

The Dylan of his day and an Aussie through and through

REVIEW OF THE WEEK

GARY SHEARSTON

Here & There, Now & Then
(Rouseabout Records)

Gary Shearston was the closest Australia ever came to producing a local version of Bob Dylan.

An influential singer of traditional folk songs during the 1960s, Shearston was also a gifted songwriter, a radical re-interpreter of the folk tradition (who else thought of using reggae as a backing for Australian songs as early as 1974?).

If you need further evidence, had he not been banned from travelling to the United States due to his involvement in the anti-Vietnam movement, he would have ended up being managed by Dylan's manager, Albert Grossman.

When US Immigration locked him out, Shearston went to London where, signed to Charisma Records (famous for a catalogue that included Genesis and Van Der Graaf Generator), he scored a hit with an unadorned version of Cole Porter's *I Get a Kick Out of You*.

By any measure Shearston's career has been an enviable journey. From Jim Carter's Troubadour folk club in Sydney, to London, then back to Australia where, having written a novel, he recorded the remarkable *Aussie Blue* before joining the Anglican clergy. He preached in the Riverina and on the North Coast and, at one point, wryly observed that he could now be called "the Reverend Gary Shearston" like the great African-American folk bluesman, the Reverend Gary Davis.

This 42-track double CD is long overdue. It brings together the essence of Shearston's remarkable



Australia's Dylan ... The Reverend Gary Shearston.

career. All the bases are covered. Starting with his haunting and melancholy reading of *The Springtime It Brings on the Shearing*, it includes a range of sublime interpretations of traditional Australian folk songs, all recorded in 1965, before moving effortlessly to sensitive readings of Don Henderson's witty *The Basic Wage Dream* and Oodgeroo Noonuccal's passionate *We Want Freedom*. Shearston's early forays into songwriting, *Who Can Say?* and *Don't Wave to Me Too Long*, hover somewhere between Dylan and Donovan.

They lead, quite naturally, to the extraordinary collection of self-composed songs on his two

masterpieces *Dingo* and *Aussie Blue*. *Baia*, about an enduring love of Australia, is still one of the great expatriate songs. It floats on an ocean of nostalgic feeling and, quirkily, is backed by a stuttering and wildly eccentric reggae rhythm.

The difference between Shearston and Dylan is essentially cultural. Dylan's influences were Woody Guthrie and the poetry of the Beat Generation. Shearston is unashamedly Australian. He is a modern Henry Lawson whose music is infused with a "love of country" that makes it unique to this continent. He has felt the rhythms rising from the land and has turned them into timeless music.
Bruce Elder