

KEN MORRIS AND JOAN SAVAGE

By (their daughter) Kelly Reynolds



Ken and Joan

'Ladies and Gentlemen – please welcome the star of the show, Miss Joan Savage.' It was August 1968, North Pier, Blackpool as Joan Savage, popular singer, comedienne, and top television personality of the day took her rightful place as top of the bill in the finale of this summer variety show, including big names such as Lonnie Donegan, Solomon King and up-and-coming comedian Les Dawson. A place she had sadly had to fight for as, not two months earlier, she had tragically lost her husband and show business partner of 16 years, the wonderfully talented pianist, songwriter and comedian, Ken Morris. Originally booked as a double act and stars of the show, Joan often recalls that moment when she was sitting alone in the stalls watching the run through of the finale and realised she had been relegated to further down the bill. "You're not gonna stand for that are you?" came Ken's familiar voice in her ear. Now some might argue that here was a newly bereaved and vulnerable young woman letting her imagination run riot or, for those less cynical, here was her husband still looking out for her as he always did. Whatever the explanation, Joan successfully stood her ground and went on to have a hugely successful and critically acclaimed solo career.

Ken Morris was born on the 29th July 1921 in the Rhondda valley, the much loved youngest brother of seven children. He taught himself to play the piano from

an early age and it became apparent he was a naturally gifted pianist who could play any tune despite the fact that he, to the day he died, could not read a note of music! It was in the year of 1934 when the great Steffani (of Steffani's Silver Songsters fame), who at the time was recruiting for his first choir the Singing Scholars, had been told about a singer who lived in the Rhondda Valley, reputedly with a magnificent voice and who should be heard. The trouble was the singer only had one leg but so enthusiastic were the reports about him that the maestro decided to go to his home and see for himself. When he arrived, the singer, although hampered by his artificial leg, was quite happy to give an audition there and then. Someone said, "Who's going to play the piano?" The singer shouted "Kenny", and a small boy appeared who straightaway proceeded without music to give a performance of extraordinary talent. The singer, Ken's older brother Idris, was not taken on, but little Kenny at the piano was offered a job with the choir as soon as he was old enough, thus spawning a lifelong career in show business.

When Steffani formed his Silver Songsters in mid 1935, Ken was often seen on stage sitting at a piano accompanying the singers. He also appeared in Steffani's Melody Makers and The Harmonichords and possibly holds the record for being in at least four of Steffani's groups! He eventually left Steffani's employ in 1937, the experience enabling him to move on and serve in the *Stars In Battledress* companies during the Second World War, and subsequently making a name for himself in countless radio and stage productions, notably as one of Charlie Chester's gang in *Stand Easy* alongside other greats such as Arthur Haynes, with whom he became great friends until Arthur's untimely death, Len Marten and Frederick Ferrari. It was at this time he formed a successful, songwriting partnership with Charlie Chester. Perhaps one of their best known compositions is *The Old Bazaar In*



Joan and Ken with baby Kelly

Cairo, still familiar today and regularly used in pantomimes and advertisements.

At around the time Ken joined Steffani, a baby girl was born in Blackpool to Norman and Millicent Savage. They named their eldest daughter Joan. Milly, at the time, was a 'song plugger', and used to sit at her piano in a big store playing the latest pop numbers in the hope the customers would buy the sheet music. Norman Savage was a comedian of the day in his own right but also a member of *The White Blackbirds*. It is reputed that Norman was responsible for introducing his friend George Formby to his future wife Beryl, a somewhat dubious honour! As soon as little Joan was old enough she would accompany her father round the Northern club circuit both observing and joining in with his act. When Joan was 12 she joined the famous Blackpool Children's Tower Ballet and Blackpool Tower Circus and was regularly performing in five shows a day, switching from riding elephants and roller-skating to performing song and dance numbers with the great versatility that would become her trademark in later years. Inevitably this led to further opportunities and an appearance on Mr Ronnie Taylor's *Variety Fanfare* on BBC radio, then a chance to tour as leading lady in a George and Alfred Black revue called *Music And Madness*. By this time Ken was performing as a solo act and, as luck would have it, was also appearing on the bill. During this particular run the company was asked to do a midnight charity performance and Ken suggested they team up as a double act. It was all to be serious and straightforward with no messing around – at least that's how it was rehearsed, but, true to Ken's nature, whilst performing the act, he could not resist clowning about at his piano unbeknown to Joan. The audience loved it, and so began a partnership both professionally and romantically and they were subsequently married in Blackpool in 1955.

