

# SALLY SLOANE

## 'Queen of Singing Folk'

Jenny Gall considers a significant holding in the Oral History and Folklore Collection

Warren Fahey's 1976 field recordings of Sally Sloane, held in the Library's Oral History and Folklore Collection, shed light on the intimate links between Sally's singing style and her life.

Before Fahey, Sally Sloane (1894–1982) had been recorded by John Meredith and, highlighting the importance of field recordings of Australian folk music from the 1950s to the present, her voice and talent would have been lost forever if it had not been for his recording activities and those of the other collectors who followed him.

The informal setting for field recordings—usually the kitchen or living room of a musician's home, with the associated background noises of daily life—contributes to the genuineness of the musical experience. In Meredith's recordings of Sally in the 1950s, the sounds of dishwashing are heard backing her rendition of 'The Spring Time It Brings on the Shearing' (TRC 4/19), but the tape was not left running for Sally to tell the history and context of her songs. Warren Fahey's later interview (TRC 5274/1-5), made in 1976, offers a more continuous soundscape, showing how Sally used her music not just as an accompaniment to domestic duties but also as the fibre that linked people and events in the web of her everyday life.

Sally's music is the oral record of a series of personal relationships inspired by



affection and respect. The field recordings provide an 'audio portrait' of her, created by her vocal idiosyncrasies, the fragments of conversation between her and the collector-recorder, and the background sounds of her personal sound-world—the particular creak of her floorboards and the sound of her dishes in the sink—in relation to the songs she sings. For Sally Sloane and many women singers, her home and the sounds distinctive to it provide an informative accompaniment to her songs.

Graham Seal, who accompanied Warren Fahey on his 1976 visit to Sally, describes the different singing voices she used:

She shifted her style to suit the song and was able to perform in a number of different styles. She sang to us as an audience—she would close her eyes ... She found a stillness once she got going.

John Meredith (1920–2001)  
*Portrait of Sally Sloane, Teralba, New South Wales* 1957  
sepia-toned gelatin silver  
photograph; 18.6 x 23.8 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an7497136-128



above:  
Warren Fahey at the Third National Library Forum at the 2005 National Folk Festival: 'Meet the Collectors' at the Village Stage

below right:  
John Meredith (1920–2001)  
Sally Sloane with her accordion  
Courtesy Bob Bolton

Sally's interview with Fahey never flags, and alternates light and dark material: the frivolous 'Oh Biddy You Are so Handsome' follows the serious piece, 'The Old Oak Tree'. In the solemn ballads, her voice is arresting and focuses attention on the narrative without the distraction of sentimental stylistic elements or irrelevant accompaniment.

The most valuable achievement of Fahey's interviews is his documenting the relationship between Sally's music and her life. As mentioned,

unlike John Meredith earlier, Fahey kept the tape rolling almost continuously while Sally sang and spoke. This technique captured the interrelationship of songs and singers down through the generations, with Sally explaining the lineage of the songs she learned, and telling something of those she learned from—giving autobiographical detail, and telling of the influences on her performance style. Fahey's seven tapes reveal the songs that were most deeply ingrained in Sally's memory late in her life. They contrast with Meredith's earlier interviews, where the quantity of material recorded was great but the conversation severely restricted because finances meant that he had to conserve his tape.

Sally was 82 when Warren Fahey recorded her in 1976, and her choice of repertoire represents the songs most significant for her. There is a notable increase in her vocal strength, and assurance with the text, when she sings 'The Maid of Fainey', 'Ben Hall', 'The Luggage Van Ahead', 'The Green Bushes', and 'The Journeyman Sailor' (TRC 5724/3). Sally is acutely aware of the deterioration of her voice, but just as firmly committed to giving her performance.

I dunno—if you'd heard me about 40 years ago—can't sing now. You know I nearly cry now sometimes over it, [I was] always singin' when John'd come—I'd be cookin' away or doin' something, he used to say 'that's when Sally sings the best when she's at the sink, washin' up.'

Sally's age is evident when she sings 'The Journeyman Sailor' (which in this rendition she turns to 'Tailor'). The background fire is crackling and the wind is heard wailing through a crack in a window as she sings. The juxtaposition with the summer setting of the song and the wintry sounds of the field recording are striking as she exerts her vocal power, shifting the listener out of the present and back into ballad 'reality'.

One of Sally's most powerful songs was 'Ben Hall', learned from her mother. In her interviews with both Meredith and Fahey, she recounted the story of Ben Hall's sister, Mrs Coobung Mick. It was Mrs Mick's husband who betrayed Hall to the troopers, and she was carrying a child at the time of Hall's shooting.

Sally's vocal style in this late performance of the song could almost be described as keening, and many listeners describe it as 'unpleasant'. This 'unpleasantness' derives from the emotion Sally is communicating in the ballad as a lament. Ben Hall's sister was the midwife who delivered Sally, and Sally tells the tale emphasising the injustice of Hall's punishment. Ben Hall and Ned Kelly

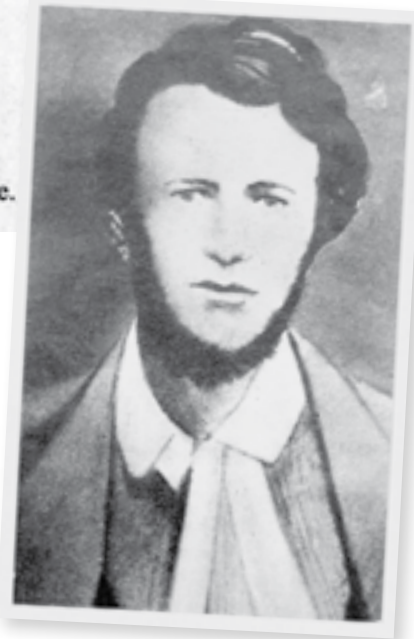


## Ben Hall

Come all you young Aus - tral - i - ans, and eve - ry - one be - sides - I'll  
sing to you - a dit - ty that will - fill you with sur - prise, Con -  
cern - ing of - a 'rang - er bold -, whose name it was Ben Hall, But  
cruel - ly mur - dered was this day, which prov - ed his down - fall.

