

## From Folksinger to Singing Historian: Phil Garland, Collector of NZ Folk Songs and Bush Verse

Julie Hawkins

**ABSTRACT:** This obituary article recognises the significant contribution of Phil Garland to the folklore movement of not only New Zealand and Australia, but also of the world. Throughout his life, Garland engaged with folk and bush poetry and song, collecting and recording authentic materials that would otherwise have been lost. How he did this, and how, in the process, he followed the New Zealand Folklore Society's goals, is a clear demonstration of folklore collection practices followed world-wide, which are briefly explored in this article.

**KEYWORDS:** Phil Garland; Obituary; Bush Verse; Folk Song; New Zealand Folklore Society

Known as a folk balladeer,<sup>1</sup> 'musical historian' or 'singing historian', and regarded as the Father of New Zealand folk music, the late Phil Garland was a respected folklorist as well as an accomplished musician.

Garland (1942-2017) was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, and grew up with a love of rugby and cricket. His viewing of the seminal film 'Rock around the Clock' in 1956 would change his life significantly, as it led him to dedicate his life to music, particularly rock music. He bought a guitar and began to play and sing with a band. Indeed, Brown notes that by 1964, Garland had been a 'well-respected professional performer', the veteran of 'several Christchurch rock 'n' roll bands', before becoming 'an enthusiastic convert to folk music'.<sup>2</sup> When in 1965 he set off on his 'OE'<sup>3</sup> where he would become acquainted with a wide tradition of folk music through visiting folk clubs in Britain, he took with him to England his

---

1 'Singing Historian' Phil Garland dies', <<http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/nat-music/audio/201836991/singing-historian-phil-garland-dies>> [accessed 2 December 2017]

2 Michael Brown, 'Earnest Spade Work: The New Zealand Folklore Society, 1966-1975', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 44, (2007), pp. 127-160, (p. 132). <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40206947>> [accessed 2 December 2017]

3 'OE' stands for 'Overseas Experience', commonly referred to as a 'Gap Year' by 21st century students and taken immediately after graduating from high school. In the 1960s, it was significant as a means to gain some work-related experience in Europe before finding work in New Zealand and 'settling down'.

Gibson Hummingbird 12 string guitar and 'half a dozen uniquely New Zealand folk songs' (RNZ). He returned home a year later with the idea of searching for what might be a considerable tradition of New Zealand folk poetry and bush verse still waiting to be discovered, and made it his mission to 'gather and preserve for posterity' the songs and stories of New Zealand.<sup>4</sup>

\*

\*

### *Garland's Contribution to New Zealand Folklore*

Garland became close friends with Frank Fyfe, who founded the New Zealand Folklore Society, and also worked with Rona Bailey, who was a pioneer collector of New Zealand folksongs during the folk revival movement of the 1950s in Wellington. In 1966, Garland went on to open his own branch of the Society in his hometown of Christchurch. He was also a founding member of the Christchurch Folk Music Club, and managed to 'expand his repertoire of New Zealand songs'<sup>5</sup> sufficiently to record close to 20 albums, publish six books, and become 'three-times winner of the NZ Folk Album Award',<sup>6</sup> the most recent of these being in 2007. In 2014, he was awarded a Queen's Services Medal (QSM).

Early influences in Garland's approach to collecting folklore included a New Zealand documentary called 'Roads to Nowhere', broadcast on National Radio, and an early familiarity with Kiwi folk songs gained from 'listening to recordings by the Song Spinners'.<sup>7</sup> Garland would later research the interaction between the early bush verse of Australia and New Zealand, kindled by the presence of Australian shearers in New Zealand, and leading to an influence from the works of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson, and also from Australian bush poets who settled in New Zealand, including C.H. Winter.<sup>8</sup> Much of Garland's training in folkloric practices came about through his association with Frank Fyfe, founder of the New Zealand Folklore Society in Wellington. The goals that would guide Garland's folkloric practice, were those which became enshrined in the constitution of the Society:

4 Phil Garland, 'Chasing a Dream', *Journal of Folklore Research*, 44, (2007), (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 161-172 (p. 161). <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40206948>> [accessed 2 December 2017]

5 Brown, p. 132.

6 Charlie Gates, 'Father of NZ folk music' farewelled in Chch', *Stuff*, <<https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/music/90800958/father-of-nz-folk-music-farewelled-in-chch>> [accessed 3 December 2017]

7 Garland, p. 161.

8 Garland, p. 162.

1. To foster a more widespread awareness of New Zealand's folk culture and a greater understanding of the country's history as expressed in this culture;
2. To collect songs, poems, stories and anecdotes relating to New Zealand's history;
3. To record, collate, publish and preserve these collections;
4. To encourage present day composers of material in the tradition of New Zealand's folk culture.<sup>9</sup>

Garland, during his career as a folksinger, folk song collector, and songwriter, involved himself in achieving all of these goals.

