

PASSIONATE HERITAGE

BY JOHN E MINSON A.M.

Take the award winning pairing of husband and wife JOHNNY ASHCROFT and GAY KAYLER, a collection of uniquely Australian songs, and a passion for the heritage of this great nation, and the result is a fascinating journey.

JOHNNY ASHCROFT is the one-time yodelling, guitar-strumming hillbilly singer who ultimately, as a singer, songwriter and recording artist, put more songs on Top 40 charts over a 17 year period than all other Australian country singers combined. These

included *They're a Weird Mob*, *The Girl Behind the Bar*, *Big River b/w The Flying Red Horse*, *Billabong Bill The Whinger*, *Playground in My Mind* and *Holy Joe the Salvo*.

His smash hit, *Little Boy Lost*, the best selling Australian recording of 1960, topped Top 40 charts longer than the combined

number one appearances of *A Pub with No Beer* and *Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport*. It received Australia's and New Zealand's first 45rpm Gold Records. Johnny was the first country artist to appear on Australian television (ABC 1956), he was placed in Tamworth's inaugural Country Music Hands of Fame (1978), and was inducted into the Australian Country Music Roll of Renown in 1986.

GAY KAYLER is a Royal Command Performer, national award-winning artist and television personality whose regular appearances ranged from *George Wallace Jnr's Theatre Royal*, *The Late Show*, *Swing 'n' School* and *Anything Goes* to the national audiences of *Bandstand* and **JOHNNY O'KEEFE's** *Sing, Sing, Sing*.

Together, Johnny and Gay were a much loved musical pairing, appearing on the iconic first country music show at the Sydney Opera House in 1974 just after its opening.

But Australianiana is Johnny Ashcroft's first love, and in 2007 the couple has combined to release a superb compilation of songs on the Two CD set, *Here's To You, Australia!*

Drawn from two notable vinyl releases, 1972's *They All Died Game* and 1989's *The Cross Of The Five Silver Stars*, plus four tracks, 24 of the songs are written or co-written by Johnny, and feature a collection of true stories, fully researched, from Australia's heritage.

Gay's role, apart from her musical contribution with both duet and solo performances on the album, was an incredibly painstaking labour of love.

With great determination and passion, Gay created these CD masters on a domestic computer over a seven month period, manually removing each vinyl click and clack to preserve the vinyl warmth, ambience, integrity and the recognised superiority of 'the vinyl sound' for posterity. All were done without digital enhancing, or any other automatic vinyl refurbishment programme.

With his deep, rich voice, some would argue that having Johnny Ashcroft sing country is like crop dusting with a 747. Certainly during his long career he sang a lot of non-country material. On stage he would do a swinging version of the jazz standard *Muskrat Ramble*. He even performed and



recorded with **GRAEME BELL'S ALL STAR JAZZ BAND**. But while he enjoys a wide variety of contemporary music, his first love is songs about Australia.

And with good reason, says Johnny. "My great, great, great grandfather marine corporal John Gowan came to Australia on the Sirius, and the first John Ashcroft was a convict on the hell ship Surry, on which fifty people died, including the captain, the ship's surgeon and its officers. So I'm both a first fleeter, and descendant of a convict."

So it was that when deciding on the 28 songs for this set, he selected those that are dearest to his heart; songs he considers "of historical importance".

The result is an amazing journey with many characters and events that shaped fascinating periods in Australia's history.

The opening track, *I Am Australian*, defines both the theme of the set and Johnny Ashcroft, with a never-before-released version by Johnny and Gay.

The Night Before I Die, written by Johnny and Joe Halford, and recorded with the ABC orchestra, is set in convict Ashcroft's hometown of Liverpool, depicting the thoughts of a convict, the night before his deportation to Botany Bay.

Then Johnny proceeds to take us on a ride with many of Australia's legendary bushrangers.

Run Cesor, Run tells of the ex plantation slave who became Australia's first bushranger and was ultimately shot in western Sydney.

From West Australia's famous *Moodyne Joe* with its jazz underlay to Matt Brady and *Captain Moonlight*, the album continues its historical ride.

Thunderbolt's Lament tells the story of Yellilong, an aboriginal girl who rode lookout for her lover, and *Sixteen Summers* is the sad tale of a nine year old, sent to Tasmania for stealing an apple. He escaped, and became known as the Boy Bandit. He was hanged at just sixteen years.

The Twilight Bar In Frisco is the story of Frank Gardiner who got 32 years for stealing 14 000 pounds from the Eugowra mail coach, yet ended up the respectable proprietor of the Twilight Bar in San Francisco.

Who'll Light A Candle In The Morning is a poignant tale of the night before Ned Kelly was hanged, when his mother Ellen visited



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him in Melbourne's Pentridge gaol.

Donahoe's Lullaby, featuring steel guitar legend **KENNY KITCHING**, is about popular Irishman Bold Jack Donahoe, who came to Australia in 1825.

No bushranger collection would be complete without Ben Hall, and *On The Fifth Of May* tells of the man who turned bushranger after he was framed by an ex trooper who ran off with his wife Biddy. Tracker Billy Dargan, an aboriginal boyhood friend led troopers to Hall's hideout.

And the final track *We'll All Die Game* fittingly sums up the feeling of bushrangers towards authority.

The second CD is broader in its Australian themes, and also features Gay in both solo and duet modes.

It appropriately starts with the classic *Little Boy Lost* (the original 1960 version) with its true story of the largest ever land and air search for Steven Walls, a four year old lost on February 5, 1960 in rugged bushland

near Guyra, NSW.

The set includes the salutary *Here's To You, Australia!*, *The Explorers' Waltz* reminding us of our good fortune to live in this great South land and the reflective *Reliving The Years* that reminds us of quieter times when friends were "true blue" and contracts were sealed with a handshake.

The Cross Of The Five Silver Stars tells of the miners' uprising at Ballarat's Eureka Stockade, the event considered to have fathered democracy in Australia. From the dingo to Matthew Flinders, seafarers to swaggies, it's a fascinating salute to Australia, culminating with the final track *Waltzing Matilda/Road To Gundagai*, a rousing mélange of two classic songs recorded live at Sydney's Wentworthville Leagues Club.

Here's To You, Johnny and Gay, for a historical and musical gem.

www.johnnyashcroft.com.au