

ASRA Award 2019

Rob and Ollie Willis



Figure 1

Rob and Olya (Ollie) Willis are a remarkable team who together have made an outstanding contribution to Australian sound recording and to the preservation of Australian culture. Since commencing as an oral historian and folklorist in the mid-1980s under the mentorship of the pioneering Australian folklore collector John Meredith, Rob, supported by Ollie, has dedicated his life to collecting the stories and songs of Australians from all walks of life, different geographical regions, diverse communities and across cultural and racial backgrounds. Rob and Ollie have recorded a staggering 2220 hours of audio for the National Library's Oral History and Folklore program. It's now the largest audio collection in the Library. Rob has also undertaken almost one hundred interviews for the National Film and Sound Archive. Rob and Ollie are still recording and in fact have recently returned from recording on Norfolk Island, so that contribution will only continue to grow!

Rob spends an enormous amount of time engaging in community outreach in person, in print and through his YouTube channel. He produces podcasts and is a regular guest on regional radio, bringing Australian music and folklore to appreciative and far flung audiences. This year, as we reflect on the ways that various audio formats will be handed down to future generations, the scope of the collecting that Rob and Ollie have been engaged in is particularly noteworthy. The

Rob and Olya Willis collection at the National Library encompasses all audio formats that the National Library holds. It ranges from analogue audiotape reels, cassettes, through to DATS, HDD and now to the latest digital formats.

Rob and Ollie work as an impressive team and, together, they offer enormous strengths to the process of oral history interviewing and folk recording. In interviews, Rob engages people to reflect on their personal or communal experiences. Ollie usually simultaneously summarises the interviews. The interviews might capture stories of immigration, war, loss through hardship or disaster, social change, changing patterns of work, or simply daily life in rural or urban Australia. While Rob has undertaken hundreds of ‘whole of life’ interviews with individuals, he has also created series of interviews as part of larger social history and memory projects like *Bringing them Home* (stolen generations), *Voices of the Bush*, *Drought*, *Forgotten Australians* and *Children’s folklore*.

During interviews, Rob might seek to record how people share their journeys through song, story, dance, yarns and other forms of cultural expression, often as a way of creating and sustaining communities. In music, for example, he captures mostly non-commercial ‘vernacular’ music that is sung or played in private, domestic or community settings. Thus, Rob has recorded a whole repertoire of music, much of it multicultural, that would have otherwise been hidden from public view. Such songs often signify stories of survival and of cultural transmission that could not be told in other ways – for example, amongst remote Indigenous mission settlements, tobacco-growing Italian immigrant families in Queensland, Aboriginal descendants on Flinders Island, Sikh communities in NSW, or in the homes of rural Australia. Rob records both the songs/tunes and the social context that lies behind their performance, providing insight into the process and power of cultural transmission across families, generations and communities. Rob has thus documented a rich body of cultural knowledge about Australia and Australian life.

Dr Shirleene Robinson

Figure 1: Rob and Olya Willis photograph courtesy Renee Powell –
Forbes Advocate