Goal 1: Garland fostered 'a more widespread awareness of New Zealand's folk culture' through his lifelong activity of communicating New Zealand folk tradition through singing, recording and publishing song lyrics.

Goals 2 and 3: Garland collected folk and bush poems and songs which he describes in some detail in his article 'Chasing a Dream'.<sup>10</sup> He researched folk poetry and bush verse in the Hocken library in Dunedin, where he discovered a 'treasure trove' of folk poetry and bush verse. He found works that had been published in Australian newspapers such as the *Sydney Bulletin*, as well as in New Zealand's early newspapers and other publications. He later researched folk and bush verse in Central Otago, where he also obtained permission to sing folksongs to children in the schools. This enabled him to make enquiries about family songs in the Otago area, and to talk with churchmen and other local identities, which in turn led him to make contact with some of the 'colourful characters' involved in folksongs and bush poetry.<sup>11</sup> Garland writes that he went to Arrowtown 'in search of a song' heard by members of the National Film Unit during one of their visits. The lead he followed on this journey had been passed on from Hugh McDonald, leading producer of the Film Unit, to Frank Fyfe, who then gave the details to Garland, along with 'the names of two possible informants'.<sup>12</sup> Arriving at the Arrowtown pub frequented by one of these informants, Davy Dennison, Garland was able to introduce himself to Dennison and enquire about the song 'The Life of the High-Country Shepherd'. Garland writes:

His reaction was pretty positive and he seemed keen to help, so I asked if he minded my setting up the tape machine to record him singing it. He instantly demanded that I put it away and said if I wanted to learn the song I'd have to do it the same way as his children had: 'orally'.

---

9 Brown, p. 134.

10 Phil Garland, 'Chasing a Dream', *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 44, No. 2/3 (May - Dec., 2007), pp. 161-172.

11 Garland, p. 163.

12 Garland, p. 164.

Consequently I spent the entire evening singing, chatting, and learning the song, whilst consuming copious quantities of whisky. Eventually, I staggered back to the local camping ground where I was staying, set up the tape recorder, and began singing somewhat drunkenly into the microphone around 1 am. Fortunately, I'd done a good job in remembering it all, and my performance exists in the New Zealand Folklore Society's archives today.<sup>13</sup>

This story is an example of how Garland carried out the Folklore Society's goals numbers 2 and 3 in his collecting activities, since he both sought and made recordings of folk songs, and sometimes discovered more than one variant of the same song, coming from different sources. He writes that in the case of the 'Life of the High Country Shepherd', he was approached some time later by Colin and Jean MacNicol when visiting Invercargill in 1990. They had heard him singing the song on National Radio and were 'quite dismayed' that he 'did not have it correct'.<sup>14</sup> Colin informed Garland that his own grandfather had written the verses while mustering sheep during the 1920s on Mt. Aurum Station. His father had set the song to music in the 1940s using an existing tune, and 'duly named it the Shepherd song'.<sup>15</sup> This incident illustrates the way in which, historically, an oral folksong tended to evolve in the hands of singers who would pass the song onto others in the role of troubadour and balladeer, thus spreading it throughout the countryside, and opening it up to further adaptation. This represents one timeless quality of folklore, that, in all of its various manifestations, Folklore is a living lore, adaptable to the changing circumstances of the folk themselves once it has become part of their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Goal 4: This last goal of the NZFLS involves 'encouraging present day composers of material', which we can see Garland accomplished comprehensively both through his tours and recordings of collected songs, and through his original compositions that were styled in the folk music tradition. In his article 'Chasing a Dream' Garland describes colourfully some of his early collecting activities, which acts as a wonderful record of folk-collecting technique, and a strong encouragement to fresh folklorists wanting to set out on their new career. Frank Fyfe's article 'Why Collect?' (1966),<sup>17</sup> had drawn attention to 'the lack of New Zealand folk songs' that were being heard 'in coffee houses and concerts' at the time.<sup>18</sup> It is clear that Garland succeeded in remedying this situation during the course of his

---

13 Garland, pp. 164-165.

14 Garland, p. 166.

15 Garland, p. 167.

16 Garland sets out this story and the two versions of the lyrics in full in 'Chasing a Dream', where he comments about the MacNicol's in parentheses that 'obviously they had never heard of the folk process'. For details, see Footnote 5.

