

MAUD FANNING

(1874-1945) The sister of comedian Charlie Fanning, Maud Fanning began her professional career began at the age of five. By the late 1880s she was working with other members of her family, including a partnership with older sister Rosie as the Fanning Sisters. She later undertook engagements with all the major vaudeville organisations, including Harry Rickards, the Fullers, James Brennan, Harry Clay, J. C. Bain, Bert Howard, Percy St John, Birch and Carroll, W. J. Wilson, Walter Bell, J. C. Williamson's, William Cosgrove, and William Anderson. Fanning also appeared with John F. Sheridan's company ca. 1900. Married to fellow vaudevillian, Arthur Elliott, their three daughters and son were also performers. Maud Fanning continued performing professionally until at least the early 1920s and in the 1930s worked in radio. Her final appearance on the stage was in 1940 at a Tivoli reunion.

As with her equally famous older brother, Maud Fanning's career in minstrelsy and vaudeville was extraordinarily long and successful, beginning sometime during the 1880s and stretching up until at least the late 1920s. Indeed, the *Theatre* said of her during a 1913 Tivoli engagement, "there is not a vaudeville patron in Australia who has not seen her in one or other of Australia's vaudeville houses" (Aug. 1913, 33). In this respect she became arguably the most popular and influential Australian coon singer of her time, and in association with her husband Arthur Elliott, daughters, Violet, Lulla, Mercia, and son Arthur, made an extensive contribution to variety theatre in this country.¹ In his autobiography Roy Rene wrote of Fanning: "She was a very good coon singer, and the house used to rock when she came on. She would bring on her kids, she had a team of them and they used to pull the place down. She was the best coon singer of her day and very hardworking" (79).

Born in Newcastle NSW in 1874, Maud Fanning's association with the stage began through the influence of her father, Charles F. Fanning, who led a successful band in Newcastle for many years. Two sisters, Bertha and Florence were also involved in the industry. Bertha (who became Mrs McKnight) was a popular contralto who made many concert appearances, including some with Phillip Newbury at the Sydney Town Hall. She later became a teacher of music in Mosman (Sydney). Florence R. (also known as Rosie) worked for some time with both John F. Sheridan and

William Anderson (as did Maud), while it is known that another brother, Edward (who died ca.1908) was with George Rignold for several years as his dresser, and in addition played light character parts on the stage.

Although Maud Fanning has claimed that she initially began performing at age five, the first record of her appearing on stage found to date was in 1890 at the Bondi Aquarium, where her brother's Popular Concert Company was advertised to appear. The company included, along with Charles and Maud, sister Bertha, J. Whitworth and Lorrie St. George among others. By 1894 both Maud and Rosie were appearing regularly at the Alhambra Music Hall, a venue that Maud continued to perform at for a number of years (although under different managements). Around May 1895 she appeared with Cosgrove and Stuart's Musical Comedy Company in Sydney and later that year took up an engagement with Warren's Surprise Party during its season at the Gaiety Theatre in Brisbane. The company, which included Harry Clay, was taken over by veteran variety performer W. A. Ball (ex-Hiscocks' Federal Minstrels) in September of that year. Fanning's connection with Brisbane was furthered in 1897 when she appeared on the Bovis Brothers' bill at the Gaiety Theatre (ca. Nov.). Engagements in 1898 included Henry's Dramatic Company (Royal Standard, Syd, ca. May/June), with whom she appeared in *Fun on the Bristol*, and a season under Percy St John and W. J. Wilson's management at the Alhambra Theatre (Syd) from around 1 October. Fanning's name also appeared on the programmes of entertainments put on by the management of the Coogee Palace Aquarium during the period.

In mid-1900 Fanning undertook engagements with John Sheridan's company (Opera House, Syd), which were presented by William Anderson, and later in the year appeared on the second leg of Walter Bell's Waxworks tour of



Source: National Library of Australia

¹ There is some confusion over the exact spelling of Maud's surname - with both Fanning or Fanning being used throughout her career. There is additional confusion over the names used by one of her daughters, this being Lulla - sometimes spelled Lalla. Furthermore she is sometimes billed or referred to by her middle name - spelled variously as Huia or Hula. For the sake of consistency this biography has adopted Fanning as the surname and Lulla (rather than Lalla) as her Christian name.

