting it," he says.

Born in Corryong, Victoria, and growing up in the Riverina area of NSW, Lee had plenty of hunting opportunities. These days, however, his hunting experiences are made up of only his memories, as his family and his concerts

demand most of his time. One hunting trip that he regularly 'revisits' is his trip to the Tallarook Ranges in Victoria with his cousin Steve. "I remember once we got up into the hills and the temperature was below freezing and we had a bunch of sausages in the esky, but they had all frozen. We were out trying to light a fire when a storm came through and nearly blew us out of our tents and swags. We didn't see a thing; we didn't shoot a thing. The whole weekend was a disaster, but sitting up there in the storm around a campfire listening to George Thorogood sing 'Wanted Man' will forever be a great memory."

If he had the time to hunt, Lee says he'd like to head out around St George or the Maranoa region in Queensland to help control the feral pig population, which isn't doing the already struggling farmers any favours.

Spirit of the bush

Inspiration for his songs and his charity work comes from the people of the outback, who don't back down, who don't give up. Those who know anything about Lee know he's living in the land he loves and spends his life embracing the 'spirit of the bush'. ●

For more information on Lee's upcoming tour dates, visit www.leekernaghan.com

South Australia: Melrose Rock the Mount Festival - April 19

Victoria: Geelong Stampede - April 5

Queensland: Caboolture Muster - May 3

Northern Territory: Pine Creek Outdoors - June 21

Lee Kernaghan and Todd Russell share the stage

SSAA members Lee Kernaghan and Todd Russell shared a moment in the spotlight at the 2008 Perth City Muster in February. Singing 'The Gambler' by Kenny Rogers, the two true-blue Aussies had the crowd on their feet.

Lee and Todd met in 2006 and established a friendship based on their love of country music, the outback and the shooting sports, as well as their desire to support the real Aussie battler.

"This was a great opportunity to sing with a real Australian icon," said Todd. "Lee is a gentleman, through and through, and a most worthy recipient of the Australian of the Year Award."



Photo by Ron Bryant