

Murder On The Ridge

Words & Music: Pat Drummond

For Neil 'The Wheel' Williams

Lightning Ridge, NSW 30/4/90

This is a story primarily about the betrayal of trust, related to me by an old man in a pub at Long Jetty. The most terrifying part of this story is the unresolved nature of the ending. Australia has prided itself on development of the concept of 'mate-ship' and this tale shows how disruptive it is to a society when the implicit trust that governs it's mechanisms is undermined. I found the story important because allegorically, it has implications for the way economic life in this country has been destroyed by the shady practices of the entrepreneurial 'cowboys' of Australia's recent past.

Old 'Neil the Wheel' looked worried as he pulled back on his beer. He rattled down his can and ran his hand back through his hair. And he said "I've been over it and over it and I still can't get it straight, but two of us, it seems have got a murderer for a mate."

Neil first came up to Lightning Ridge in 1985.

He dug a pit that fell on him; he was lucky to be alive.

But in a way it was his making; when the mine inspector came;

he issued Neil a license to 'open cut' the claim

Murder on the Ridge, Lightning in their eyes.

The darkness of the mine, for one, became a way of life.

Opals ringed with fire, friendship tinged with fear,

a thirty second gamble for a half a million clear.

Two of them are innocent of what the other did

but no one knows just who to trust and mateship's suffered badly on the ridge.

Neil didn't have much money so he threw in with three mates.

They put their cash together and formed a syndicate.

They hocked themselves forever to open cut that ditch

and barely three weeks into it, they struck it flamin' rich.

When darkness came that night they locked themselves behind the fence.

Each man said "Goodnight" and took a light off to his tents.

As miners will, they knew the drill and stayed close to the light

for no mate walks a partner's claim at night.

At Four o'clock they heard the shot ring out from Michael's place;

They all arrived together looking like they'd run a race

and Neil had never seen such blood, it was all over the bed

and Michael laying in the middle dead, with a bullet through his head.

The police arrived and closed the opal mine down for a month.

No powderburns, no casings, no prints upon the gun;

so the finger of suspicion rested hard upon each man

for each one had the motive and each one had the chance.

When Neil finished speaking, his eyes were growing wet.

He said, "I lost more in that moment than I ever stood to get,

for people look at me now like I'm full of flamin' lies

and even you, you mongrel, I can see it in your eyes."

He knew what I'd been thinking so I turned away my gaze

and I thought, "Well, you poor mongrel, what a way to spend your days!

If they don't catch the killer, this thing will never end

for who'd trust any one of them again!

The last I heard old 'Neil the Wheel' was up in Lightning still.

They never solved the murder and I doubt they ever will.

And as to which one did it, well it's anybody's guess.

So three men work and watch and wait; and wonder who'll be next!

Chorus:

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