Queensland, with the troupe including Harry Clay. Following that engagement she once again performed for a Brisbane audience, this time under the auspices of Percy St John at the Theatre Royal (ca. Oct.). In a 1913 *Theatre* interview Fanning records that she had been for some time one of J.C. Williamson's ballet-girls and that she had also played "Bella" in *Fun on the Bristol* for William Cosgrove years before John Sheridan was seen in the same piece. She later joined the Anderson/Holloway theatrical company, and it was during this period that she first did her coon act. This was apparently a pedestal dance and a song called "The Alabama Coon."

Fanning continued to perform around Australia and through New Zealand over the next decade, at some stage marrying Arthur Elliott (born Arthur Hargraves). In 1902 she and Elliott appeared in Hobart under the management of John Fuller Snr. In the final week of this engagement Fanning caused some interest by appearing on the corner – a role traditionally undertaken by male comedians. It is unclear if this was a break in tradition or a satirical take on the endman character, however, as at least one advertisement suggests that she was presenting an "impersonation of a cornerman" (HM: 3 Nov. 1902, 5). Her act later caught the attention of Harry Rickards while she was in New Zealand in 1903, possibly under engagement to Fuller. Her first appearance with Rickards is believed to have been sometime that same year. In the 1913 *Theatre* interview Fanning recalls:



It was in New Zealand that I first came under the notice of Mr Rickards. I was appearing there with the Fullers. I was singing a song that belonged to one of Mr Rickards imported comedians. I think Mr Rickards and the comedian were at the show together. At any rate, Mr Rickards came round to my dressing room and asked me to let him know when I would be finished with the Fullers... Later... I was told to open [for the Tivoli circuit] in West Australia. I remained for eight years with Mr Rickards... From time to time [he] got special scenes for me. I very much admired Mr Rickards. He was goodness itself to me. He was so genuine (Aug. 1913, 33).

Harry Rickards engaged Fanning on a frequent basis between 1903 and at least 1906. Although it is not known whether she found engagements with any other managements during that period, certainly by 1907 she was in demand from other quarters of the industry. Harry Clay took her on tour of Queensland in 1907 and Ted Holland secured her services in late 1908. She was on Clay time again in 1909 and 1910.

By 1910 both Maud Fanning and the rest of her family were enjoying much acclaim around Australia. As the *Theatre* notes in relation to an engagement at the National Amphitheatre: "What a delightful act is that put on by the Three Elliots! These dainty and clever children are Maud Fanning's, who has surely coached them with gentleness and love.... The trio are recalled again and again" (Mar. 1910, 18). Her known engagements in 1910 included at least one season with James Brennan (Gaiety Theatre, Melb) around March; the Birch and Carroll Queensland circuit (Oct.) and Pat Fisher's Entertainers (Royal Standard, Syd) in late November.

Theatre Royal 9 Dec. 1904
Source: State Library of Tasmania

In 1912 Fanning, Elliott and their children toured Queensland for Harry Clay, being with little doubt one of the company's leading attractions. They then went on to the Brennan-Fullers circuit shortly afterwards. J. C. Bain gave Fanning top billing at the Princess Theatre in 1913 (ca. May) as did Harry Barrington at the Alhambra Music Hall (ca. June). By 1914, and with a new born infant added to the family's (on-stage) troupe, the Fanning/Elliott family was undoubtedly an Australian entertainment institution. They continued to find engagements in Australia and New Zealand throughout the remainder of the decade, spending a good deal of that time under contract to the Fullers. On a number of occasions, however, the firm leased them out to other organisations. Thus although Fanning and Elliott signed a 12 months contract with Fuller-Brennan in July 1914, during that period they also appeared on bills for Holland and St John in October that year (Empire Theatre, Brisb). While with Brennan-Fuller, too, Fanning appeared briefly with Walter Champney's English Entertainers (ca. Dec. 1914/Jan. 1915).

With her family Fanning undertook a tour of New Zealand in 1917, again under contract to the Fullers. Her performances, as usual, drew much praise from critics. The *Theatre's* Dominion scribe wrote, for example:

Maud Fanning and her children are again proving a phenomenal draw... Of the many hundred acts on the circuit it is doubtful if any artist has so consistently retained her popularity as has Miss Fanning. One recalls the early days of the Fullers, when the late P.R. Dix was importing stars. During that period Miss Fanning played a record

season of over seven months at the old Choral Hall, Wellington. Irene Franklin was one of the Dix stars. The dusky Maud, singing the same songs was easily the bigger favourite in the windy city (May 1917, 41).

