

# Rolf Harris

## AND HIS WOBBLEBOARD

If I mentioned Rolf Harris I wonder how many of you would start humming 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport', 'Two Little Boys' or 'Six White Boomers'? Harris left Australia in 1952 to pursue art studies in London and for the past 50 years he has forged a career in art, music, television and performance, making him one of Australia's best known exports. He has had number one hits, been on some of the longest running TV shows in the UK, performed to thousands at both the Glastonbury Festival and Albert Hall, painted an official portrait of Queen Elizabeth II and been inducted into the ARIA Hall of Fame. With the opening of *Australian Journeys* Rolf Harris will also have a presence at the National Museum of Australia.

*Australian Journeys* explores connections between people and places here in Australia and overseas. The exhibit on Rolf Harris considers the broader history of young Australians moving overseas, especially to London, in the 1950s and 1960s. The flow of Australian tourists to Britain and the continent is not a recent phenomenon. The desire to either return 'Home' or explore Britain as an ancestral homeland is evident from the time of early British settlement of Australia. People travelled to Britain for work, education, leisure and society. While the Second World War put a stop to tourism, the postwar years saw an explosion in tourism as a viable leisure activity and developing market. Increased availability of transport from the 1940s onwards meant more Australians were travelling overseas. Further, opportunities were opening up across class and gender lines: no longer was travel limited to the upper and middle classes. Growing affluence allowed more and more people to satiate their itchy feet and curiosity to see the world.

One of the items that will be on display is the very 'individual' instrument, the wobbleboard. The wobbleboard is a musical instrument accidentally discovered and then popularised by Rolf Harris. The link between Rolf's painting, music and performance is the key to the history of the wobbleboard. Rolf 'discovered' the wobbleboard when trying to dry a piece of hardboard on which he was painting a portrait of magician Robert Harbin. According to an interview on *Enough Rope* in 2005:

*I was painting a portrait of a very dear friend of mine... I had a sheet of hardboard which had got some paint dropped on it in a lovely pattern. I thought I'll cover that with a dark blue, it'll be mysterious and those bits of white paint will show through. He was due to arrive in about half an hour and I was thinking lots of turpentine it will dry quickly. It didn't dry and I propped this bit of board like that right over the oil heater and the smell of the turpentine with the heat was fierce so I opened the window and opened the door to get some sort of a gale blowing the smell out. And I came back a couple of seconds it seemed later to test the board to see if it was dry and put a big blister up on my hand, big huge blister, just touching the surface. So I propped it between the palms of my hands and I fanned it to cool it off and that amazing sound ... I went and I started*



A promotional photograph of Rolf Harris with the Masonite wobbleboard.

*emphasising every second one and I had written Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport a couple of months previously and it just fitted perfectly.*

The wobbleboard creates a 'whoop' sound through the vibration of the wobble. The angle at which the board is held and the way it is moved can alter the tone.

One of the wobbleboards on display was made and painted by Rolf Harris and shows a 'Rolfaroo' climbing a stairway to heaven. The 'Rolfaroo' is a caricature he has drawn for many years, depicting Harris' head on the body of a kangaroo. The stairway references Rolf's version of 'Stairway to Heaven', which he performed on the 1993 television show, 'The Money or the Gun' and began a type of Rolf Harris revival.

Another wobbleboard in *Australian Journeys* was manufactured by the Masonite company in the 1960s and marketed as 'A new rhythm instrument'. Unfortunately this venture met with limited success. It turned out most people were unable to attain the right motion for the wobbleboard to sound.

The two wobbleboards, along with a leather jacket worn by Rolf Harris during his 1990s Rolf Rules Tour, were donated to the National Historical Collection by Rolf Harris. They add significantly to the National Historical Collection's holdings around Australian performers and popular culture and will provide a point of musical interest and connection for visitors to *Australian Journeys*.

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