

ANNA'S COUNTRY
MUSIC NOTESYOUR WEEKLY COLUMN FROM THE
COUNTRY MUSIC CAPITAL

e: annarose4@bigpond.com

Folk legend finds
fresh inspiration

WHEN you're regarded as the doyen of Australian folk singers and songwriters, it's no easy mantle to uphold.

But for the ever-young Gary Shearston, it's seemingly effortless.

The words continue to flow from his prolific pen and subjects are found everywhere around him.

"The actual songwriting process varies," Gary said.

"Quite often you just feel like a channel for something that springs out of the ether ... a phrase, a word, a melody can start the whole process."

He's now returned to his childhood home in Tenterfield, with wife Karen and teenage son Luke, after a lengthy career that's taken him to the other side of the world and back again.

In his other "career", as an ordained minister in the Anglican church, he's also travelled, and ministered to many a flock.

These days though, Gary is no longer actively preaching to the converted – or otherwise – and is content to return to "the best of all trades".

Although he has a new album, *Renegade*, recently released on the staunchly Australian Rouseabout Records label, through Undercover Music, Gary says he already has 22 new songs on the go for the next release.

"Three weeks ago that total was 19. They really do just spring out of the ether," he said.

"One can't help but be inspired by the refugee situation, complete strangers, any circumstance really.

"I woke up one morning about a month ago when we'd had one of those really severe frosts. There was a blanket of frost as far as I could see and I just wrote down 'there's frost across the tablelands' ... and kicked off a four-verse song and after I'd finished thought 'how did I ever think of that?'"

"It's a tap whose dripping you don't mind."

When that constant source of liquid gold sprouts forth gems like you'll find on *Renegade*, who wouldn't tolerate such a companion?

From the opening lines of track one, *Live In Love*, you get a glimpse of the man behind the song...

I'm a holy terror, a bushranging feller, Wayfaring through this world of woe.

But no need to worry, I just have to hurry, To share with you these seeds I sow.

In that song he goes on to share the beauty we can find in nature, while hinting at past wrongs that can never be made right.

Because of his strong political views opposing the Vietnam war, his support of Aboriginal rights and his stance on nuclear disarmament, he got into more strife than Flash Gordon.

Quite a lot of his background is encapsulated in track two, *Truth Is...*

I was sacked from a job on TV, blacklisted in my industry.

My career overseas got chopped off at the knees, surreptitiously, slanderously.

*It went into a spiralling dive, counteracted by those who contrive
Just to brand whom they like with whatever they like, under licence to plot and connive.*

NATIONAL TREASURE: Bruce Elder from *The Sydney Morning Herald* has described Gary Shearston, pictured, as a "national treasure".



Now the truth is I never belonged to any political throng.

I just celebrated, as conscience dictated, good causes I could help with a song.

Later on, I recalled who I was, the singer-songwriter from Oz.

I got on with the show and continued to grow, which I had to do, simply because.

For several months in the early 2000s, Gary was locum minister at St John's parish in Tamworth, which was where we became acquainted.

Having enjoyed his music over many years prior to that, it almost felt like a reunion of sorts when I was assigned to interview the relieving minister "who played a bit of music".

Who could forget his unashamed Aussie version of the Cole Porter-penned *I Get A Kick Out Of You*, which was a #1 hit in 1974?

Ironic, isn't it? Never one to shy away from singing his own lyrics, it was that song that propelled Gary Shearston to the top of the

English pop music charts.

But as he so aptly puts it, he is "the singer-songwriter from Oz" who can spin a yarn like few others.

He has fun with words in *She's A Classic*, a fair dinkum Aussie song that laughs at how blokes can describe their women, cars and boats in equal measure.

Then in two songs, *Gone Missing*, followed by *And A Butcherbird Overhead Sang*, you're taken to the depths of despair as he mourns the loss of a dear friend, whose body was not found until 15 months after his demise.

Never before has a bush suicide been described with such heart. Its creation must almost have torn out the heart of the songscribe.

His Name Was Edgar Waters is Gary's salute to a magnificent man, one of a handful to whom Australian music owes a great debt.

This dedicated archivist and folklorist was a great friend of Gary's.

"Together with Alan Scott and John Meredith, Edgar Waters was responsible for the entire rebirth of

Australian traditional music," Gary said.

"He was the first to get a doctorate in Australian folklore, a PhD, and wrote copious notes for my early albums in the '60s."

Esteemed Australian artist Martin Sharp is saluted in *Paint Me A Painting, Painter*.

"While it was written with my great friend Martin Sharp in mind, it really is for anyone who can paint," Gary said.

"I so very much love and admire people who express their creativity in that field.

"I'd been thinking about him one day, and thought 'I could ring him up or just say it in a song', so that song was the result."

This recording experience was a special one for Gary, as his son Luke played drums on all 16 tracks.

"It's been great to have Luke play on the album. On *Renegade*, I got him to play pretty basic stuff, but on the new songs I've let him have his head, in terms of feel.

"There's a genetic connection,

and although I might sound biased, he's got his chops. He's quite an amazing drummer for his age. It's quite special to have someone feel the song the way you do, too."

The recording was made at Restless Studios in Stanthorpe, owned and operated by renowned folk musicians Roger Ilott and Penny Davies.

A multi-talented musician, Roger plays most of the instruments, while Roger and Penny's son Jordan contributes dobro on *She's A Classic*.

Lee Williams provides bass guitar on all tracks and guitars on selected others.

In the past decade, we've been fortunate to have several releases from Gary Shearston – *Only Love Survives* (2001), *Here and There, Now and Then – An Anthology* (2007), and *The Best of All Trades* (2009).

Each is filled with songs that feed the soul, challenge the mind and do the heart all power of good.

God bless Gary Shearston. He most certainly has.