17 Frank Fyfe. 1966. 'Why Collect?', *Sing*, April 17, 1966, pp. 35-36.

18 Brown, p. 131.

career, both inspiring and motivating others to record and sing and collect even more songs.

\*

\*

### *The New Zealand Folklore Society*

A comprehensive history of the activities of the New Zealand Folklore Society is given by Brown in his 2007 article 'Earnest Spade Work'. He writes that 'the two NZFLS members who seem to have used collected material most extensively in the revival context' were Phil Garland and Neil Colquhoun.<sup>19</sup> Colquhoun developed a revivalist project, one among many, called 'Song of a Young Country', which carried the songs of New Zealand to a wide public audience by means of 'concerts, radio programmes, and recordings'. The series began in 1968 with 'a fund-raising concert' that consisted of songs interspersed with commentary and recitations:

A radio adaptation of the project aired in September of the following year, featuring Auckland singers and musicians performing songs either collected by Colquhoun or composed by revival songwriters like Dave Jordan. The concept was finally developed into a double-LP release, *Song of a Young Country*,<sup>20</sup> and a lavish song anthology titled *New Zealand Folksongs*.<sup>21,22</sup>

After having been responsible for the great accomplishment of establishing New Zealand Folklore throughout the nation, and achieving the collection of a wide range of folkloric materials, the Society disbanded in August 1975 after experiencing 'problems in retaining members', an issue Brown suggests was 'aggravated by a falling-out between members'.<sup>23</sup> Although there are many who have collected stories and poems over the years in the effort to preserve this body of New Zealand's cultural material, clearly, Colquhoun and Garland were prominent figures who were involved in both creating a foundation for this work, and in carrying it forward. It was the singular occupation to which Garland would dedicate the remainder of his life.

\*

\*

---

19 Brown, p. 140.

20 Colquhoun, 1971.

21 Colquhoun 1972, p. 140.

22 Published by the leading local firm, A.H. & A.W. Reed.

23 Brown p. 151.

### *Influences on Garland as Folklorist and Folk Singer-Songwriter*

In late 2016, Phil Garland had been about to embark on a farewell tour, accompanied by members of the band Bush Telegraph. At his first concert, he was to re-release a digitised version of his 1970 album 'Down a Country Road'. The write-up he prepared for this occasion reads:

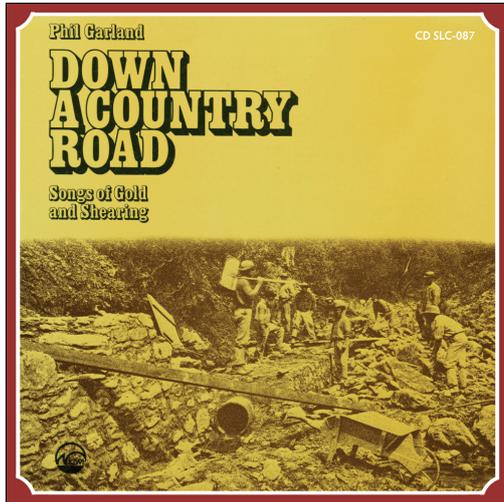


Figure 1. CD Cover for Garland's Down a Country Road.

This recording highlights New Zealand's story and the way people have lived and recorded it in homespun balladry. These songs were collected from both old timers and younger people that Phil met as he travelled thousands of miles into the remoter parts of New Zealand.<sup>24</sup>

The phrase 'homespun balladry' captures a vital element of the way folklore can evolve within families and communities, sometimes in isolation, and

often in remote locations. Perhaps it is a way of making sense of life's experiences and contradictions, a type of philosophical response to the unpredictable, and even the unthinkable, by offering a sense of consolation that arises from traditional truths, which resonate with the heart in a variety of human contexts. Such 'homespun' verse has enriched folk traditions all over the world, in service to the human quest for meaning.

In an interview on the *Simply Australia* website,<sup>25</sup> Garland discusses his approach and role as a folksinger and folklorist, and his interest in writing meaningful songs. Having been brought up 'on a diet of classical music before being seduced by early Rock'n'roll music', Garland says it took him five years to discover Folk Music 'and its story-telling ability', and it was this latter that kindled his interest.<sup>26</sup> His early folk influences included: 'The Kingston Trio, The Limelickers, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Tom Paxton and a little later The Corries and Ewan McColl'.<sup>27</sup> The arrival of

<sup>24</sup> Garland's write-up for his farewell tour was presented at the Christchurch Folk Music Club on 4th September 2016, and has been published on the website folkmusic.org.nz in an article entitled 'Remembering Phil Garland'.

