

THE SPRINGTIME IT BRINGS ON THE SHEARING

Traditional Australian Shearing Songs

GARY SHEARSTON (vocals/guitar)

with Richard Brooks (harmonica) and Les Miller (banjo/guitar).

Side 1

The Springtime It Brings On The Shearing
Flash Jack From Gundagai
Bluey Brink
The Murrumbidgee Shearer
The Station Cook
Tomahawking Fred
The Backblocks Shearer
Jog Along Till Shearing

Side 2

The Lime Juice Tub
The Shearer's Dream
Lachlan Tigers
The Banks Of The Condamine
Click Go The Shears
The Road To Gundagai (Lazy Harry's)
Shearing In A Bar
One Of The Has-Been

Recorded 1965, Sydney, Australia. Produced by Sven E. Libaek

Album Notes by Edgar Waters (1965)

INTRODUCTION

The first recording Gary Shearston made was called **Folk Songs and Ballads of Australia**. Most of the songs on it really are old bush folk songs. But later he became known best as a singer of new songs, which are not really folk songs though they are written in folk-song style. Songs, for example, by writers like the Americans Bob Dylan and Peter Seeger, or the Scotsman Ewan MacColl; and songs that he wrote himself.

But a while back he decided that the most important thing for him to do, just then and for some time to come, was to learn more about authentic folk songs; and especially about the folk songs of the bush; and above all about the way that the old bush singers sang the bush folk songs.

So he sat down to listen carefully to every field recording of traditional bush singers that he could lay his hands on. He has listened to recordings of the best of our traditional singers, especially Sally Sloane and Simon McDonald, over and over again. He has also been listening very carefully to the recordings of bush songs made by A. L. Lloyd: a pommy, no less! But Lloyd began learning bush songs during the nine years he spent working as a station hand in western New South Wales, before he went back to England to become a distinguished folk-song singer and scholar.

This collection of shearers' songs is the first result of all this. Wherever possible, Gary Shearston has learnt the version of the song which he uses from a recording or tape rather than from print. Many he learnt from the singing of A. L. Lloyd, some from field recordings made by the Folk Lore Society of Victoria; one from an old shearer, 'Duke' Tritton, with whom he sang many times at folk-song concerts.

None of the songs come out as a mechanical copy of the recording from which Gary Shearston learnt it. Far from it. But if you wonder whether all that listening to field recordings was worth the trouble,

whether it could really make all that much difference, then just compare the style of singing on this record with the style on that early record of Folk Songs and Ballads of Australia!

THE SPRINGTIME IT BRINGS ON THE SHEARING

This was collected in Victoria by Dr. Percy Jones. John Meredith found a rather different version in New South Wales, and most of Dr. Jones' words turn up in some verses called *The Wallaby Track*, which were published by a bush poet called E. J. Overbury in 1865. Maybe some bush singer read Overbury's words and set some of them to a tune; that was a common habit with bush singers. Maybe Overbury heard a bush song, and took some of the words into one of his own poems; that was a common habit with bush poets.

coves - station managers or owners.

billy quart-pot - an indispensable item of the bush nomads, gear; a can - here of quart capacity - in which water could be boiled and food cooked.

new-chums - newly arrived immigrants.

flash shearers making johnny-cakes round in the bend - a contrast in the lot of the shearer at different seasons of the year is implied; during the shearing season he is flash (shows an exaggerated sense of his own importance), because he is earning good wages and respect for his skill; when the shearing season is over, and he is unemployed, he is reduced to camping out in the open by some river bend, and living on a diet consisting mainly of camp-made bread (a johnny cake is, roughly speaking, a kind of small damper).

FLASH JACK FROM GUNDAGAI

Gundagai figures in a lot of Australian folklore. The best-known piece of folklore about Gundagai concerns the famous dog that sat (some people use a different word) in the tucker box nine miles (but some people say it was five miles) from the town. But Gundagai gets a mention in a lot of shearers' songs, too.

This version of the song about Flash Jack - who seems to have done most of his shearing at stations in the Riverina - comes from A. L. Lloyd. But Banjo Paterson printed the words in very much the same form in his *Old Bush Songs* in 1905. And a Brisbane singer, Bill Scott, learnt the song in the Queensland bush only a few years ago, with practically the same tune as Lloyd learnt in the Riverina, as well as with practically the same words.

