



Between the Lines

The Folk Process at work in Australia

By Jason Roweth



"These songs are meant to be shared."

- Carrie Milliner

PLEASE do not hesitate to send an item to me if you feel you have something to contribute - ditties, parodies, songs, even fragments of songs, stories about the singers & musicians... please contact me via The Millthorpe Post Office, NSW, 2798, phone/fax on 0263 663 260 or email usnothem@speedlink.com.au. My thanks go to the collectors of Australian folklore, and to The National Library of Australia for supporting so much of their work.

This is the sixth 'Between the Lines' instalment. Previous columns have contained the following songs...please contact Trad&Now for back issues of the magazine.

Issue 1 I Don't Work for a Living

The Rambling Bachelors
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Engines/Machine Guns They Rattle

Songs from Pat Nightingale and Neville Drysdale

Over the last few weeks I've had the great pleasure of listening to the field recordings of two very interesting blokes - brothers-in-law Neville Drysdale (b. 1930) and Pat Nightingale (b. 1910). Neville and Pat both told some great yarns and sang some very interesting songs. Pat is also a Hawaiian Steel guitarist! Neville also plays conventional or "Spanish" guitar. Collectors Rob Willis and John Harpley made the recordings in 1996, in Keppel Sands, QLD. Thanks to Rob for giving us a copy of the tapes and to John for his original transcriptions of the first two of these beaut songs. Thanks also to Chloe Roweth for her transcription of "Shearing Boots".

The Death of the Shed Rep

- Source: Pat Nightingale

Neville and Pat spent years in the shearing sheds of central NSW and a few of the more obscure references in "The Death of the Shed Rep" may need some explanation. Folks who wanted work in the shearing sheds would start as rouseabouts - "rousies" or shed-hands. In search of the better money that you could earn as a shearer, a rousie could learn to shear by "barrowing". This was the practice of getting to the shed early in the morning to shear a sheep or three before the shearers clocked on. The Shed Rep. would look down on this as unpaid or even scab labour. The story goes that one rep died unexpectedly and the song "The Death of the Shed Rep" was born. Pat Nightingale had learnt the song at a shed north of Lightning Ridge, in around 1933, and sang it for Rob and John with a warning that I'll pass on to the reader - "I hope you don't mind the swearing".

The Death of the Shed Rep

There was a mad shed rep, and a bast - ard they say, Who had for his mot - to "work eight hours a day", When the rous - ies would bar - row you'd hear the rep. yell, Then he'd get as hot as the tom - cats in Hell.

There was a mad shed rep and a bastard they say, Who had for his motto, "work eight hours a day", When the rousies would barrow you'd hear the rep yell, Then he'd get as hot as the tomcats in hell.

Now the rousies, poor bastards, were having their fun, When up jumped the rep like a shot from a gun, He said, "you can't barrow, you know it's a farce", And he pissed them all off with a kick in the arse.

Now the rousies were gloomy, their pleasure was done; They couldn't see why they'd been stopped from their fun. And they had no ideas 'til the penner-up said, "We'd be far better off if the bastard was dead", So we put a death adder in the mad bastard's bed. (repeat last line melody)

Now the rousies next morning were first out of bed, They tore round to see if the shed rep was dead. As stiff, stark and cold, with a smile as he lay, And the rousies all murmured, "we'll barrow today".

They all had their breakfast and went to the shed, They knew very well that the shed rep was dead. And they worked with a will and they worked with a way, And the song that they sung was "We'll Barrow Today".

Now one stand lay idle where the shed rep had been. He never was heard of or ever was seen. For the rousies had buried him deep in the pit, And covered him over with big lumps of shit. (At this point Pat chips Rob and John with "stop laughing - this is serious")

Now the shed rep has gone where all bad shearers go, He's down underground where they're shovelling coal, And his motto "you must not work more than eight hours", Was changed by the rousies to, "please bring no flowers".

The Flash Sydney Shearers

You've heard of those flash Sy - ney shear - ers, They're the flash - est of men out of town, There's noth - ing so flash of by gol - ly, As a shear - er when shear - ing comes round.