<sup>25</sup> Jim Low, 'New Zealand's singing historian Phil Garland talks to Jim Low, April 17 2004'. *Simply Australia*.

<sup>26</sup> Low, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Low, p. 1.

Bob Dylan on the folk music scene gave Garland the idea that he might also write meaningful folk songs, and while he began writing in the American style, he says he eventually resigned himself to the fact that everything he wrote 'seemed to have a Kiwi flavour and content. When he performed his songs in the local folk club, to his surprise 'they were very well received'.<sup>28</sup>

He mentions a number of other influences during the interview:

I feel I've learned from various sources and songwriters over the years. The British and Australian traditions have been major influences, which must surely include the folk movement at large. I have also learned from many of my informants and local rhymesters along the way. If I had to single out anyone in particular, it would have to be Henry Lawson, who not only did so much for Australia, but also New Zealand as well. He had a very strong influence here, particularly on the work of Otago poets David McKee Wright and Ross McMillan, for whom I have gained a great deal of respect.<sup>29</sup>

When asked about some of the places he has performed and the associated memories, Garland responds that when he gives performances around New Zealand:

People come up and share snippets of verse, songs and background information to poetry and stories associated with Kiwi folklore. Every one of these performances is a potential collecting exercise and is never taken lightly. There have been times I have written songs about historical events and occasions to have someone come up after the concert and say 'You've just sung about my family' or 'that happened to my family'. Such responses give me the impetus to continue writing in the knowledge that I'm not only telling their stories, but adding to the national archive of oral history.<sup>30</sup>

He clearly continued collecting New Zealand folk songs throughout his career, and in doing so, he made an invaluable contribution to his country's storehouse of recorded folk and bush poetry, songs and lore. Information on a range of Garland's recordings can be accessed at the National Library of New Zealand.<sup>31</sup>

---

28 Low, p. 1.

29 Low, p. 3.

30 Low, p. 2.

31 The URL of the National Library of New Zealand is: <https://natlib.govt.nz> and the address on this site for Garland's recorded audio work is <https://natlib.govt.nz/items?i%5Bcategory%5D=Audio&text=Garland%2C+Phil%2C+1942-> while his books are *Faces in the Firelight: New Zealand folk song and story* Date:2009 From: Wellington, N.Z. : Steele Roberts, 2009. By: Garland, Phil, 1942-2017.

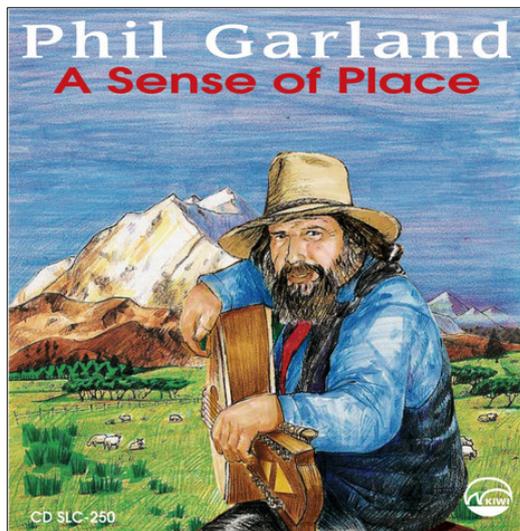
\*

\*

### *Garland's Legacy*

This article has sketched in lightly a few of the details of Garland's life and legacy as an important Folklorist and Folk singer. We will end with comments by a few of those who knew his achievements well:

Phil Garland is one of New Zealand's true musical treasures, a respected folklorist and a musical balladeer. His mission for over 30 years has been to gather and preserve for posterity the songs and stories of New Zealand.<sup>32</sup>



Garland was a kingpin in the home grown folk music scene for half a century, as singer-songwriter and as folklorist and collector of precious heritage material: poetry, songs, stories and yarns from our colonial past. He was acknowledged as the foremost authority on local folkloric heritage, and it is testament to his musical ability, his broad-based knowledge, his perseverance, and commanding stage presence that he was able to earn a lifelong living in this musical field that is arguably as fringe to mainstream music as poetry is to populist literature.<sup>33</sup>

Figure 2. CD Cover for Garland's *A Sense of Place*.