When briefly off Fuller time Fanning undertook engagements with other managements, including Harry Clay (1915 and 1919), Bert Howard (Sydney, ca. May 1918) and Dix-Baker (Newcastle, ca. May 1918). She was also tended a benefit in 1916, held at the Coronation Theatre, Leichhardt. Lulla, Violet and Mercia are also known to have worked on the Clay circuit on occasions throughout the 1920s.

Industry opinion of the Fanning family act in 1915 included an *Australian Variety* par in its 24 February issue: "Maud Fanning - well, if anybody ever earns a salary it's Maud. I have never seen a harder trier in the business. She was a riot, and her three cleanest girls in vaudeville cleaned up with their raggy singing. Daddy Arthur Elliott has some punch in his comicalities, and it's a sure four he has to do before he can retire" (13). The *Theatre* reported that same year: "The volcanic Maud Fanning... got a rousing reception [at the National]. The point about this is that Miss Fanning is now being seen in Sydney for about the thousandth time. Has there ever been - or will there be - seen any other artist who could in such circumstances move an audience to the enthusiasm displayed in the case of Miss Fanning? Her record in this respect stands second to none" (May 1915, 41).

It is not been established when Maud Fanning retired from the stage. In October 1929 she was invited on the bill of the final programme at the old Sydney Tivoli Theatre, and in 1932 appeared alongside fellow variety veteran Ward Lear in a "Stars of Yesterday" troupe which supported Clem Dawe's musical revue company (see Wintergarden, Bris; beginning 5 Nov.). She also made a guest appearance at the new Tivoli Theatre (Syd) in 1940. Roy Rene has mentioned that Lulla Fanning and Violet Elliott had become successful in radio and in London pantomime respectively in late years. Their mother, who also had a career in radio during the 1930s, and possibly early 1940s, died in Sydney on 14 February 1945. She is buried in Waverley Cemetery alongside her brother Edward.



Maud Fanning and the Elliott Sisters
"Australia's Premier Coon Singer" and her children.
Source: Mitchell Library

SEE ALSO

- [Charlie Fanning](#)
- [Arthur Elliott](#)
- [Violet Elliott \(2\)](#)

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. In an article reporting on Maud Fanning's long engagement with the Rickards Circuit, the *Theatre* magazine records that her father was Edward Charles Fanning. New South Wales Births, Deaths and Marriage records indicate, however, that her parents were Charles F. and Catherine A. Fanning (Reg No. 12159). In correspondence with the AVTA, John Laplaw notes that he grandfather's name was Edward Fanning, which may explain the *Theatre's* error (12 July 2013).
2. Maud Fanning's known siblings were: Charles E.T. (1864), Ethel (1866), Henry C. (1867), Bertha H. K. (1868), Florence R. J. (1870) and Edward M.B.D. (1872).

ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS

- Maud Fanning, sister of Charlie of that ilk, definitely joins P. R. Dix's companies for seasons in Christchurch and Dunedin. She is regarded as a top-notch in her own line, that of singing coon songs in black face (OW: 14 Aug. 1901, 57).

