If one is to talk of songs of the goldfields, it is just as well to start by a consideration of how the goldfields came into being. So here is some historical background:

In April of 1844, the Reverend William Branwhite Clarke, an Anglican clergyman, and a fellow of the Geological Society of London, informed Sir George Gipps, the Governor of New South Wales, that the colony possessed potentially rich gold deposits.

Governor Gipps was less than enthusiastic; when shown a sample of the gold that Clarke had unearthed, he commanded, “Put it away, Mister Clarke, or we shall all have our throats cut!”

The Reverend Clarke did as he was told. Sir George returned to England in 1846, but Clarke held his peace until the former Governor had died in February of 1847; he then began to agitate for a geological survey of New South Wales, and drew public attention to the presence of gold in the colony.

By mid-1848 a gold rush had started—but not in Australia!

In January of 1848, at Colomo in the American held territory of California, James Marshall was building a saw mill for his partner, John Sutter, when he discovered particles of gold in the stream that was to power the mill’s waterwheel. This was not the sort of news that could long be kept secret — in fact very soon people were singing about it.

Song: The California Gold Diggers
Many Australians took passage to California, where they not only dug for gold, but gained an unenviable reputation as troublemakers and criminals, and were dubbed “Sydney Ducks” by the locals.

However, within a twelve months of the rush starting to the Californian goldfields the Melbourne Morning Herald reported that a young shepherd tending his flock in the Pyrenees, had discovered gold encrusted quartz. Reading of this discovery, the Reverend Clarke wrote to the Sydney Morning Herald, warning; “‘gold may be bought too dear’ — and I think it will prove so in the present instance.” And he added the additional caution; “that there is no instance of any man making his fortune by opening a gold mine.” He was, of course, wrong!

There were many, who like Governor Gipps believed nothing but mischief would accrue from the discovery of payable gold deposits, it would, as one colonist observed, lead to a “mania for gold hunting...so fearful to contemplate (with the example of California before our eyes) that no person well disposed to the progress of our social and moral state, can desire the dreams of a Midas or Aladdin to be realised’.

Too late! — By the beginning of 1851 a rich gold field had been discovered near Ballarat, and on the 11th of September, the hundred and twenty diggers who were in the area declared that their particular goldfield would be know as “the Ballarat Diggings.” The London Times proclaiming in the same month; “Discovery of Gold—Gold Fever in Australia.” Twelve months later the same newspaper calculated that the number of emigrants who had left the British Isles for the Australian goldfields numbered “at least one hundred thousand souls,” and with more to follow. In fact from 1837 through to 1851 the population of the colonies of New South Wales, and the later separated Victoria, had totalled only 103,000 persons, yet within eighteen months of the discovery of gold that figure had doubled!

At the same time British song writers and musical hall artists encouraged their fellow countrymen to depart for Australia. “Make no delay but hast away to Australia, O”.

Song: Will you go to Australia Oh?

Other songsters were a little less boisterous in their promotion of the goldfields, still they did not deny that “there’s wealth to be won”; but they soberly assured the emigrants that God would watch over their endeavour, and the promise was that they would never forget “dear England” — the latter sentiment tended to weaken as in time the new immigrants became acclimatised to their adopted home; or as it was sometimes expressed, they became “colonised”!

Song: To the Gold Field or the Song of the Emigrant
However, for those who made the journey from the Old Country, and they came in their thousands, conditions on the diggings proved something of a shock.

Local songsters were quick to sound musical cautions about the reality of life in the colony and on the goldfields, no doubt such songs sung to the ironic amusement of the old hands, and the consternation of the new chums. James Mulholland, a Ballarat man, lyrically warned, “As it is in Australia”.

Song: **As it is in Australia**

And it was on the Victorian diggings that the goldfield song came into its own as a distinctive musical genre. Topicality was the thing, and these songs became a means of appraising the diggers of the local news, and keeping them abreast of the latest gossip. The songs also acted as an introduction, for the new chums, to the developing customs of the diggings, and a correspondent at the Argus opined that some of the songs “would give a much better idea of life on the gold fields than most of the elaborately written works upon them do.”

So, while the new chum had not only to come to terms with the strange conditions, social and climatic, in which they found themselves, they had also to familiarise themselves with the peculiar argot of the diggers.

Song: **English Notions of a Digging Life**

Music was one of the main sources of entertainment on the diggings — along with liquor, ladies of the night and events at lavishly decorated theatres and ramshackle concert halls!

No doubt many of the new colonists cherished and lovingly sang songs from their homelands, and advertisements for evenings of musical entertainments on the diggings promised songs from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales; augmented by an operatic item or two.

But there were many professional entertainers who saw that popularity, and profit, lay in providing the diggers with topical humorous songs — with lyrics that sprung from a response to particular local social situations — and ideally set to popular music hall melodies. The combination did not necessarily produce good, or even memorable pieces, but they possessed enough merit to warrant the attention of the diggers, and provide the professional performers with an income and a degree of popularity.
One such goldfield entertainer was Charles Thatcher; a flautist, who turned his hand to writing and performing songs, with sufficient success as to be acknowledged as the greatest of the goldfield balladeers and granted the sobriquet ‘The Inimitable Thatcher’. A song about the manner of police entrapping sly grog sellers was one of his popular pieces:

Song: **Laying Information**

Despite all the hardships associated with a diggings life, there was still an overseas audience prepared to allow that digging for gold was an undertaking they should not eschew; and there were many songsters who were prepared to encourage this view. Joe Small, an entertainer who shared billing with the inimitable Charles Thatcher on a New Zealand tour, was happy to sing to islanders north and south, of the “magical scenes” to be encountered on the Victorian diggings.

Song: **First Impressions of the Goldfields**

And indeed in the Old country there were many still prepared to promote a fanciful view of the goldfields, and despite warning that there were thousands of prospectors “absolutely not earning their rations”, yet “the interest felt by the people of England in the Australian gold discovery was ... deepening and extending.” A broadside circulated by the Glasgow publisher John Lindsay exhorted people to “go where you’ll get a lump of gold, over in Australia”.

Song: **Digging for Gold**

In the midst of all this physical and social upheaval, the political scene was undergoing a change. On the first of July, 1851, the newly created colony of Victoria was hewn off from New South Wales. With considerable wealth accumulating from the efforts of the diggers, there was a shift in the social and economic life of the new colony; marked in part by a move amongst the citizenry from the necessary and functional toward the luxuriant and even frivolous.

Jack was not slow to recognise that he was — potentially — as good as his master, and that; having struck it rich, he was probably better off staying in his adopted home, rather than taking passage to the Old Country. Charles Thatcher summed it up in song:

Song: **Look Out Below!**
All of this raises a question for those who make a study of such things; are these songs of the goldfields ‘folk songs’? The best answer to that question would be a cautious ‘no: not quite’!

Such songs as the diggers may have spontaneously composed for their own amusement, have, to all intents and purposes, been lost. The goldfields brought an influx of professional entertainers for whom the production of topical songs was an integral part of their business. In effect they flooded the market with songs that we may now probably best classify as traditional or colonial ballads, rather than folk songs.

In fact on hearing the melodies to which some of the songs were set it becomes obvious that the pieces were devised for a theatrical presentation, rather than simply to be sung by the diggers around their camp fires at night.

These crafted lyrics however sprung from a response to particular and local social situations, and notwithstanding that they were primarily the work of dedicated music makers, they are not limited in their appeal by this fact.

Song: Pull Away Cheerily!