

# WARREN'S ON THE WALLABY

AUSTRALIAN FOLK AUTHORITY WARREN FAHEY TALKS ABOUT HIS MAGNUM OPUS AND OTHER MATTERS

Warren Fahey OAM is deeply concerned about the welfare of Australia's folk heritage. That's why the veteran folklorist, who has toiled as record producer, author, performer and oral historian for forty years, decided to put his money where his mouth is. Fahey has self-financed a 194-tracked, two volume, 10-CD box set that stands as a definitive guide to Australian *Folk Songs And Bush Verse*, which is indeed the collective title of his master work.

After digesting the feedback accrued from a recent survey he conducted among other movers and shakers in the Australian folk business, the loquacious Sydneysider describes the situation as "critical".

"More young folk than ever seem to be performing at festivals, and attending festivals, but they are nearly all steering down the John Butler road, like sheep!" he exclaims in frustration. "I'm not that surprised about the shift away from our traditional music – probably in tandem with the shift away from Australiana books, etc. We seem to want a more 'glamorous' history... we want *The Bold And The Beautiful*," he adds. "Song words seem to have no relevance in our dumbed-down society. Songs are just another 'product'... I guess that's one of the reasons I had to do the CDs and everything else I do to bang the drum."

For all that, Fahey allows himself some optimism. "After forty years of hard slog, I have immense hope that the world will turn around and realise that Australia has produced a unique folk music born in both the bush and the big smoke." He points out that other nations treasure their traditions more than us – for example, France and Canada, which have a 50% local content law in regards radio airplay. France, he adds, encourages folk festivals that celebrate regional difference, such as InterCeltique. Three in every five children in Brittany, he reports, learn a traditional instrument at school.

Fahey says he has never sought "overt commercial success" in any of the myriad folk enterprises he has been involved in, though he concedes he's usually found "that happy land" of break-even. "My main aim [with *Folk Songs and Bush Verse*] has been to show Australians that our folk song treasury offers more than songs about sheep, sheep, sheep, a couple of cows, and more sheep. I think I have proved that with

these recordings."

He's certainly achieved his objective with the wide sweeping box set, a truly monumental undertaking that's the culmination of a lifetime's endeavour. "It is a life's work in as much as I have been researching the songs for so many years. Many are songs I actually taped in the early 1970s for my National Library *Oral History Collection*. It was wonderful to be able to record little-known songs that had been entrusted to me by old singers. Songs like Cyril Duncan's 'This World Is Like A Bag Of Nails' or 'A Long Time Ago On The Logan' would never be recorded except by me."

Fahey financed the magnum opus entirely out of his own pocket. "I paid all the studio costs, paid all the musicians. I called on a few favours, but I wanted to own the masters. I was determined to do this project come hell or high water and only presented it to the ABC after I had finished the recordings. I am extremely grateful to my long-term supporters at the ABC because I would never have had the resources to do this on my 'Pat Malone'. By owning the masters, I was able to persuade them that the series must be released as single CDs as well as the two box sets."

Surprisingly, given the significance of his project to Australian musical heritage, he

was unable to acquire any government funding. "There are no Australia Council grants for recording projects and there were no other avenues other than begging. I am also disadvantaged by my age – most of the arts grants these days are for 'young' and 'original' acts. They do not see what I do as 'original', which is weird."

Fahey's masterwork might delve deep into Australian history and he might sing the songs in a traditional way, but his chief accompanists – keyboards' maestro Garry Steel and stringed instrument whizzes Marcus Holden and Clare O'Meara – have laid down music beds that are innovative and have some contemporary resonance. "Marcus, Clare, Garry and sometimes Mark Oats are my fellow Larrikins, and I have never enjoyed making music as much as I enjoy working with these people. They are all exceptional musicians and I feel honoured they enjoy working with my often eccentric repertoire. You will note I gave Marcus, Garry and Clare 'co-producing' credits. They told me no one has ever credited them in this fashion before, despite their musical contributions to countless recordings."

The Larrikins had never heard many of the songs on the box set prior to the recording phase. "We all created the songs in the studio, and much of the music seemed

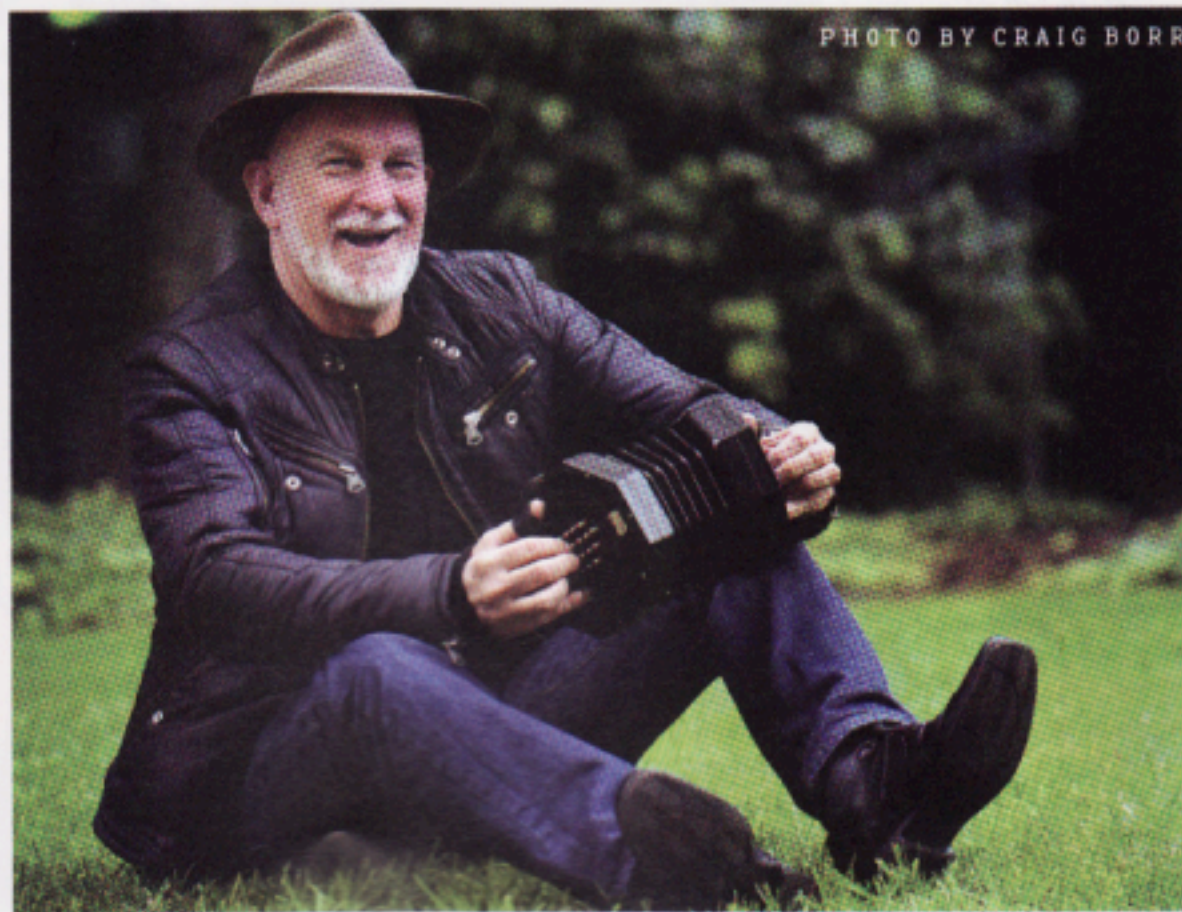


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