Come, all you young Australians, and everyone besides,  
I'll sing to you a ditty that will fill you with surprise,  
Concerning of a 'ranger' bold, whose name it was Ben Hall,  
But cruelly murdered was this day, which proved his downfall.

An outcast from society, he was forced to take the road,  
All through his false and treacherous wife, who sold off his abode.  
He was hunted like a native dog from bush to hill and dale.



above left:  
Musical score for Sally's  
version of *Ben Hall*  
reproduced from *The Sally  
Sloane Songbook*  
(Sydney: Bush Music Club, 2004)  
Courtesy Bob Bolton

above right:  
Unknown photographer  
*Portrait of Ben Hall* c.1865  
sepia-toned gelatin silver  
photograph; 23.7 x 14.7 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an12596897

were the people's heroes and Sally describes their fate with great animation.

I'd hate to hear his [Ben Hall's] reputation—O God, scandalised! He wasn't a bad fella! ... And the same with Ned Kelly—his mother, they put her in jail when she was going to have one of her babies, every time there'd be any wrong, of course Ned was supposed to do it ... It's a pity he didn't get a few more of them!

The direct line of transmission is Sally's measure of authenticity for a song, as demonstrated by 'The Luggage Van Ahead'. Originally a sentimental parlour song, Sally had learned it from her mother, and sings it with the same intensity as 'Ben Hall'. The story of the father nursing his distressed child while his wife lies dead in the luggage van of the train tells of loss and abandonment in a way that resonated for Sally and her mother strongly enough to change the song from a ditty into a family heirloom:

As the train rolled onward, the husband sat in tears  
Thinking of the happiness of just a few short years  
Baby's face brings pictures of a cherished hope  
that's dead  
But baby's cries can't waken her in the luggage  
van ahead.

The listener's first reaction is to pass over this sentimental song in the search for the next 'traditional' item, but Sally's delivery demands attention. Her songs often concern the plight of the disadvantaged. Sally's granddaughter, Cheryl Wotton, comments on Sally's sympathies for people in difficulty: 'Nan was always taking strays under her wing if anyone needed a break—she'd have the whole family to stay.' Sally's repertoire epitomises her personal values.

While Warren Fahey asks the questions in the interviews, Sally clearly remains in control of the line she wants to pursue. The associations of songs, events and characters are the mental web that constructs her pattern of response to Fahey's requests for music and information. There's an interesting synchronicity in the interview, as the sound of a ticking clock is audible early in the interview and Sally twice refers to herself as a wind-up musical timepiece: 'Oh I'm not wound up yet' (TRC 5724/2), and 'He must think I've got a main spring!' (TRC 5724/3). She perceives herself as a pragmatic seer, mediating between the present and the past, where the old songs survive in her memory: 'Oh they'll all come to me by and by'

right:  
John Meredith (1920–2001)  
Sally and her fiddle  
Courtesy Bob Bolton

below:  
Bob Bolton  
Sally and Fred at the Bush  
Music Club Subscription Ball,  
1979  
Courtesy Bob Bolton

(TRC 5724/1). Reaching back to the source requires a process of being 'wound up' by the action of recollection and musical performance.

Sally's involvement with the narrative of her songs is complete. After singing 'The Old Oak Tree', she retells the story of the song (printed as a broadside in Dublin in 1867). The Irish broadside has been absorbed into Sally's Australian worldview, and she is outraged equally at the brutality of the murder which the song describes, and the brazen stupidity of the murderer in leaving the murder weapon with the victim.

Well he was a big squatter, and this girl he mucked around with her, and he killed her and he never said anything about it, and they went out hunting with the dogs, and you know what them dogs are like, sniffin' and snarlin', and tearing, and anyhow they held a bit of an examination and there they found her body, they dug around and found 'er. [Shouting] And he left the knife in the breast! That's what done him in! (TRC 5724/5)

With the stories of 'Ben Hall' and 'The Old Oak Tree' fresh in her mind, Sally makes it clear that, unlike the tragic characters she has sung about, she herself is no victim. When Warren Fahey asks her, 'Do you know any songs about boxing,' Sally replies:



No I used to *do* it, not sing it ... The fellow who learned me used to travel with the shows, a fellow by the name of Johnson. I can take me own part! I used to love it too!

Warren Fahey's 1976 field recordings build on John Meredith's earlier tapes from the 1950s to provide a more vivid portrait of Sally Sloane—her artistry, and her resilience—illustrating how her repertoire was set in her memory in relation to significant people and events (TRC 5724/1-6). What might appear at first as a random choice of songs from different cultural origins is in fact a repertoire constructed through a lifetime of relationships.

Sally Sloane was a bard and a story-weaver of the first order—worthy of the title John Meredith bestowed on her as 'Queen of Singing Folk'.

JENNY GALL is a folk music practitioner and historian completing a PhD in Musicology titled 'Redefining the Tradition: The Role of Women in the Evolution and Transmission of Australian Folk Music'