AdmitONE WEEKLY ENTERTAINMENT NEWS

History comes to life with Jim

RECORDING people's stories is a very worthwhile occupation and Blue Mountains-based singer-songwriter Jim Low does it better than most.

When I first listened to his new album, *The Further I Travel*, it felt familiar, a bit like an old friend telling me things I hadn't heard before – with one exception.

Towns Along the Castlereagh I definitely had heard before and when interviewing Jim for a feature story in *Country Music Capital News*, I asked him if Gary Shearston had covered the song.

"Don't I wish!" was his rapid response, as Shearston was one of Jim's major musical influences, along with Eric Bogle.

That song was originally recorded by Jim several years ago and Ian "Macca" McNamara had flogged the living daylights out of it on *Australia All Over*.

It also won the major songwriter's prize at the Henry Lawson Festival at Grenfell, NSW, some years back. Kootingal retiree John Martin was on the judging panel that year and became one of Jim's greatest supporters.

You'd think it would have been a challenge for a songwriter to put Coonabarabran and Binnaway into a song, but the northern towns' names flow effortlessly from Jim's very listenable voice.

The album is rich with Australian history and stories that had to be told.

Boyd's Tower tells the tale of the whalers of yesteryear and as Jim says, he's in no way condoning the whaling trade, but admires the courage of those men who practised the trade when it was widely accepted.

"It's a good way of bringing out that part of our history in an accessible way, that makes people think, or want to find out more," Jim said.

Boundaries is a thought-provoking piece, exploring the various boundaries we encounter in life – racial, social and otherwise.

An avid history buff, and former teacher, Jim started writing that song in 1980. He read about Governor Phillip exploring Sydney Cove and one incident stood out from all the others.

"He was around the Manly area and the soldiers he was with were about to have an afternoon dinner, and he drew a circle around his group," Jim said.

"Through sign language, he told the inquisitive Aboriginal people to stay away from the circle. That was the first boundary that was set between white and black.

"The fact is there are a lot of boundaries in our life, not always ones that we see."

GREAT STUFF: Jim's new album.

Dreaming With Open Eyes is about the explorer, Ludwig Leichhardt, who was "short of sight and with a vision grand" – a condition Jim shares with the explorer.

The title track was inspired by Robert O'Hara Burke, of the ill-fated Burke and Wills pairing.

Two years before that fateful expedition, Burke fell in love with a young actress, Julia Mathews, and gave her a bracelet. This delightful song tells the story and makes you think how often Burke's thoughts would have turned to his lady love as he faced his doom.

The King is taken from an adaptation of a poem written by Jim Harper in 1907, as was *When Angledool Was Young*.

"I found his poetry through an old family friend, who recited them to me and I put down on tape in about 1970. Twenty years later I went to Angledool, where he had come from," Jim said.

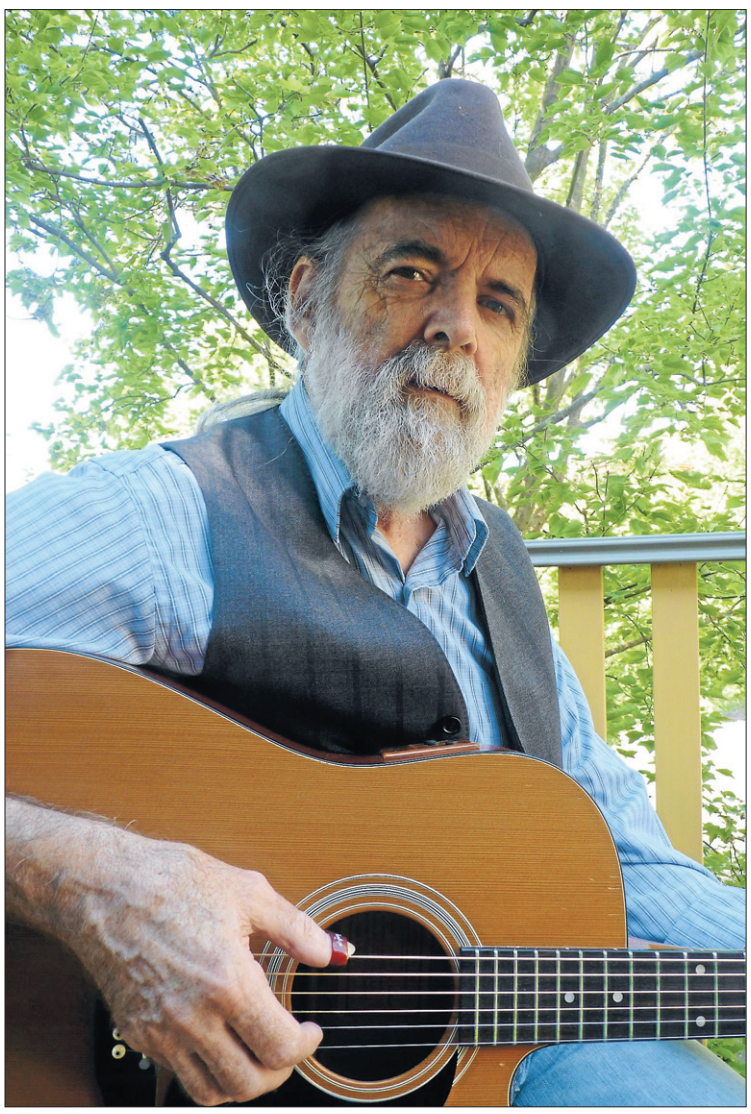
"When someone's writing about a township that has seen a lot of change, especially how change had affected the indigenous people, you can learn a lot from their writings, as I did from Jim Harper's."

