

Folk legend defined nation's identity

Gary Shearston was a doyen of Australian folk music, self-described minstrel, an artist who defined Australia in his work and in his person. He was variously described as a national treasure, icon, royalty, king of the heap and a legend, and he epitomised some of his generation who, thanklessly and with love, laboured to construct an Australian national identity through culture – in his case, through song.

Striking into international fame with a top 10 hit in Britain in 1974, singing his version of Cole Porter's classic *I Get A Kick Out Of You*, he had already established himself as an essential Australian singer songwriter. His *Sometimes Lovin'* had been covered by Peter, Paul and Mary.

But Shearston the artist was never about international fame. He was about Australia, or as he later sang, "the Great Australian Groove".

The plain-wrap title of his 1964 album *Folk Songs and Ballads of Australia*, belied the arrival of a giant talent whose muse was his country. He aggressively rejected the "cultural cringe" by celebrating authentic Australian iconography, as precisely as Barry Humphries or Sidney Nolan.

Gary Shearston was born on January 9, 1939, in Inverell and his family moved to Sydney when he was 11. His first job in show business was working with Peter Scriven and his Tintookie puppet

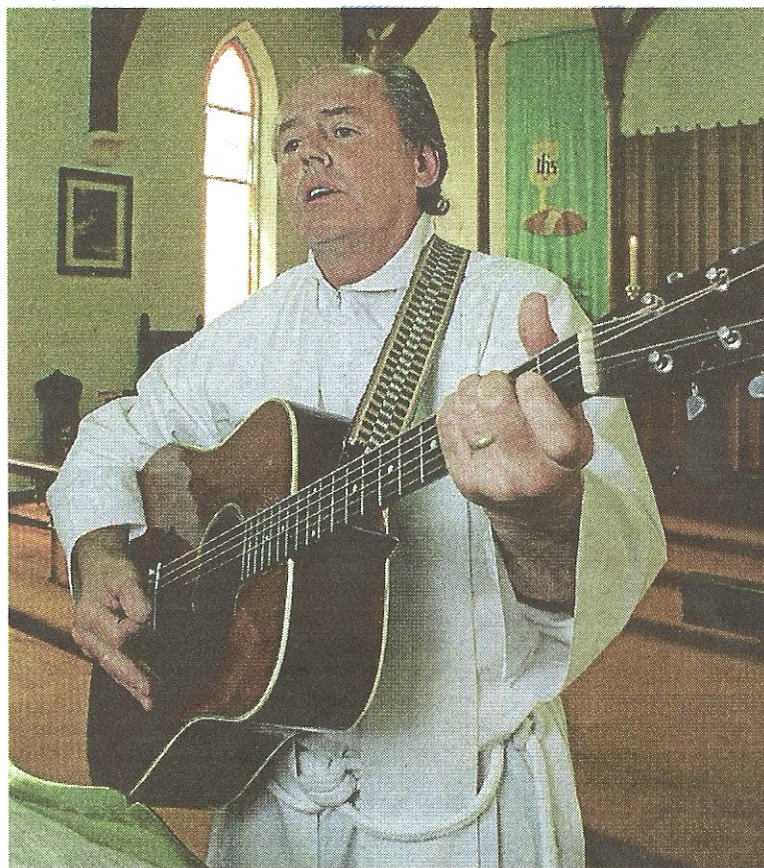


Treasure: Shearston in 1972, above, and later as an Anglican priest. Main photo: Simon Alekna

theatre. There was something cosmically fitting about Shearston kicking off with this most quintessentially Australian show. He was handsome, talented and compelling. He quickly progressed as a young song writer-singer to his own folk TV show, with local hits by the mid-1960s.

Next, Shearston joined friends in London; the list of talented Australians who went to London in the '60s is famous itself. He played songs at the Pheasantry studio for Martin Sharp with an eclectic audience ranging from the Living Theatre to R. D. Laing and many Australians. With Eric Clapton rehearsing in the next room, "those were the days, my friends".

Coming to artistic maturity in the 60s, Shearston faced the task of straddling a lost Australia he



loved, for example, of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson and the demands of his own generation.

The tragedy of the Vietnam War was reflected in his work and contemporaries such as Bob Dylan, and his friends Peter, Paul and Mary.

His anti-war view, widely shared by his generation, may have affected his career in the highly polarised US, and restricted his

clicked. In a plot twist, he was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1992. He never stopped song writing, and left the priesthood in 2007, subsequently creating albums such as *Renegade* and *The Great Australian Groove*.

Shearston's style was direct, with unmistakable authenticity in his oral depiction of Australian themes. His albums continue to grow in stature and define his era. He held a lifelong friendship with Sharp – both artists who relished a profound understanding of what it means to be Australian. Sharp championed Shearston for decades.

In 2011, at 72, Shearston delivered the virtuoso album *Renegade*, with drumming by his son Luke, containing a paean to Sharp called *Paint Me a Painting, Painter*. The album, showing undiminished creativity, contains *She's A Classic*. He wittily references his Porter hit, Aussie-style, singing "She's a goer."

In the '60s, he was an intense combination of ambition and naivety, intellect and instinct. That could describe many artists. There was something also spiritual about him, so it was no surprise when he joined the church. Still, when he left and erupted back into the Great Australian Groove, friends were relieved he resumed his greatest talent: being the national minstrel.

Gary Shearston is survived by his wife Karen and children Bonnie and Luke.

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