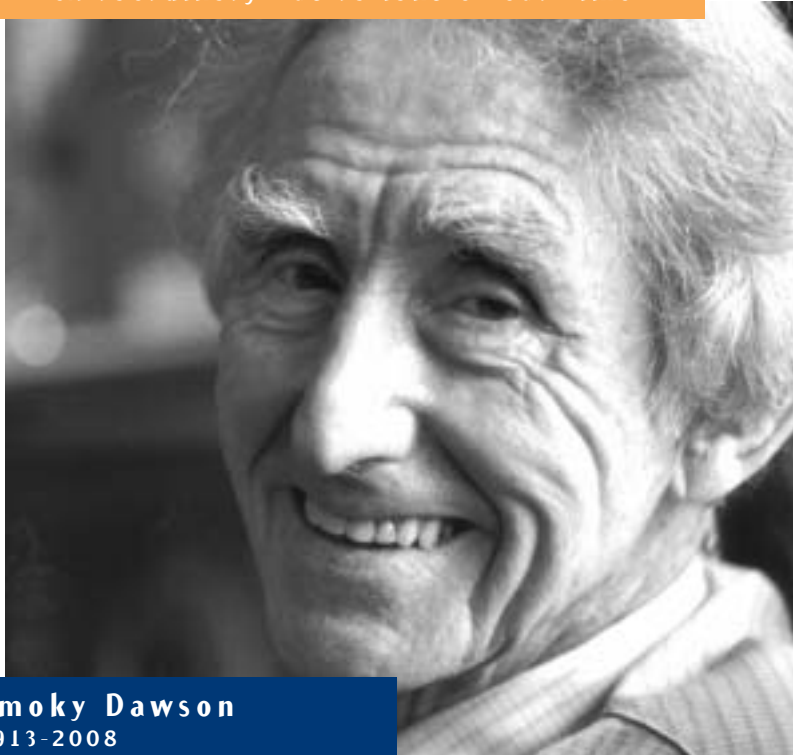


# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



**Smoky Dawson**  
1913-2008  
Entertainer

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 3 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Smoky Dawson**

**Director/Producer** Frank Heimans

**Executive Producer** Sharon Connolly

**Duration** 27 minutes **Year** 1993

Study guide prepared by Diane O'Flaherty © NFSA

Also in Series 3: Flo Bjelke-Petersen, Veronica Brady, Malcolm Fraser,  
Hayes Gordon, Lois O'Donoghue, Albert Tucker

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For more information about Film Australia's programs, contact:  
National Film and Sound Archive of Australia  
Sales and Distribution | PO Box 397 Pyrmont NSW 2009  
T +61 2 8202 0144 | F +61 2 8202 0101  
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## SYNOPSIS

Born in Warrnambool, Victoria in 1913, Smoky Dawson was Australia's first cowboy and a pioneer of Australian country music. Smoky and his horse Flash were legendary. An entire generation of young Australians grew up listening to his radio show and abiding by his 'code of the west'.

During the Second World War, Smoky served in the first Australian Entertainment Unit. After a severe illness he returned from the jungles of Borneo to start The Adventures of Smoky Dawson radio show. At its peak, the show was broadcast nationally on 69 stations.

In 1978 Smoky received an MBE and was elected to Australia's Country Music Roll of Renown. He has also received the Honour Award of the Grand Ole Opry and the American Country Music Association in Nashville, Tennessee.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at junior to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Media Studies, Leisure, Music, Studies of Society and Environment, Community and Family Studies, Australian History, Beliefs and Values, Society and Culture.

## AN ORDINARY BLOKE

Smoky Dawson is well known by many generations of Australians. And for those who grew up being entertained by Smoky, it won't be too long into a conversation about him before you'll hear the word 'icon'. This word in its purest usage simply refers to an image or representation. However, the Orthodox Church historically added the notion of 'sacredness'; thus current everyday usage signifies the widespread and lofty regard in which someone is held within a particular area. We have icons of the movie world, the sports world, the gay world and the music industry. To proclaim someone an icon of a country is a very large accolade. After working through this study guide, you should be able to decide whether an 'ordinary bloke' can be an icon and if you believe such a tribute is deserved by Smoky. Similarly, you might decide that this entertainer is simply part of a mythical reputation needed by a young Australia. Has the country outgrown this need?

## THE CONCEPT OF A HERO

Smoky's opening words in the program are 'I provided them with their first hero'. We see black-and-white archival footage of him capturing a 'baddie'.

- Note down five words that you associate with a movie hero today. Then note five words you consider describe a real hero, not necessarily connected with movies.
- Compare these ideas. Are they similar, or are our expectations of movie heroes unrealistic and associated with fantasy?

Look at your first list.

- Do any of your words describe Smoky's actions in the film footage you've just seen? Give evidence to support your answer.
- Gleaning what's going on in the film from its context, decide whether the situation would seem oversimplified and melodramatic to a member of today's audience. Why does this changing taste affect our expectations of heroes?

