

BILL SCOTT chats with **ROGER ILOTT** about his early folk recordings, and the beginning of the Folk Centre in Brisbane; recorded at Warwick, Queensland, May, 2002.

Roger: Bill, could you tell me a bit about the recordings you did with **Stan Arthur** all those years ago?

Bill: Well, Stan and I did several recordings. Jacaranda Press, who I was working for at the time, had put out a couple of poetry anthologies for schools, edited by **Professor A.K. Thompson**, from the University of Queensland. One was called "*Off the Shelf*", the other was "*Living Verse*". There were LP's made to be given free to schools who were using the anthologies as text books, and old A.K. had a number of folk songs scattered among the more orthodox poems, and included them on these recordings. He had a very clean version of "*One Eyed Riley*", I think I've still got copies of the records in there...

Roger: Was "*The Billygoat Overland*" on those recordings as well?

Bill: No, no, that was a separate recording, Rog - that was made in 1958. The year before, we were also featured on the "*Folksongs from Queensland*" recording that Wattle put out. "*The Billygoat Overland*" was one that Stan and I did. We recorded it at the Starlight Recording Studio, but we used John Callaghan's equipment, he had beaut equipment that he built himself. We taped 7 or 8 songs on "*Billygoat Overland*". It was a most unusual record, it was the size of a 45 but it ran at 33 1/3. I think I've still got one. The following year there was a 10 inch LP made called "*Folksongs from Queensland*", half of which was made by John Manifold's mob, the **Bandicoots**, and the other half was made by the



Moreton Bay Bushwhackers - Stan, and myself and **Gary Tooth** and I haven't got a copy of it, somebody stole my copy of that, but I do have it on a reel to reel tape of all things! The two records we did for Jacaranda Press, I think were in the early to mid '60's.

**Bill with Ron Edwards,
Bill Wannan & Stan Arthur**

Roger: We were looking for those reel to reel tapes one of the previous times we were here!

Bill: I think I know where they are. I stumbled over them again the other day. Those were the earliest recordings that were made of folksongs in Queensland at that time.

Roger: And did the Folk Centre come out of those recordings that you were involved in?

Bill: No, at the time we were the **Moreton Bay Bushwhackers**, and we flourished until after the Queensland Centenary thing was over, in 1959. Then we got terribly busy - I got the job at Jacaranda Press and Stan was working and doing other things and the other blokes got transferred away - with the Public Service.

Roger: There was Stan and you and Gary. Were there other people in the band?

Bill: Oh yes, there was a lovely old guy who was a fiddler. I can't remember all their names though - after all, it was 40 years ago nearly!

Roger: Did you do a lot of performances?

Bill: Yeah, we did a lot of performances as the **Bushwhackers**. We attended the Centenary Celebrations at Cleveland and played on the back of a truck!

Roger: Any photographs of that time?

Bill: No, oh no. We performed at the Boilermaker's Picnic at Sandgate - on the back of a truck! But at that stage of the game there was such a lot of blokes who wanted to dress up and be in the band, but they didn't have any musical talent and they couldn't sing. So they all made "jingling johnnies". That's how Stan and I learned to sing very loudly. We had to! There was a guy called **Theo Braun** - he was a German fellow - a railway engine driver, who came out to work on the Snowy Scheme. He used to play the Waldzither. He was very good too. And there was a Russian wharfie called **Wally Mehonashen** who used to play the squeeze box and he was very good also. So it was a real multicultural **Bushwhackers** band, it really was.

Roger: So how did the Folk Centre come into being?

Bill: Actually there were a couple of coffee lounges that started in Sydney, but at that time in Queensland you couldn't sing in a pub and there were no coffee lounges around at all. And when **Pete Seeger** came to Australia - this was around 1962 or 3 - he was going to Sydney and Melbourne, and there was a team of about 20 of us in Brisbane and we said, "Well, why can't Pete come up to Brisbane and do a concert for us here?" We'd got to guarantee him some money, so we all put in twenty pounds each - which was a lot of money. We got in touch with Pete and he said, "Yeah, yeah, I'll come up." So we hired the Stadium, the old Stadium, not the current one, which was started up about 30 years ago, and he actually performed in the Boxing Ring - in the middle. And we were very lucky in that we had a sell-out, which means we didn't do our money and we were able to give Pete a really decent fee. So we still had, I suppose, about two hundred and fifty quid, and we said, "What'll we do with this? Will we take our money back or what?" And we said, "No, we won't, we'll start our own coffee shop".

