

JILL SUMMERS

By Stuart Turner



Tom F. Moss and Jill Summers

Jill Summers was born into a theatrical family on 10 December 1910 and christened Honor Margaret Rozelle Santoi Fuller. Her mother, Marie Santoi, was a star of light musical comedy for many years and her father was a wire-rope walker, Rozelle being his stage name; his mother, Jill's grandmother, was a well-known bare-back rider and his brother was Leslie Fuller, one of the best known pantomime cats. 'Born into a theatrical family' seems almost an understatement.

Jill was proud to have the first and last issues of *The Performer* (which she passed on to me) and even more proud to find that Marie Santoi was listed in the 1906 issue, playing the Empire Palace in South Shields. But Marie died when Jill was only 13 and she then lived with a string of foster parents, not always happily. She didn't start in the business until 1941 when she was taken on by Sir Seymour Hicks who was organizing ENSA at the time. Not surprisingly, he felt she needed a simpler name so

one warm summer's evening when she was drinking a gill of beer...Jill Summers became a natural choice.

Jill later teamed up with her brother Tom to form a new act Tom F. Moss and Jill Summers. Tom had a fine voice and looked very much the part of the grand singer; Jill then came on and segued into a glorious parody of *The Pipes of Pan* before they finished with a duet. They played Moss Empires, then, when playing Wolverhampton in a show with Elsie and Doris Waters, Jill met a doctor, my father, and they married a few years later. They were a perfect partnership – the extrovert Jill and the doctor, quiet but with a wicked sense of humour who wrote much of her material.

Jill later went solo and earned reviews like:

'She's broad, she's wicked and her gags frequently overstep the bounds of propriety. But Jill Summers' earthy North Country comedy was

responsible for the loudest laughs at Coventry Theatre. She is the very kernel of music hall.'

Those who saw her would say 'hear, hear' to that.

As a youngster I had the pleasure of watching her work at countless theatres around the country and was lucky enough to see and meet people like Frank Randle, Jimmy James (anyone prepared to disagree that he had the greatest timing of them all?) and Wilson, Keppel and Betty. Once I even held Jane of the Daily Mirror's dog backstage, which was heady stuff for a young lad, I can tell you. I didn't realize it at the time of course but it was all like watching John Osborne's *The Entertainer* live as it happened, as I was reminded when I later saw Olivier playing Archie Rice.

Jill drafted her autobiography with my father's help and the book ended with her experiences when putting on shows like *The Bad Old Days* in



Barbara Knox, Jill Summers, Anthony Hopkins, Thelma Barlow

northern clubs. It also mentioned her first bit parts on TV. She closed the book with the words:

‘And so I go on - I’ve no real ambition. I’ve enjoyed my life in the theatre -but also my private life. Like Micawber I’m always waiting for something to turn up – and it does.’

But not even Jill could have forecast what did then turn up. Little did she realize that she would go on to greater fame playing the character of Phyllis Pearce in over 100 episodes of *Coronation Street*. She continued on the *Street* until early 1996, dying on 11 January 1997. She never, ever, lost her glorious and earthy sense of humour. Her language at times made Gordon Ramsay sound like a Trappist monk but she never failed to make people laugh. In an address at her funeral, her good friend Roy Barraclough recalled once finding 15 people round her hospital bed - beneath a sign saying ‘Only 3 visitors at a time’- all helpless with laughter at her Frankie Vaughan impression using a hospital sick bowl as a top hat.

As Mike Craig recounts in his excellent piece on Jill in Volume 3 of *Look Back With Laughter*, Jill’s last words raised a laugh. I was sitting with her when a nurse asked her if she would like something to drink - “A cup of tea,

some milk or a glass of water”? Jill said, “It gets better all the time” ...and passed away seconds later.

Because of her *Corrie* fame a large press turnout was expected at her funeral so Granada TV sent someone to the crematorium to discuss with the undertaker exactly where barriers should be put to corral the photographers. At one point the undertaker gently pointed out that there would be one minor problem with their proposals – they wouldn’t be able to get the coffin into the building. Jill would have liked that!

WEEK COMMENCING MONDAY, APRIL 16th 1956	
JILL SUMMERS in her new road show	9. INTERMISSION.
I COULD OPEN YOUR EYES	
1. OVERTURE by the Theatre Royal Orchestra directed by Mac Griffiths	10. THE DUBARRY TWINS— Dancing for you again.
2. PROLOGUE—JILL SUMMERS.	11. JILL SUMMERS and COMPANY in "The Landlady."
3. RITA RODEN— Rhythm is her business.	12. MICHAEL STEVENS— The Sensational Discovery of 1956.
4. THE DUBARRY TWINS— Dancing to Delight.	13. PAULINE JOY—Glamorous Xylophonist of Malenkov Fame on the late Teddy Brown's Xylophone.
5. JILL SUMMERS as "The Porteress."	14. JILL SUMMERS in "Almost a Lady."
6. ALBERT MILLWARD and SYLVIA— Sweethearts in Song.	15. GRAND FINALE BY THE ENTIRE COM- PANY—GOODNIGHT AND GOD BLESS.
7. JILL SUMMERS as "The Bartered Bride."	16. THE QUEEN.
8. PAT HATTON and PEGGY— England's Ace Illusionist in a "Magic Smile"	
	For "I Could Open Your Eyes" Co.
	Manager B. Workington
	Publicity J. Smell
	Wardrobe G. Pollock
	Furniture supplied by Warberg's, Langley, nr. Birmingham.
NO PHOTOGRAPHS TO BE TAKEN WITHOUT PERMISSION OF THE MANAGER	