ENGAGEMENTS CHRONOLOGY

* = Details regarding length of engagement are yet to be established

- 1890:** CHARLIE FANNING'S CONCERT PARTY (Bondi Aquarium, Syd; 6 Dec.)
- 1892:** BONDI AQUARIUM (Syd; 26 Dec.)
- 1893:** ALF M. HAZLEWOOD BENEFIT (Gaiety Th, Syd; 3 Mar.) ▶ BONDI AQUARIUM (Syd; 1 Oct.)
- 1894:** GEORGE GIBBONS (Alhambra Th, Syd; 26 May*)
- 1895:** COSGROVE & STUART'S MUSICAL COMEDY Co (S of A, Syd; 4 May*) ▶ WARREN'S SURPRISE PARTY (Gaiety Th, Bris; 24 Aug. -*) ▶ W. A. BALL'S GAIETY SURPRISE PARTY (Gaiety Th, Bris; 14 Sept. *) ▶ HELEN GORDON BENEFIT (Gaiety Th, Bris; 5 Oct. *)
- 1897:** BOVIS BROS (Gaiety Th, Bris; 6 Nov. *)
- 1898:** COOGEE AQUARIUM (Syd; 6 Mar. *) ▶ HENRY'S DRAMATIC Co (Royal Standard; 4 June*) ▶ PERCY ST JOHN & W. J. WILSON (Alhambra Th, Syd; 1 Oct. *)
- 1899:** COOGEE AQUARIUM (Syd; 10 June*)
- 1900:** JOHN F. SHERIDAN Co (Op House, Bris; 14 July* > Prod. William Anderson) • (Qld tour; ca. Aug/Sept. > Incl. Charters Towers; 27 Aug.) ▶ BELL'S WAXWORKS & BOER WAR Co (Qld tour; ca. Sept/Oct. > Incl. Th Royal, Charters Towers; 17 Sept. *) ▶ PERCY ST JOHN Co (Theatre Royal, Bris; 20 Oct. *)
- 1901:** PERCY DIX (New Zealand circuit; ca. Aug/Sept. > Incl. Christchurch and Dunedin)
- 1902:** JOHN FULLER (Temp Hall, Hobart; 18 Oct. – ca. 14 Nov. * > Fuller's Polite Empire Entertainers)
- 1903:** HARRY RICKARDS (Op House, Melb; ca. Aug.-Sept. *) • (Tivoli Th, Syd; 26 Dec.)
- 1904:** HARRY RICKARDS (Tivoli Th, Syd; 1 Jan.) • (Th Royal, Hobart; ca. Nov-Dec. *) • (Op House, Melb; 24 Dec. *)
- 1905:** HARRY RICKARDS (Op House, Melb; 24 Dec. *) • (Tivoli Th, Syd; 2 Sept. *) • (Op House, Melb; 30 Dec. *)
- 1906:** HARRY RICKARDS (Op House, Melb; 1 Jan. *) • (Tivoli Th, Syd; 16 June*)
- 1907:** HARRY CLAY (Qld regional tour; See *Djubal* (1998) + S of A, Rockhampton; 6 May > return leg) • (Centennial Hall, Syd; 6 July)
- 1908:** JAMES BRENNAN (Nat Amph, Syd; 14 Mar. -*) ▶ TED HOLLAND (Th Royal, Bris; 14 Nov. *)
- 1909:** HARRY RICKARDS (Op House, Melb; 9 July*) ▶ HARRY CLAY (Royal Standard, Syd; 4 Dec. *)
- 1910:** JAMES BRENNAN (Gaiety Th, Melb; 19 Mar. *) ▶ LENNON, HYMAN & LENNON (Empire Th, Adel; ca. May*) ▶ HARRY CLAY (Royal Standard, Syd; 17 Sept. *) ▶ BIRCH & CARROLL (Qld circuit; ca. Oct. > Incl. Th Royal, Charters Towers; 22 Oct.) ▶ PAT FISHER ENTERTAINERS (Royal Standard, Syd; 19 Nov. * > Lse. Harry Clay)
- 1911:** FULLERS (Th Royal, Wellington, NZ; ca. Mar-Apr. *)
- 1912:** HARRY CLAY (NSW/Qld tour; See *Djubal* (1998) + Toowoomba TH; 9 Mar. etc) ▶ FULLER-BRENNAN (Nat Amph; 27 Nov. *)
- 1913:** J. C. BAIN (Princess Th, Syd; 24 May*) • HARRY BARRINGTON (Alhambra Th, Syd; 28 June*)
- 1914:** SADLER/BEVERIDGE Th Royal, Hobart; 20 Feb. -*) ▶ FULLER-BRENNAN (Nat Amph, Syd; 29 July*) • J. C. BAIN (Princess Th, Syd; ca. May to July* > See SMH adverts) • FULLERS THEATRES (12 month contract for Australian/ New Zealand circuit from ca. July*) • HOLLAND & ST JOHN (Empire Th, Bris; ca. Oct. * > Engaged from Fullers circuit) • FULLER-BRENNAN (King's Th, Adel; ca. Dec. -*)



Source: State Library of Tasmania.

- 1915:** FULLER-BRENNAN (King's Th, Adel; 1 Jan. -*) • (Bijou Th, Melb; 6 Feb. -*) • (Nat Amph, Syd; 10 Apr.*)
 ► HARRY CLAY (Princess Th, Syd; ca. May/June* > see AV: 2 June 1915, n. pag.; See also ca. Dec.)
- 1916:** MAUD FANNING BENEFIT (Coronation Th, Leichhardt, Syd; 8 Feb.*) ► HARRY CLAY (Sydney circuit; ca. Sept/Oct.* > see AV: 4 Oct. 1916, n. pag.)
- 1917:** FULLERS THEATRES (NZ Dominion circuit; ca. May-July*) • (Majestic Th, Syd; 15 Aug.*) • (Empire Th, Bris; 12 Oct.* > Lse. Holland's Vaudeville Deluxe Co) • (Grand Opera House, Syd; 24 Dec.*)
 NB: New Zealand itinerary incl. (Princess Th, Dunedin, NZ; ca. May*) • (Opera House, Christchurch, May-June*) • (His Majesty's, Wellington; ca. July*)
- 1918:** BERT HOWARD Co (Sydney circuit, ca. May*)
- 1940:** TIVOLI ANNIVERSARY SHOW (Tivoli Th, Syd; 2Sept.*)