Phil will be missed by the many people he impacted during his rich life, not only for his music, but his teaching, Running of folk clubs and music nights, concerts and so much more. He is survived by his brother and five daughters.<sup>34</sup>

\*

\*

<sup>32</sup> Charlie Gates, 'Father of NZ folk music' farewelled in Chch', *Stuff*, March 25th, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Rosa Shiels, 'Phil Garland Profile.' *Audio Culture*. March 20th, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> (NZME) 'Kiwi Folk Legend Phil Garland dies, age 75.' *Otago Daily Times*, Allied Press Ltd., 16 March, 2017.

### References

- Brown, Michael, 'Earnest Spade Work: The New Zealand Folklore Society, 1966-1975.' *Journal of Folklore Research*, 44, (2007), 127-160.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40206947> [accessed 2 December 2017]
- Colquhoun, Neil, *Song of a Young Country: New Zealand Folksongs*, (Various artists) (1971) LP recording, Kiwi SLC-101/102.
- Colquhoun, Neil, *New Zealand Folksongs: Song of a Young Country*. (Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed, 1972)
- Garland, Phil, *Faces in the Firelight: New Zealand folk song and story*. (Wellington, N.Z.: Steele Roberts, 2009)
- Garland, Phil, *The Singing Kiwi*, (Albion Park: Willie Wag Productions, 1996)
- Garland, Phil, 'Chasing a Dream.' *Journal of Folklore Research*, 44, (2007), 161-172. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40206948> [accessed 2 December 2017]
- Garland, Phil, *The Phil Garland Songbook*. (Hastings: Kiwi Pacific Records, 2012)
- Garland, Phil, 'Farewell Tour' (2016), In 'Remembering Phil Garland.' *Christchurch Folk Music Club* (2017) <<http://www.folkmusic.org.nz/phil-garland-2017.php>> [accessed 3 December 2017]
- Gates, Charlie, 'Father of NZ folk music' farewelled in Chch', *Stuff* (2017) <<http://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/music/90800958/father-of-nz-folk-music-farewelled-in-chch>> [accessed 3 December 2017]
- Low, Jim, 'New Zealand's singing historian Phil Garland talks to Jim Low, April 17 2004.' *Simply Australia*, (2017) <<http://simplyaustralia.net/interview-philgarland.html>> [accessed 3 December 2017]
- Shiels, Rosa, 'Phil Garland Profile.' *Audio Culture*, (2017) <<https://www.audioculture.co.nz/people/phil-garland>> [accessed 3 December 2017]
- NZME, 'Kiwi Folk Legend Phil Garland dies, age 75', *Otago Daily Times*. (Otago: Allied Press Ltd., (16 March, 2017) <<https://www.odt.co.nz/news/national/kiwi-folk-legend-phil-garland-dies-age-75>> [accessed 2 December 2017]
- RNZ Music, 'Singing Historian' Phil Garland dies.' *Radionz.co.nz* (2017) <<http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/natmusic/audio/201836991/singing-historian-phil-garland-dies>> [accessed 2 December 2017]

### Musical Recordings

'Little Band of Gold' (Single) (1964); 'Down a Country Road' (1971); 'Colonial Yesterdays' (1975); 'Dreams of a Boy' (1982); 'Springtime in the Mountain' (1984); 'Hunger in the Air' (1986); 'How Are You, Mate?' (1990); 'Dancing on the Edge' (1992); 'Under the Southern Cross' (1996); 'A Sense of Place' (1997); 'Swag o' Dreams' (2001); 'No Place Like Home' (2005); 'Southern Odyssey' (2007); 'Wind in the Tussock' (2009); 'Damper, Duff and Doughboys' (2012); 'Billycan Ballads' (2014).<sup>35</sup>

35 This is by no means a complete list, but rather a list of all the recordings for which I could find a reference. If you know of others, perhaps you might find time to write a Note, in response to this article, to *Australian Folklore*, including the details you have. Some

*Online Resources of Interest*

<<http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/nat-music/audio/2531869/phil-garland-in-session>>

<<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Music/People/G/GarlandPhil/>>

<[http://www.kiwipacific.com/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=206](http://www.kiwipacific.com/product_info.php?products_id=206)>

<[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=phil+garland](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=phil+garland)>

<<http://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid=161702>>

<<http://natlib.govt.nz/blog/posts/folkies-and-flonkers>>

\*

\*

\*



*Phil Garland. Photograph supplied by CHART - The Christchurch Music Industry Trust. <<http://christchurchmusic.org.nz/>>*

---

references I found had details that differed from others, so I tried to take the title and date from the site which seemed to have more 'authority'. You can find details of some of these recordings, including some live performances, and also a range of interviews on the National Library website, at: <<https://natlib.govt.nz/items?i%5Bcategory%5D=Audio&text=Garland%2C+Phil%2C+1942->>>