- Thinking about the evidence on which you based the above answer, decide whether we value heroes today. Give examples of heroes, and examine the qualities you admire in these people. Are they 'ordinary people' or 'supermen/women'?

- Based on all your findings, produce your own definition of the word 'hero'.

Smoky Dawson is well known as Australia's first cowboy. The whole notion of Western movies (and cowboys) originated in America. Although the genre's beginnings involved subduing 'Indians' (Native Americans) and thus today appears nationalistic and racist, it soon rid itself of that and came to be a genre with which many children and young adults identified. Movies based around its intrinsic and accepted wisdom were part of the Saturday afternoon Australian or American matinee experience if you grew up in the 30s or 40s. The 'wild west' or 'untamed outback' offered heroes, and the triumph of right, to any young aficionado.

- List some famous Western films. Who were the American big name cowboy actors?

- Are we still making films of this genre? Why/why not?

Think about elements which give this genre its special flavour. The following questions might form a start for your list.

- Who is always the winner?
- Is the 'baddie' always evil?
- Is there in-depth examination before assigning the label 'goodie' or 'baddie'?
- Do we see stereotypes?
- What is the role of women in these films?

## Activity

Draw up a three column table, with headings as below and note down your ideas.

Element of genre	Why it was loved	Why it is less popular (or rejected) today

- Have we as a society rejected any of these components in everyday reality?
- Has the Western genre mutated into something else, keeping its elements but updating its players and its landscape?

Smoky says 'I never called myself a cowboy. I've always been called a cowboy.'

- Why does he make this distinction?
- What is it about our landscape and way of life that made it so easy to transfer the notion of cowboy from America to Australia?
- Would Smoky's young fans have been more attracted to him because of the Americanisms he adopted (e.g. his letter of welcome to the Kellogg's Wild West Club opened with 'Hi there, partner')?

## SMOKY'S CHARACTER

What sort of person was Smoky Dawson? Examine the following categories. Challenge them, endorse them or add to them. Form a picture of the man underneath the showman.

### Honesty

Smoky seems very truthful and tells his story with candour, never seeking to put himself in a better light. The segments listed below each show this openness. What else do you learn about his character from the following parts of his story?

- His memory of a traumatic childhood—'And so I got no love'.
- His recollections of feeling utterly alone the night his mother was taken to hospital.
- The nine year 'difficult period' Smoky had 'to keep [his] self respect and feel [he] was important' when Dot wouldn't marry him.
- Smoky's recounting of his having 'to start life all over again' after having a nervous breakdown in Borneo.

### A Natural Storyteller

In Smoky's voice, you can hear the cadence of a country and western entertainer. His words elicit images as he tells his stories, and thus we can see situations through listening: situations we couldn't possibly view in reality. This is often called 'painting a picture in words' and it works because it evokes any combination of our five senses. Look at the following parts of the program and say what picture you see and what details he draws to help you imagine the picture. Decide whether the image relies on sight (visual imagery), sound (aural imagery), smell (olfactory imagery), taste (gustatory imagery) or touch (tactile imagery). In each case, decide what emotion is being aroused within you.

- The stormy night when little Herbie ran to the Clifton Hill Railway Station bridge and his sister found him looking down at the trains passing underneath.
- Smoky and his brother's trudge to Chris Rainbow's amateur radio station, only to be told they couldn't perform because Dot and her sister took up the available time.
- Smoky's account of his collapse at Tarakan.
- Any section where Smoky tells of his success in America. Note especially how the words tumble out—the pace becomes faster.

### Compassion/Love

Smoky has great regard for other people. He never criticizes anyone and seems forgiving. Look at the following incidents in the film and decide what they add to your knowledge about him.

- He sees his father as a 'victim of a war' rather than as a child basher.
- Dot Dawson (nee Florence Cheers) 'was magic' and despite her nine years of correcting his grammar, Smoky sees his accepted proposal as a 'great triumph'. His only wish, even after death, is 'that I'll always be with Dottie.'
- Smoky's pride in his knife throwing record—'all the time that I've been throwing...I have never hurt anybody, never hit anybody'.
- Smoky's acquiescence to Dottie's request to 'go home', even when he was at the height of his career in America. He saw it as 'being torn between...my love for Dottie...and my ego'. Her wishes won out.

- His wish 'that [he has] left behind something that will benefit mankind...be remembered as goodness'.

Most of all his love is seen in his modelling of what he considered 'decent values' and passing them on to the younger generation. Look at the segment from the program about Smoky establishing the Wild West Club.

We see Paul Keating as a Deputy Sheriff in the club, and hear about its 'code of the west' which involved kids (and particularly their parents as enforcers) in clean living and honourable ways.

The cowboy singer expected his deputies to follow the three codes:

1. Come to the table when you're first called, with clean fingers and a clean mind.
2. Be a good sportsman [sic].
3. Help your neighbour in need and honour your flag and country.