Burrabogie - this, and most of the other regional names which occur in this song, refer to south-western New South Wales; most of them (like Burrabogie) are the names of particular sheep stations.

Barcoo - a river - usually dry - which runs through south-western Queensland into South Australia; along part of its length it is known as Cooper's Creek.

pinked 'em - shorn the wool off so closely that the pink skin shows through.

Wolseleys - the earliest brand of machine shears.

B-bows - a brand of hand shears.

shaved 'em in the grease - shorn sheep with unwashed, greasy wool.

slummed a pen - shorn the sheep carelessly and hurriedly.

whaling up the Lachlan - this implies more than can be explained adequately in a few words; travelled up the Lachlan River, camping out in the open, living on food received free from the stations along the river, and on fish caught from it; be Murray cod found in the rivers of the Murray-Darling system grow to a considerable size, which suggested a facetious comparison with whales.

rung Cudjingie shed - was the fastest shearer in the shed, the shearer who shored most sheep.

blued it in a week - spent all the money earned at the shed in a spree which lasted a week

BLUEY BRINK

There are a lot of hard drinkers in frontier folklore, and it is only in folklore that a shearer could drink straight sulphuric acid with never a wink, and come back howling for more. But shearers sometimes did in fact get sulphuric acid mixed in with their rum or whisky in outback shanties, where publicans were much given to doctoring the grog they sold with all kinds of poisons. *Bluey Brink* is one of the few old bush songs which seems to be known to a lot of young singers in the bush. This version comes from A. L. Lloyd, who learnt it from an old singer called 'Dad' Adams of Cowra, in New South Wales.

The tune has been a great favourite with folk singers for a long time now. It seems to have been spread far and wide through being used with the tune for a popular English music-hall song called *Villikins and his Dinah*.

shear his two hundred a day - this would put Bluey Brink in the ranks of the very best shearers.

THE MURRUMBIDGEE SHEARER

Banjo Paterson published the words of this song in his *Old Bush Songs*, but no folk-song collector since has found a bush singer who knew the words or a tune for them. But, somewhere in western New South Wales about thirty-five years ago, A. L. Lloyd heard a song called *The Maryborough Miner*, which seems to be an earlier version of *The Murrumbidgee Shearer*. This version uses Paterson's words to Lloyd's tune.

natives - the Australian-born; this song probably dates from the 1860s or 1870s, a period when nearly half the white-skinned inhabitants of Australia had been born in other parts of the world (mostly in the British Isles).

Barwon, Darling, Murrumbidgee - rivers in western New South Wales.

the Paroo - a region of south-western Queensland.

diggings - gold fields.

Ballarat - most famous of the Victorian gold fields, and centre of the first great Australian gold rush, in the 1850s.

Lachlan - river in western New South Wales.

fossicked - prospected for gold.

Lambing Flat - a New South Wales gold field, close by the present town of Young.

touched the shepherd's hut, of sugar, tea and flour - got these things from a shepherd living in a hut away from the station homestead, without any payment; in the bush during the nineteenth century this was not thought of as begging.

plunged in the store, and hooked it, with a very tidy lob - robbed the station store, and made off with worthwhile loot.

done it on the cross - been a criminal.

carry bluey - this implies that he has travelled about the bush on foot, carrying all his belongings in a blanket slung over his shoulder.

the escort - the police troopers who escorted the coaches carrying gold from the diggings down to the capital cities.

traps - policemen.

flipper - hand.

patent pill machine - revolver.

planted - hidden.

Cockatoo - Cockatoo Island, in Sydney Harbour, at one time the site of a prison.

THE STATION COOK

A few lines of this song got into print in *The Bulletin* - which used to be called "the bushman's Bible" - away back in the 1890's. That scrap set the scene on the Castlereagh River in New South Wales; this version sets it at Fowler's Bay in South Australia.

This version of the song was published by Dr. Percy Jones of Melbourne. He seems to be the only collector who has ever managed to find a bush singer who knew a full set of words and a tune for them.

plum-duffs - plum-puddings.

doughboys - dumplings.

swear by Long Maloney - a mysterious phrase; perhaps it is a euphemism for "I swear by all that's holy?"

to sling the cook his fee - to pay the cook his wages (the shearers' cook was paid by the shearers themselves, not by the station management or the contractor).