FURTHER REFERENCE

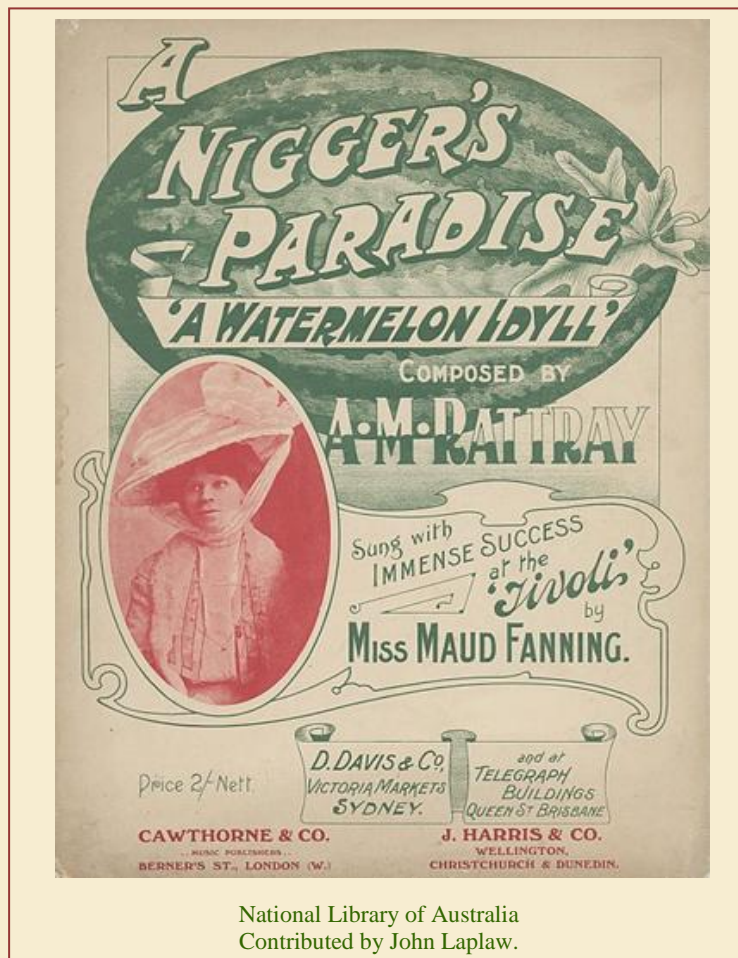
Bridges, Nancye. *Curtain Call* (1980), v. pags.

Djubal, Clay. "[Fanning, Maud.](#)" *AustLit* (2007).

Hood Collection II: Photo Negatives, ca. 1920 – 1953. Held in the Manuscripts, Oral History and Pictures Archive, State Library of New South Wales – ON 204 Box 75 / 33-71. [Incl. photos of "Aged Performer Maud Fanning in Costume"]

See also:

- AV:** 16 May 1917, n. pag.
- B:** 30 Aug. (1906), n. pag. • 1 Nov. (1906), n. pag. • (21 Feb. (1945), n. pag.
- DT:** 6 Dec. (1890), n. pag.
- EP:** 24 Mar. (1911), 8 • 1 Oct. (1914), 2 • 19 July (1917), 2.
- OW:** 14 Aug. (1901), 57.
- SMH:** 30 Sept. (1893), n. pag. • 25 Dec. (1897), n. pag. • 16 Aug. (1907), n. pag. • 26 Nov. (1912), n. pag. • 15 Feb. (1945), n. pag. •
- TT:** July 1914, 1 • May (1917), 41.



National Library of Australia
 Contributed by John Laplaw.

Last updated: 16/06/2013

First published in: Clay Djubal, "Harry Clay and Clay's Vaudeville Company." MA Thesis, U of Qld (1998), Appendix F.

NB: The URL for this PDF will change each time it is updated. If you wish to cite or link to this record please use the following:

Australian Variety Theatre Archive • <http://ozvta.com/practitioners-f/>