The Flash Sydney Shearers - Source: Pat Nightingale

The following is an interesting excerpt from the field recordings.

Rob Willis: "Was there much singing going on in the sheds?"

Neville: "Oh, we had to do most of the entertaining."

Pat: "I'd hear some of them singing while they were shearing, you know, singing to themselves. But - pretty shy sort of a mob - they don't like to come out in front of a mob and do anything."

Rob: "Where did you pick up the songs?"

Pat: "Mostly young people - young rouseabouts. They'd learn one at this shed and they go to the next shed, and they sing it, and someone else picks it up, you know, like that...I used to get the guitar out we'd all sing different songs, you know, and I'd play. A couple of 'em sang those ones, and I wrote 'em down so I wouldn't forget 'em."

While working in a shed on the Paroo river Pat picked up another terrific song - "The Flash Sydney Shearers".



Shearing Boots On

– Source: Neville Drysdale

Neville Drysdale sang this one with the following introduction.

"Well, there was this fella down there [central NSW] named Bill Higgins, and he picked a skeleton of it up somewhere in South Australia - don't ask me where - but he could remember snatches of it and we got together - we were flooded in one year at a place out near Roto - and we got together there and we sort of worked on it a bit and come up with what it is today."

**Tired and weary from shearing all day,
To a hut in the valley a stray took my way.
To the hut in the valley I quickly strode on;
Enquiring my way with my shearing boots on.**

**To the hut in the valley I quickly strode by,
And the sound of my footsteps, they brought forth a cry.
Tired and weary, "Is that you John?"
"Yes sir", said I with my shearing boots on.**

**Well she opened the door and I quickly stepped in,
And into the bedroom she offered me then.
The night being cold and the blankets rolled on,
I slept there all night with my shearing boots on.**

**But early next morning about break of day,
I said to my true love "I must be away".
And she said "John, oh Johnny, you know you've done wrong.
You slept here all night with your shearing boots on."**

**Well I rolled on my back with a laugh and a smile,
I said "How could I do wrong in such a short while?
What I have done I have done it in fun,
I'll do it again with my shearing boots on."**

**Six months later, seven months at least,
That pretty little damsel grew thick round the waist.
Eight months later, nine months along,
She brought forth twin sons with their shearing boots on.**

**Well after ten days to the court I was brought,
To stand like a sinner, as everyone thought.
Bad deeds and bad actions I was told then to shun,
And I hung down my head with my shearing boots on.**

**You've heard of the flash Sydney shearers,
They're the flashest of men out of town.
There's nothing so flash, oh by golly,
As a shearer when shearing comes round.**

**He cut's out each shed and is happy,
He puts on the dog and all that.
He'd whip anything in creation,
And ends up by whipping the cat.**

**In most sheds you'll always find growers;
"In the last shed the sheep they cut well.
But these are the regular howlers,
As tough as the sinews of hell".**

**They set all hands growling and muck up,
They growl at the shears and the sheep,
They growl at the cook and his tucker,
And snore, snort and fart in their sleep.**

**And when all the shearing is over,
And the mince-balls have come to an end.
It's then you will find those flash shearers,
Cooking Johnnycakes down at the bend.
And when they return to the city,
It is then they become mild and meek.
It is then you will find those flash shearers,
Going up for their dole every week.**

Shearing Boots On

Pat Nightingale

– Steel Guitarist!

Pat was born in Rockhampton, QLD, on the 17th of March (St Patrick's Day) 1910. As he says, "no wonder they called me Pat". He spent his early life around the Mount Morgan area, and moved to Sydney with his family when he was 14. At 16 he grew weary of the rat-race and went bush, starting work on a property near Tullamore (central NSW). He comments, "I wouldn't call it work - it was doing something you loved". He talks of carrying his swag as a young bloke; even a trip to the Northern Territory on horseback. Here's an insight from Pat into life on the track in the Great Depression.