Fowler's Bay - on the western coast of South Australia.

slushy - a derogatory term for the cook, suggesting that he is only fit to be a cook's helper.

TOMAHAWKING FRED

There was a London music-hall song about Fashionable Fred:

*Yes, I'm just about the cut for Belgravia,
To keep the proper pace I know the plan.
Wire in and go ahead then, for Fashionable Fred,
I'm Fashionable Fred, the ladies' man.*

Some shearer took the tune, and re-wrote the words so that they told about Tomahawking Fred the shearer. He was called Tomahawking Fred because he cut sheep whilst shearing.

Jack Bradshaw, who called himself the Last of the Bushrangers, published the words of this song in one of his books about bushranging, in the 1930s. But it was only recently that collectors from the Folk Lore Society of Victoria found an old bushman, Harvey Games, who remembered the tune as it was used in the bush. He remembered only some of the words, so this version uses his tune and Jack Bradshaw's words.

knuckling down so close upon the skin - shearing the wool off so close to the skin.

tomahawk - shear unskilfully, so as to cut the sheep.

tin - money.

the don of Riverine - recognised as a man of importance in the Riverina, a region of southern New South Wales.

THE BACKBLOCKS SHEARER

According to one old bush singer this song was written in New South Wales by a shearer named Bill Tully. But Widgeegowarmee Joe probably really came from Widgeegoara, which is in Queensland; and this version of the song comes from Victoria. It was recorded by collectors of the Folk Lore Society of Victoria from an old bushman called Alf Dyer. Joe got around, it seems, and so did this song, which pokes fun at him for being too much of a skite and not enough of a shearer.

John Meredith - who got down a rather different version of the song from an old Riverina bushman called Jack Lee - says that the tune was taken over from an old Irish song, Castle Gardens. Another folklorist, John Manifold, thinks that Bill Tully must have had uppermost in his mind an old sailor song which begins "Hurrah, my boys, the sails are set, the winds are blowing fair...." The song is full of shearers' technical talk, and a few topical references. Mitchell, obviously, was a highly-regarded shearer. But Deeming was a murderer - in fact, a multiple murderer - whose name made a splash in the newspapers towards the end of the last century.

backblocks - away out in the bush, a long way from the cities.

Riverine - the Riverina region of southern New South Wales.

the union lads - the shearers were amongst the most militant of Australian trade unionists around the turn of the century, and belonged to one of the most powerful trade unions of the day, after the great shearing strikes of the early 1890s there was a great deal of bad feeling between shearers who were staunch union men, and those who had been scabs.

my shears are set - set here probably implies not only ready but also sharpened.

pen - the pen in which sheep are held in the shed alongside each shearer's working position.

gaffer - the boss of the shed.

rings the bell - as a signal to begin work.

sardine blow - a blow is one continuous action with the shears, and sardine blow implies anibbling, cramped action, as against a flowing, forceful movement which might be expected of a really good shearer.

for the century - aiming at shearing one hundred sheep in a day; this was reckoned good shearing.

saw long tallies done - seen men shear large numbers of sheep in a day.

gun - an outstanding shearer.

board - the floor of the shearing shed.

collared - appropriated.

shoulder cuts - "blows" used in shearing wool from the shoulders.

rang-stang block - block is poetic licence for blow, in order to rhyme with shock; why Priestley should have called the blow which invented a rang-stang blow is anybody's guess.

Wagga - a town near the fringe of the Riverina region, and clearly the location of an annual demonstration of shearing techniques.

scoop the pool - win all the prizes.

JOG ALONG TILL SHEARING

The first time I ever made a field recording of a folk song, I went with a friend of mine (his name is Jeff Way) down to one of the southern suburbs of Sydney to call on Joe Cashmere. He came from Booligal in the Riverina, and asked us if we knew the old bush saying, "Hay, hell and Booligal". He reckoned that Booligal was really a pretty good place, at least, it had been when he was a boy. He stood in his kitchen and sang for us. He was over seventy years of age, and we said we thought he ought to sit down. He said he would sooner stand. He stood.