Stan was the moving spirit, and he discovered this sort of attic room in the Royal Geographical Society building in Ann Street. So he bought second hand tables and chairs and painted them black, and they got hessian and hung it on the walls and painted everything black. By expending our two hundred and fifty quid, we had a coffee shop! I was on the Committee, and I said, "There's only one thing, it's got to be proper coffee, none of your damned instant stuff". And everybody said, "Yeah, yeah. That's great." So we started up there and it exploded really, and the bloke at the Royal Geographical Society said, "We've got a big basement down there, why don't you move down into the basement?" So we did, and that's where we eventually stayed for the next nine years I think - down there. We carried the décor and colour scheme down there - black! But it was a marvellous coffee shop.

We used to hire and pay a featured artist every weekend. We only used to open three nights a week - Friday, Saturday, Sunday nights. People like **Don Henderson**, **Margaret Kitemura**, and people like that. And, as well as that the resident group was the **Wayfarers**, which was **Stan Arthur**, **Gary Tooth**, **Theo Bosch**, and **Bob Stewart**. The four of them, they used to belt out everything from Israeli folk songs in Jewish and we used to get a lot of Irish from Stan, of course, and we had chess sets and draught sets. The good thing about the Folk Centre was at that time in Brisbane nothing happened on a

Sunday night – and there were a lot of kids – University Students, and Student Nurses from up at the Holy Spirit Hospital on the Terrace, and kids from Teachers’ Training College – and they’d all be at a loose end on a Sunday night. They’d all be broke and they could come down to the Folk Centre – I think it cost a shilling or two bob to get in – something like that. And you could get a big doorstep slice of bread with a tin of baked beans on top for about a shilling and a cup of coffee for sixpence and they used to come down and feed themselves. There were kids all over the place. Heinz baked beans on toast – very cheap. So it flourished.

People who went to the Folk Centre have never forgotten it. On several occasions middle aged ladies have come up and given me big hugs and blokes have come up and shaken me by the hand and said, “I used to come down to the Folk Centre when I was a kid.” **Dave de Hugard** was a Pharmaceutical student at the Uni – that’s when he started his interest in folk music, coming to the Centre.

Roger: Did you do some performing at that time as well?

Bill: Yeah. That was how the “*Uncle Arch Stories*” came to be written. Because they would do anything to stop me singing!

Roger: They didn’t entice you into the **Wayfarers**?

Bill: They said, “For Christ’s sake, can’t you read ‘em a poem or something?” So I wrote the first couple of Uncle Arch stories, and I read those and they became enormously popular. I used to have to turn out a new one every now and then that they hadn’t heard before. They loved hearing the same ones over and over again. They could almost recite them. Stan still uses them, they tell me, at the Kookaburra. He’s still reading Uncle Arch Stories. But that was how they came to be written.

There were some very funny things. I used to read poems as well, not my own so much. I’ve never forgotten, one night, it would have been about ‘63 or ‘64 – remember the beehive hairdos and black eye shadow? I was doing a poem; I think it was one of Ted Dyson’s, a poem called “*The Old Whim Horse*”, which is a poem about an old horse, and in the finish, he dies. Well, there were girls were sitting at a round table down in the front; three of them looked up, and two of them had these dreadful black scars down their cheeks, and they were both crying about the old horse. Their black eye-makeup shadow had melted and run down their cheeks! They used to use white face powder and black lipstick. I thought, oh my God they’ve been hurt – but they hadn’t, they were just crying. They’d probably never even seen a horse – but it’s such a wonderful poem. So I used to do poems and Uncle Arch stories, and every now and then I’d do a song like “*Hey Rain!*”

Roger: Was that your first attempt at songwriting?

Bill: No, I’d done “*Hard On A Lass to Be Lonely*” back in the ‘50’s, but “*Hey Rain!*” was about the second time I’d tried to write a song.

Roger: You’ve absorbed a lot of folksongs, Bill.

Bill: An enormous number of folksongs, Rog. I still startle myself sometimes by coming up with one that I’d totally forgotten I knew. I was thinking the other night about one that I heard **Burl Ives** sing a number of years ago and I realised quite recently that what it is, is the “*Douglas Tragedy*”. The Childe Ballad, the “*Douglas Tragedy*”, taken to America and given a new set of words and a new tune. (Sings) “*Soldier, soldier a’ comin’ from a plain, and he loved a lady to honour and to fame, he loved his lady dearly above a love of gold, and she loved her soldier because he was so bold, tra la tra la la la.....*”

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