

DAVID CROFT ON RECORD



David Croft

In all the obituaries and tributes that appeared following the death of the comedy writer David Croft, there has been almost no mention of his involvement with the record business. His association with the composer and conductor Cyril Ornadel has been noted in relation to the several musicals they wrote together – *Star Maker* (1956), *The Pied Piper* (1958) and *Ann Veronica* (1963) – but there was another string to their bow. Cyril Ornadel was one of the founders in 1956 of the UK mail-order record company World Record Club, which quickly became a thriving business. The other founders were the wealthy banker and businessman Norman Lonsdale, an Australian mail-order expert, John Day, the actor Richard Attenborough and the producer Fiona Bentley. Fiona had begun her professional life as probably the youngest stage director in the UK and had met Cyril Ornadel in Blackpool in 1950 when he was just beginning his career as a pit conductor. In addition to licensing product from major record companies including Westminster, Everest, Cetra and EMI, the club also recorded a smallish catalogue of its own. This covered both classical music, with conductors like Sir Adrian Boult and Anthony Collins, and various popular albums, mostly produced and conducted by Cyril Ornadel himself. A few years later, Ornadel resigned as a director of World Record Club but in 1959 Fiona Bentley invited him to join her and the politician and tennis enthusiast Lord (Morys) Aberdare in forming a new company called Fiona Bentley Productions.

The company's first venture was a series of children's records to be released by EMI on 7-inch 45rpm coloured discs

called the HMV Junior Record Club. Ornadel was commissioned to compose all the songs, together with David Croft, who would write the lyrics and make the adaptations. The ever resourceful Fiona managed to obtain rights to use a number of well-loved stories by Beatrix Potter, so in addition to classic tales like *Ali Baba*, *Cinderella*, *Sinbad the Sailor* and *Little Black Sambo*, the series included *The Tale Of Jemima Puddle-Duck*, *The Tale Of Johnny Town-Mouse*, *The Tale Of Mrs Tigglywinkle*, *The Tale Of Peter Rabbit* and *The Tale Of Squirrel Nutkin*. Each disc was narrated by a celebrity from a very starry list that included Vivien Leigh, who did all the Beatrix Potter stories. When Fiona told her colleagues the artists she intended to engage for these recordings, she was greeted with a good deal of scepticism; but she managed, entirely through her own efforts, to obtain many of the leading stars of the day, including Richard Attenborough, Dick Bentley, Bernard Braden, Dame Edith Evans, Celia Johnson, Roger Livesey, Sir Ralph Richardson, Moira Shearer and Sir Donald Wolfit. The characters were sung by talented artists like Anthea Askey, Ian Carmichael, Judy Carne, Cicely Courtneidge, Clive Dunn, Wallas Eaton, Marion Grimaldi, Susan Hampshire, John Hewer, Hugh Lloyd, Anna Massey, Juliet Mills, Stella Moray, Julian Orchard, Dennis Quilley, Cardew Robinson and Graham Stark, with animal noises by Percy Edwards. As an experienced performer in musical theatre, David Croft also took a number of roles. The standard of these productions was extremely high because Fiona had that rare talent of being able to inspire those she worked with and to bring out the best performances. Sir Ralph Richardson once remarked that she was the finest producer he had ever known. The Beatrix Potter recordings can currently be heard on the EARLY YEARS section of the David Croft website at www.davidcroft.co.uk.

In 1960, Fiona Bentley formed another company with Cyril Ornadel and Morys Aberdare, this one called FCM after the first names of the three executives. Its *raison d'être* was to record highlights from operettas and musicals for World Record Club and, as he relates in his autobiography *You Have Been Watching...* (BBC Books, 2004), Croft

found himself performing roles like Hard-Boiled Herman in *Rose Marie*, Leopold in *White Horse Inn* (in which he also took over the role of Valentine Sutton to sing the duet *You Too* when Leonard Weir lost his voice at the recording session), Billy Early in *No, No, Nanette* and Ko-Ko in an abridged version of *The Mikado*. The last was conducted by Alexander Faris and made in Hamburg in 1961 with the North German Radio Symphony Orchestra, ostensibly to avoid copyright restrictions; the sessions took place late at night when the orchestra had finished its regular work.