As solo artistes they were steadily climbing the ladder of fame with Joan pursuing her own brand of comedy and impressions as well as developing a recording career with her own versions of *Love Letters In The Sand*, *Nora Malone* and *Hello Happiness, Goodbye Blues*. Ken meanwhile continued with Charlie's gang playing the piano but also enjoying success writing various scores for films as well as recording some of his own compositions. However, it was as a double act that they were catapulted to the top and quickly established themselves as household names appearing individually and together on radio, stage and television in numerous television advertisements and big shows of the time such as *Hi Summer*, *The Black And White Minstrel Show*, *The Jack Jackson Show* and, of course, perhaps most memorably, *The Arthur Haynes Show*.

Life was good for this golden couple and in March 1960 a



Joan Savage

baby daughter Kelly was born to complete the happy family. With the help of family and a succession of nannies, Ken and Joan's careers continued to flourish as they enjoyed a lengthy season at the London Palladium in *Swing Along* with Arthur Haynes, Nicholas Parsons and Susan Maughan, and life continued much as before until Ken was diagnosed with a brain tumour and, after a relatively short period of illness, died on July 3rd 1968.

It is to Joan's eternal credit that she battled on alone in the business, determined to keep working and build on the successful career they had forged together. During the next three years she was able to draw on all her considerable strength and talents to establish herself as one of Britain's top female entertainers of the time through her superb singing and wickedly funny impersonations in summer shows, pantomime, cruise ships, concert and cabaret. It was around this time that Joan met her second husband through a mutual producer friend and this year they celebrate their ruby wedding anniversary.

It is almost impossible to estimate the number of radio broadcasts Joan has made. Many will remember her as a regular soloist on *Friday Night Is Music Night*. Other radio credits include her own show series, *The Pleasure Of Your Company* and *Joan Savage Sings*. One of her proudest moments was when she sang the BBC winning

entry for the Nordring Radio Prize in 1974, after which she retained huge popularity abroad. This led to prestigious appearances at many major concert venues including regular appearances at London's Barbican, Royal Albert and Royal Festival Halls. She also appeared as guest artiste with such orchestras as the London Symphony, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and Bournemouth Symphony, even performing in a series of concerts with the Halle Orchestra to mark the VE Anniversary celebrations, and to emphasise her aforementioned versatility, jazz concert tours with the Pete Allen Jazz Band.

Her ability for comedy, acting and dancing also led her to playing in many theatre productions including *Deja Revue* with Sheila Hancock and George Cole, *Dames at Sea*, *70 Girls 70*, *Divorce Me Darling*, *Stepping Out*, *Chicago*, *High Society* and *Follies* at the Royal Festival Hall, following which she was asked to perform *Broadway Baby* at Stephen Sondheim's 75th birthday tribute concert in aid of Childline - a huge honour for Joan. Over 350 television appearances include *The Les Dawson Show*, *The Good Old Days*, *Who Do You Do?*, *Dads Army* and

latterly as Celeste Pickersgill in *Coronation Street*, a chance for Joan to return to her Northern roots and one she relished.

Many of Joan's most staunch and loyal fans have often said Joan has never been fully recognised or rewarded for her considerable talents and indeed there have been plenty of missed opportunities and misguided decisions along the way but not many people can say they have sustained a successful full time professional working career in show business spanning over sixty years. Indeed in the words of Joan herself during a particularly proud and happy moment in her life when she was awarded the Freedom of the City of London, 'Eee, not bad for a Lancashire lass eh?'

Joan and her husband currently live in Surrey whilst her daughter and two grown up grandsons live in Dorset. Sadly however, due to illness, Joan is no longer able to work but her youngest grandson has gladly picked up the musical baton and has written his first full length musical to be performed in Maidstone this Christmas.