One of the songs he sang that day was *Jog Along Till Shearing*. Gary Shearston learnt it from our tape recording. Joe Cashmere is dead now. Joe said the tune was called *Miss Tickletoy's School*. Hugh Anderson, who spends a lot of time delving into old song books, says that it was also called *The Barking Barber*.

When he had finished singing the song for us, Joe chuckled and said "That's a true song."

without a word of gammon - without any bulldust.

swagmen - here, this refers to bushmen travelling around looking for seasonal jobs.

waiting for the lambing - waiting for the lambing season, and the seasonal jobs connected with lambing.

shanty - a bush public house.

they hear the price that's going - hear the usual price for shearing a given number of sheep this season.

blowing - skiting, boasting.

bit of paper - cheque.

they give three cheers for the river bends - they recognise that their next period of affluence is over, and give three cheers for the life that awaits them until their next period of employment at the next shearing season; and this life means camping out in the open along the inland river, subsisting largely on the fish they catch, and on hand-outs from the stations.

THE LIME JUICE TUB

The food on English sailing ships was mostly pretty poor. To prevent the scurvy which was a likely result of a regular diet of pickled meat and ship's biscuit, a ration of lime juice was doled out. So American sailors, who were mostly better fed, contemptuously called English sailors 'Limies'. And so in this song the shearers contemptuously suggest that the unskillful English new chums should be sent home in a lime-juice ship. This version of the song comes from A. L. Lloyd, who says that it was very popular with shearers along the Lachlan thirty or so years ago. He also says that it was one of the few songs that the shearers sang while they were at work.

drums - swags, of the same kind as the bluey mentioned in *The Murrumbidgee Shearer*.

board - the floor of the shearing shed.

brand new chums - migrants just newly arrived in Australia.

cockies' sons - sons of small farmers (who were looked down upon by bush workers in the pastoral industries).

great guns - really good shearers.

they tar the sheep till they're nearly black - they cut the sheep so much in shearing them that the sheep end up almost covered with the tar applied as an antiseptic.

on the wallaby track - travelling on foot from one station to another, looking for work.

press the wool - wool is packed for transport from the shearing sheds in a machine which compresses the wool into sacks.

reckon it's time to breast the cook - think it is time to approach the station cook for food. At sundown, the cook would distribute a ration of uncooked food to unemployed 'travellers' who happened to reach the station homestead at about that hour of the day.

huts - stations also provided huts in which such unemployed 'travellers', could sleep overnight.

dampers - the usual bushman's bread, made with baking soda for leavening.

with daggy tails - with lumps of excrement adhering to the wool of the tail.

THE SHEARER'S DREAM

These words are by Henry Lawson, though Lawson himself used them (in a story called *The Shearer's Dream*) in a way that suggests he might have made them over from an older bush song. Lawson's words seem to have been taken up by shearers, and sung to a number of different tunes. But this version comes from A. L. Lloyd, who says that he never himself heard the words sung in the bush. So he set them to a tune which is used in the British Isles for a ballad called *The Girl I Left Behind Me*. A lot of young Australian singers prefer this tune to any that the folk-song collectors have

recorded from bush singers. In fact, when *The Shearer's Dream* is sung at folk-song concerts in the cities these days - as it often is - then it is usually sung to this tune.

rouseabouts - the general helpers in the shearing shed; in general, unskilled labourers whose job it is to assist the skilled.

chute - the chute, down which the sheep were pushed, to slide from the shearing shed back to the ground outside after they had been shorn.

the huts had springs to the mattresses - commonplace items of furniture in shearers' huts today, hut not in Lawson's day.

tucker - food.

billabong - part of an old, abandoned channel of a river, still filled with water from time to time during floods.

German band - a band of Germans playing music, mostly dance music on brass instruments; such bands were a common feature of the entertainment available in city streets in Australia - and England - for a large part of the nineteenth century.

jumbuck - sheep.

shore till all was blue - until the bluish skin of the sheep could be seen through the thin covering of wool left after close shearing.

the sheep was washed afore they was shore - this was a common habit until the 1860s; shearers who had been used to it resented having to shear sheep whose wool was thick with sand, grass seeds, burrs and so on.

when the shed cut out - when the shearing in that shed had been finished.