"It's a funny thing - now, there's men everywhere! This is 1928, there was men coming up the bloody Darling river - see Broken Hill was closed down - and there was men carrying their swags everywhere. You've got no idea! Now this last depression was not a depression at all. You know, in the thirties I seen doctors and solicitors carrying their swag out of Sydney! I seen thousands of people camped out of the bloody towns, all up on the river banks in bag humpies - because they was kicked out of their houses.....and what amazes me is - they never kicked! No one started talking about having a revolution to change anything! They all accepted it, and they were the nicest people you could ever meet....I was an 18 year old boy in amongst hundreds and hundreds of swagmen....and not one of them ever did me a bad turn! You couldn't do it today, could ya?"

He worked at rabbit trapping and in the wool sheds as a rousie and a cook, and settled down to married life in the Euabalong area of NSW. He took a short but momentous trip back to Sydney in 1928. I'll let Pat pick up the story...

"...when I walked into the bedroom to chuck me swag in the bloody corner, there's a steel guitar sitting there, see. And I said to mum "What the hell's this? I've never seen anything like this before!". She said, "That's a Hawaiian Steel Guitar your sister Florrie brought home from The Islands". See Florrie was a nurse and she'd gone to the Islands to be a nurse and she fell in love with this guitar and brought it back. And I only run me fingers across the strings and I fell in love with it too - even though it wasn't in tune! So I said to mum "Gee, I'm going to learn to play that". You know, I went all over Sydney and couldn't find anyone to teach me. Palings knew nobody. I was three years before I found anyone to teach me to play the guitar, and I never let up! So I found a bloke [Arthur Tookey] that could play. And he only learnt 'cause he paid a Hawaiian band that came over to Sydney.....for them to show him as much as they could. They started him off....and I hung around Sydney for a couple of

years while I was playing guitar, see."

And what sort of guitar did he end up with? Obviously pointing at his pride and joy, he says "I bought that in Sydney, in 1938 or 39. That was the first Hawaiian Steel Guitar that came to Australia. It was made by Rickenbacker and if they knew that was there, they'd pay thousands to get it!" No doubt they would. An electric steel guitar in Sydney, in 1939! He bought it from the "Nicholson's" store in George St, Sydney, along with a "Vibrator" six-volt car battery powered tube amplifier!

The tuning was an open A chord, low to high E,A,E,A,C#E. He played in a steel guitar band - three players, one taking the high melody part, the other two coming in as they felt they could with bass and/or harmony in rhythm. He talks of the importance of a good bass/rhythm player to good music, as it frees up the melody player for the evocative double stop/harmony playing on the top three strings, which he demonstrates wonderfully. Another later band that Pat played in was a family affair, with a line-up of steel, electric lead and bass, and acoustic rhythm guitar.

The range of tunes Pat has played over the years is not limited to the beautiful Hawaiian instrumentals. He speaks of playing for waltzes, the sets and other old style Australian dances in the bush, sometimes even using the Hawaiian tunes! He even talks of one time playing solo for a whole dance in Ivanhoe (western NSW). He makes one memorable comment regarding playing without amplification for the old dances - "you had to hit that first string as loud as you could because the sound had to go right out over the heads, to get to the people at the back of the hall, see (demonstrates with shrieking note!) - loud? Loud as I could bloody well get it!" What key did he play in? "I play mostly on A, three sharps...more volume. But when the bloody electric guitars come in...they learnt to play in all these other bloody side keys see! Like bloody so many flats, so many sharps...C! D! F! bloody G! bloody three or four flats down here somewhere!" Point taken.

To hear the recordings of this very accomplished and experienced musician play, and talk about playing, is a real joy. The tapes are available from The National Library of Australia - Willis Collection. Simply give the library a call, quoting tape references TRC 3388/56-57 and TRC 3388/58.

About a Shearers' Cook

– Source: Pat Nightingale

Shearers' Cooks have a terrible reputation - I'm sure this poem recited by Pat is no exaggeration.

*There's a cook on Mumble-Bumble oughta be in gaol they say,
For his numerous offences in the culinary way.
Most everything the beggar had - curried, hashed or fried,
Would create a revolution in an Ostrich's inside.*

*All the Crows and the Goannas get most awful stomach aches,
Taking chances on the fragments of the dampers that he bakes.
And no self-respecting emu ever ventures on his cake,
For they get appendicitis if they eat them by mistake!*