Highlights from two other Gilbert and Sullivan operettas were also recorded at the same time in Hamburg, but as David Croft was in only one of them he was able to take his wife Ann to inspect the delights of the notorious Reeperbahn. Some of the other singers also found time to sample the night-life of Hamburg, but Cyril Ornadel had to stay behind every night and edit the tapes, as he ruefully recalled many years later in his autobiography *Reach For The Moon* (Book Guild Publishing, 2007). The deal with the orchestra specified that their name should not be used, so they appeared as the Westminster Symphony Orchestra when the recordings were issued, although Croft reported in his book that the players spoke German to a man and munched knackwurst at 1 o'clock in the morning, which was not an activity much seen in Westminster.

By the early 1960s EMI had become closely involved with World Record Club and it eventually bought the company in 1965. When the direct mail club business had run its course, the WRC catalogue was absorbed by EMI and some of its recordings were released on other labels, although the World Records label itself continued as an important outlet for historical recordings of various kinds, of which by far the most successful genre was Great British Dance Bands. In 2005, the re-issue manager of EMI's Classics for Pleasure label, Richard Abram, enlisted the help of Tony Locantro and Andrew Lamb to put together a group of albums of studio cast recordings of operettas and musicals, and the WRC catalogue was a fruitful source for a number of titles. When Abram contacted Cyril Ornadel to check some details when the

albums were in preparation, he was happily surprised to receive a letter from David Croft that began as follows:

‘Cyril Ormadel tells me that you are releasing some records on the Classics for Pleasure label a few of which I figured on as a singer – *White Horse Inn* and *The Mikado* for instance. I was delighted to hear about this. I had often thought of these records lurking in dusty attics which seemed a shame because they were undoubtedly of excellent quality. It was also nice to think that I am

to be heard again as a singer (I was rather good!) – when I am mainly known for writing and producing TV Comedy.’

When the CDs were released, Abram sent copies to a number of the participants, including Cyril Ormadel and Marion Grimaldi. Cyril was very happy with the discs and said, among other things: “The *Mikado* tracks are terrific, especially the David Croft tracks. His diction is superb”, and Marion commented: “David sings so delightfully!”

Thus David Croft the recording artist was restored to the EMI catalogue in 2005 in a number of highly entertaining character roles that he had recorded some 45 years earlier. It was a matter of great satisfaction to all involved that both he and Cyril Ormadel were able to enjoy listening again to these fine recordings, now given new life in digital remasterings for CD.

Tony Locantro

DAVID CROFT AND THE TRAPPED ENVIRONMENT

The death of David Croft (1922-2011) provides a timely opportunity to praise his contribution to what is already being perceived as the golden age of television comedy series. Born in Sandbanks in Poole, Dorset and coming from a theatrical family, he was immersed from childhood in a variety of entertainment work, which, coupled with his equally varied war activities – he was both an air raid warden and an army major – supplied the sort of background experience that would later assist his script-writing.

Very much his own man, he relied completely on his own judgement, disdaining the modish use of surveys and the like; he had much the same sense of humour as the next bloke’s and reckoned if he found something funny, then they would. Well, it worked effectively as an axiom for thirty years.

Consider the output, *Dad’s Army*, 81 episodes, 1968/77, plus the 1971 feature film; *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum*, 56 episodes, 1974/81; *Hi-De-Hi*, 58 episodes, 1980/88 and *You Rang, M’Lord*, a more disappointing 26 episodes. These were all done in harness with Jimmy Perry, who brought his own experience of home guard, concert party and holiday camp fruitfully to bear, but David Croft also wrote in partnership with Jeremy Lloyd, to wit, *Are You Being Served?*, 69 episodes, 1972/85; *‘Allo, ‘Allo*, the first six of the nine series, from 1984 onwards. It is an astonishing record of some 350 consistently cheering and cheerful pieces.