LACHLAN TIGERS

Lachlan Tigers goes to the same tune as *The Station Cook*. It is a good tune, and it seems to have come from Scotland. It is one of the few Scottish folk-song tunes used in the bush. This version comes from A. L. Lloyd.

Jackie Howe was a famous shearer, in fact the most famous shearer of them all. He shored 321 sheep in one day in 1892, and his record stood until 1947.

gate - the gate of the pen in which sheep are held alongside each shearer's work place in the shed.

whistle - as a signal to begin or end work.

tigers - as in the common Australian colloquial phrase, "he's a tiger for work," meaning a very hard and enthusiastic worker.

ringer - the fastest shearer in the shed.

whipping side: - the second side of the sheep to be shorn, after the finicky work of shearing legs, head and so on was over.

tar - antiseptic used for cuts given sheep in shearing.

contractor - shearers are not generally employed directly by the stations, hut by a middleman who contracts with the stations to see that their sheep are shorn.

topknots - the wool on the head of the sheep.

Ward and Paine's - a brand of shears.

Bogan - river in western New South Wales.

THE BANKS OF THE CONDAMINE

This song was made over from a British Broadside ballad of the time of the Napoleonic Wars, called *The Banks of the Nile* (and that was made over from a still earlier broadside; in fact the family tree can be traced back to the seventeenth century at least). There are many sets of words and many tunes, collected from singers at Rutherglen in Victoria, at Mataranka in the Northern Territory, and many points in between. Sometimes the song is called *The Banks of Riverine*. Sometimes the men are not off to a shearing shed, but to a horse-breaking camp.

The Banks of the Condamine is one of the very few bush-made songs that you might call a love song.

This version comes from A. L. Lloyd, who learnt it from Jack Lyons of Dubbo, in New South Wales. Lloyd says that this melody is related to one used for an Irish folk song.

Roma - a town in southern Queensland. Condamine: - a river of southern Queensland, one of the headwaters of the Darling, which flows through western New South Wales.

selector - this means, literally and usually, a man who takes up and farms, with the intention of purchasing, land

owned by the government, and made available to the selector on favourable purchase terms, with extended credit, and sometimes subsidies of one kind or another; the selector is in Australia what the homesteader was in America. But the word carries many overtones; and sometimes it may suggest nothing more than a small farmer. **squatters** - here, as usually in Australian speech today, simply large station owners.

moleskins - trousers of heavy, closely-woven cotton cloth, today worn mostly by stockmen.

ramstag mutton - the implication, without going into the literal meaning, is of tough, rank meat.

boundary riding job - again without going into the literal meaning of the word, the implication is that the singer will get a job which will keep him settled on one station - looking after the strategic, but scattered, fences - instead of leading the nomadic existence of the shearer.

sandy cobblers - cobbler is an old-fashioned word for shoemaker; the sheep which the shearer left in his pen until the end of a work period were likely to be hard to shear (because, for example, there was a lot of sand in their wool); such sheep were kept till the last and so - in the stereotyped shearers' joke - compared with the cobbler, who stuck to his last.

CLICK GO THE SHEARS

Henry Lawson tells how the gold diggers, during his boyhood days, used to sing a song by the popular American composer Henry C. Work:

*High in the belfry the old sexton stands,
Grasping the rope with his thin bony hands . . .*

Some shearer borrowed Work's tune, and some ideas from his words, and created Click Go the Shears. The collectors have found a lot of old shearers who know the song. Versions do not differ very much, but in this version - which comes from A. L. Lloyd - there are a few lines in which the humour is given a sharper point than in most others.

bare-bellied yeo - a ewe - yeo is an English dialect word for ewe - with little wool on its belly.

snagger - an unskillful shearer who leaves "snags" of wool on the sheep.

blue-bellied yeo - this means the same as bare-bellied yeo.

as it comes off the screen - as it comes off the table at which the fleeces are classed into different grades.

the colonial experience man - the English gentleman, getting some experience of life in "the colonies", by working for a time on a station; an object of both derision and resentment on the part of the shearers.

you take off the belly wool - this verse is also found in a quite distinct shearers' song; it gives an account of the order in which the shearer was expected to remove the wool.

shouting for all hands - buying drinks for everyone in the bar.