- Do you think the kids of today would aspire to pledge obedience to these rules? Support your answer with evidence.
- If you headed a popular club for children aged 6-12 and were seeking to teach them solid values, what three codes or rules would you establish to ensure the behaviour you wanted from them?
- Why might the association of Paul Keating with the club make it appear more important in its function?
- What is the effect on a child of being part of a principled club with outside expectations of moral and thinking behaviour, presided over by parents and led by a movie hero?
- What do you believe Smoky means when he says he hopes the legacy he and Dot leave behind helps 'some kid understand'?
- How do his actions reinforce Smoky as a caring adult?

### Activity

You've looked at incidents from Smoky's life and career. Read over the words you've gathered together describing him.

- Do they describe a hero, an entertainer or an 'ordinary bloke' who had an extraordinary life? Could they describe all three?

## SMOKY'S LIFE

### Childhood

Smoky's early years were less than ideal and could have moulded him into a very disturbed adult. There is a well known axiom that it is not what happens to you in life, but how you deal with what happens to you.

- Choose an incident from Smoky's childhood which you believe was significant to the rest of his life. Note how he dealt with it and what effect you believe his actions at the time had on him later as an adult. Conversely, think of another way he could have dealt with the same incident and project what may have happened had he dealt with the event differently.

Smoky has a memory from when he was five years old of leading a street parade in Warrnambool. He was dressed as a soldier and remembers his cousin, Daisy, dressed as a Red Cross nurse and giving him a drink 'like a wounded soldier'.

- Do you believe that this incident planted the seeds for any choices Smoky made about his career or his marriage?

Smoky confirms the hunch of interviewer Robin Hughes that the creation of Smoky was 'a way of getting over [his] childhood'. A persona is a mask to the world assumed by an individual.

- Was 'Smoky' a persona for Herbie Dawson or had the adult entertainer developed as a person?
- Why does referring to himself in the third person help Smoky to separate himself from his childhood?
- Why do you think he adopted the nickname of Smoky and what is its significance?
- Do you know of anyone who has changed her/his name from that given at birth by parents? Why did the person change it? What were the results?
- Do you believe Smoky is the opposite of Herbie? Using the table below might help you think through this question.

Herbie's characteristic	Examples of it being rejected by Smoky	Examples of it being repeated by Smoky

The identity of 'Smoky' was '...the pot of gold [which] came my way...' Smoky speaks of it being 'prearranged, programmed' and then comments '...everything born is programmed'.

- What extra understanding of the man do you gain from these comments?

### Career

Smoke (as he was known to his fans) belongs to a category of variety entertainment rarely seen today. His versatility kept him in the public spotlight year after year. All of the following areas have contributed to his icon status:

- singing and playing guitar at country shows
- making country and western records
- trick riding on the rodeo circuit
- knife throwing in travelling shows
- leading Sydney's Spring Festival Parade (with Flash, the wonder horse and Jingles his side-kick)
- starring in radio serials
- being the hero of a comics series
- acting in black-and-white film adventures
- acting in musicals
- founding the Wild West Club for children
- being a member of the Army Entertainment Unit
- running the Smoky Dawson ranch
- acting as an 'Australian ambassador' overseas

### Activity

Select one of the above areas. Research it in greater detail, using information from **Australian Biography** as well as other resources.

- Learn about it as part of Australia's history as well as finding its importance to Smoky Dawson's life.
- We don't see this type of all round entertainer today. Side show type carnivals rarely travel from country town to country town.
- Why is this so? Is it simply that the majority of people's tastes have changed?
  - Would you be interested in seeing one of his shows today? Give reasons for your answer.

Smoky went to America and the Cinesound Review records him being welcomed home with a box of cactus flowers at the airport.

- Were the cactus flowers a symbol? Was it forgivable in the 1950s to need to associate our Australian identity with America?
- Would Smoky's success on American and British television have enhanced his reputation in Australia? Has this changed in the last 50 plus years?

Newsreels were a very popular part of public cinema offerings in pre-television days.

- Using Smoky and Dot's homecoming as an example, discuss the functions these newsreels fulfilled other than disseminating information. Listen to their language, their point of view. Think about the historical context and the circumstances of the audience.

### CONCLUSION

What are your findings? Comment on Smoky's talents. What place does he deserve in Australia's history of popular culture? Does he represent a past long forgotten and merit the label of icon? Do you agree that if we don't preserve the early days of our citizen's halting efforts to make their marks in the world, we will never know our own country's unique story? Whatever your verdict, would you agree that it is pioneers in many areas who form this interlocking jigsaw of our history?

### REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Herbert Henry 'Smoky' Dawson, **Smoky Dawson: A Life**, illustrated by Pro Hart, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985

Australian War Memorial—Remembering the War in New Guinea —Smokey Dawson: First Australian Army Entertainment Unit <http://ajrp.awm.gov.au/AJRP/remember.nsf/pages/NT000021CA>

Australian Screen —Smokey Dawson <http://aso.gov.au/titles/radio/smoky-dawson-singing-bullet/notes/>

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