He claimed to look back to a more wholesome and less fraught era – and all

his successes stemmed from nostalgic glances back to shared experiences. “I write ordinary non-controversial comedy which gives families a good laugh”, he said. “They know nobody’s going to say ‘shag’.” At the same time, by deploying old-time values, he ran the risk of political incorrectitude. “You can’t have the poof”, said Bill Cotton, head of BBC light entertainment, not in itself the most p.c. of phrases, in reference to John Inman’s camp sales assistant – but then he relented. But *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum* never gets repeated because of its racialist overtones at the expense of the Indian attendants of the army concert party.

David Croft would have none of it. He would argue that, by taking the mickey out of everybody, he could not be accused of discrimination. Faced with criticism over making fun of wartime distress in *‘Allo, ‘Allo*, he tersely pointed out that ‘our Germans are insensitive, nest-feathering and kinky, the French are devious, nest-feathering and immoral, and the British are real twits.’ Equality reigned in the Croft assemblages.

It is evident that, in seeking out these social gems from the past and polishing them for the viewer, he was drawing on a strong music hall, variety and concert party tradition. Each half hour of comedy his partners and he created are like extended black-out sketches from that convention. Over-the-top characters in garish costumes and farcical situations, incontinent and daffy ancients, funny foreigners, snotty-nosed or incompetent people in authority, misunderstandings galore and all the fun

of the fair. That mind-set of sending up everybody was at the heart of many a variety sketch, plus a crazy finale.

For all that, there was with David Croft, as with all the great TV comedy writers, an instinctive grasp of what could be accomplished in a medium that, crucially, was not stage, radio or cinema screen. The intimacy of the televisual happening dictated a reliance on close-order combat, so to speak, an accent on well-observed character (recall the genius of placing the middle-class bank manager captain against the upper class assistant bank manager sergeant in *Dad’s Army*) and sharply exchanged dialogue. There developed the convention of the ensemble, where radio, for obvious reasons of identification, had usually focused on two or three players, as in Kenneth Home and Richard Murdoch in *Much Binding In The Marsh*, whilst *ITMA* was basically a series of double acts with Tommy Handley the genial ring-master.

There was another dimension. These groups – the Poujadist shopkeepers of the home guard in the church hall; the bored ineffectives of the concert party, harassed by the sergeant-major, Windsor Davies; the oddly assorted entertainers of Maplin’s holiday camp; the sparring staff of Grace Brothers department store – are located in a claustrophobic setting, one that corrals them inescapably. It is exactly the same device that has served many an Agatha Christie-like murder mystery – the guests and servants secluded in a country house – or schoolboy story – Billy Bunter and Harry Wharton and co. encastled in Greyfriars. That feeling of

oppressive confinement, given heightened credence by the very compressed parameters of the television set, was perhaps the key to the success of much of the television comedy of that splendid era.

It was no accident. David Croft aptly called it a 'trapped environment'. It creates the social pressure that evokes the comedy. Other writers at that same time were conscious of this as well. There were the Steptoes locked together in their totters' anti-paradise, the lodgers trapped with Leonard Rossiter in *Rising Damp*, or Victoria Wood's gossiping dinner-ladies bound together in their canteen. Possibly the most patent example is *Porridge*, where Ronnie Barker and his motley crew demonstrated the penitentiary principle of television comedy in a penitentiary. Then, finally, what about *The Royle Family*, where we flop in our sitting rooms watching on television a family flopped in their sitting rooms watching television? Triple claustrophobia!

David Croft is the much-mourned begetter of, and contributor to, a hugely enjoyed collection of defiantly funny programmes on the telly – and, to be

honest, there don't seem to be too many of those around at the moment.

Eric Midwinter



The cast of Dad's Army