THE ROAD TO GUNDAGAI (LAZY HARRY'S)

Another of those shearers' songs about Gundagai. Maybe this one explains why Gundagai is mentioned so often in the songs of the Riverina shearers. It was a town they had to come through on the way to Sydney from many parts of the Riverina; and maybe a lot of them set off with Sydney in their eye, but found the girls and the beer in Gundagai too tempting.

This version comes from A. L. Lloyd, but the words are almost the same as those that Banjo Paterson printed in Old Bush Songs long before Lloyd arrived in the Riverina.

Roto - a place in the Riverina.

whips and whips - lots and lots.

rhino - money.

humped our blues - shouldered our swags.

three-spot cheque - a cheque for one hundred pounds or more.

wanted knocking down - just had to be spent.

struck the Murrumbidgee... and so on - the names which occur in this verse refer to rivers or towns in the Riverina region of southern New South Wales.

Matildas - swags.

nobbler - phrases such as to nobble the favourite suggest the dubious ancestry of this word; but nobbler has become respectable, and even official, Australian for a standard measure of alcohol.

SHEARING IN A BAR

In 1905 a youngster called Herbert Patrick Croydon Tritton gave up his job (making mattresses in a factory in Sydney) and headed for the bush. There he earned the nickname of 'Duke', because he was handy with his fists; he learnt shearing and fencing and other bush trades; he learnt some old bush songs; and he helped to make a few new bush songs himself. One of the first songs he made was *Shearing in a Bar*. He said himself that a lot of mates helped him make it. He also said that the tune started off as the tune of *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling*; but you would hardly recognise it, because they had to "chop it down a bit". 'Duke' Tritton died in May, 1965. Late in his life, he became well-known to folk-song audiences in Sydney. Gary Shearston sang with him many times.

at the end of every run - at the end of every work period (the day was divided into four such periods, by the midday meal and two "smoke-ohs").

trade union shears - a reference to the series of bitterly fought strikes around the turn of the century; the suggestion is that the singer has never shorn at less than the rate demanded by the union.

bogging full - the shears were bogging in the fleece, because the shearer was trying to cut as much wool as possible at every blow.

shore at Goorianawa and never got the sack - a widely sung shearing song complained that "I never saw before / The way we had to knuckle down on Goorianawa. " All the place names mentioned in the song refer to stations in north-western New South Wales.

knockers - this is 'Duke' Tritton's own explanation: "The old blade shears were just like the shears you'd buy today to clip a lawn, only instead of being bent, they're straight. But the gullet was filled with softwood, sometimes with cork; that was to prevent the shears from closing too far and hitting your forefinger. And as they were razor sharp they had only to touch it to give you a nasty cut. Well, they were the knockers; that was to stop them from closing."

bindii - a kind of weed; the prickly seeds lodge in the fleece.

catch one on the bell - when the bell rang to indicate a break or the finish of work, the shearer had to finish the sheep he was then actually shearing; and if the bell had rung for "smoke-oh" or a meal break, then he had to resume work at the same time as every one else.

the right bower - the boss of the shearing board.

rousie - rouseabout.

drove 'em on the long blow - shore quickly along parts of the sheep where it was possible to take long "blows" with the shears (as distinct from the "sardine blows" needed in trimming the crutch and hocks and so on).

ONE OF THE HAS-BEENS

This comes from A. L. Lloyd, who heard it one New Year's Day in the late 1920s when he was in hospital at Cowra. The matron was away, and the patients had a bit of a party. A bullocky from Grenfell sang this song, and some of the old-timers didn't like it. They thought the bullocky was getting at them. But the song is a very sympathetic commentary on the old battler who will never say die. This is the bushman's rather sentimental account of the old snagger who is seen a bit more realistically in *Click Go the Shears*, where he drinks hard and works hard and goes to hell at last.

The words, it seems, are the work of a bushman called Robert Stewart, who was born in 1838. The melody was borrowed from an English music-hall song which is still a favourite with many people, called *Pretty Polly Perkins*.

keep them blades down - keep the blades of the shears down close near the skin of the sheep.

Pat Hogan, Bill Bright... and so on - names of well-known shearers; Jack Gunn's name is also mentioned in Tomahawking Fred.

Lachlan - river in western New South Wales.