At Pennyweight Flat is about a cemetery on the outskirts of Castlemaine, in central Victoria, where between 1852 and 1857, nearly 200 children were buried in shallow graves. It became known as God's Acre.

Track eight is a lot closer to home for many in the North West and New England. It tells the horror story of the massacre at *Myall Creek Station*.

Jim wrote this song from trial transcripts of the seven stockmen convicted and executed for the murder of 30 Aboriginal people.

Engines of the Southern Cross recalls the days when "Smithy" – Charles Kingsford Smith – ruled the skies while *Luna Park* is memories of the fun of Jim's childhood, growing up in Sydney.



SONGMAKER EXTRAORDINAIRE: Jim Low tells stories that have shaped our nation's history on his brilliant new disc, *The Further I Travel*.

Songs of Peace is Jim's protest at the futility of war.

Dancing In The Dust came about from meeting an old retired drover and horsebreaker in Coonabarabran, which was Jim's first teaching appointment.

"He'd retired when I met him, spending his final years working on the council," Jim said.

"The stories he told captured a period of the past that if you don't talk about it and record it, it'll disappear.

"He had such an interesting view of life. He was of that generation that lived a hard life, but he had a great sense of humour and always saw the funny side of life."

They were hard days but they were good

That's what it's all about

Every saddle, he'd say, has thirty ways

One in and twenty-nine out!

The closing song on the album is another walk back through Jim's childhood in Sydney, telling of the enigmatic Arthur Stace, known as *Mr Eternity*.

The album was recorded, mixed and mastered in Millthorpe, NSW, by Chloe and Jason Roweth, two extremely talented musicians in whom Jim has found kindred spirits.

"We met in the mid 1990s and I'd reviewed a few of their records and they later set up their own recording studio near Blayney," Jim said.

"I approached them about recording some of my songs basically to have something to give to my kids and grandkids.

"The working relationship was what I'd always envisaged. Their musical interest in traditional Australian songs and clever arrangements of the songs brought them to life on my previous album, *Above The Creek Bed*."

The response from radio stations meant it went much further than Jim ever expected, so they recorded *The Further I Travel* – and the good news is, he's not done with recording yet.

He's now on the same label, Rouseabout Records, as his two musical inspirations – Bogle and Shearston – and pleased to be in such fine company.

About five years ago Jim's sight began to deteriorate and he ceased performing. He's now declared legally blind, but fortunately, he's been heartened by the response to these latest album releases and has returned to the stage.

"Even though I have sight problems, I just love reading, and with the technologies today, it's slower, but I'm very fortunate I've got some things that can help me to still read," he said.

"With computers you can blow words up to the size of the big screen. I always liked writing things down, but I'm now getting used to putting my thoughts down on little pocket recorders.

"Because of my disability, I've had to change how I do some things. You sometimes value the things you didn't value before, but the fact is I still have some eyesight and can go out in the bush around my home.

"I get lost all the time, but I avoid the edges of cliffs and only venture about 2km from home.

"I know this area. I walk it differently – and I fall down a lot, but then that gives me the chance to touch the ground."

Jim has an excellent website, www.jimlow.net where you can find out so much about this extraordinarily gifted man.

If you ever see Jim Low's name on the bill, grab a front row seat and sit down and take a trip back in time with this wonderful journeyman who's keeping our history alive for future generations.

KINDRED SPIRITS: Jason and Chloe Roweth and Jim Low make some great music together.