

NEIL SEAN & JOHNNIE HAMP



Neil Sean and Johnnie Hamp at the Blackpool Hilton
(Photo: Maycon Productions)

If you say the words *The Comedians* or *Wheeltappers* there really is only one man that springs to mind – producer/writer/compere extraordinaire, Mr. Johnnie Hamp. I was so lucky to spend a delightful afternoon interviewing him at the Blackpool Hilton Hotel; in fact we were both excited as the suite in which the interview took place had only just been vacated by Engelbert Humperdinck, no less. A fact that Johnnie and I found great fun in during our long chat.

Johnnie Hamp is a rare breed, successful on every level, but I was particularly keen to learn of his time working as a trainee manager for the Granada Cinemas circuit way back in the 1950s. Johnnie revealed, “I was to work at the Granada Tooting when the Voice, also known as Frank Sinatra, was booked to appear and me – yes, me, was also down to do the sound. Can you imagine? I mean I was terrified really. Mr. Sinatra was great, though his career was not going great guns at that time, so the fact he came over, I think, at that period was a big plus for us. Now while we had other big names like Danny Kaye, Eddie Fisher and people like that, who filled the theatre, Frank, it’s sad to say, only got around 150 people which was not many in that theatre but you would have never known. He was a total pro and asked them all to gather around the front and sang so well to them it was a real treat.” Johnnie added, “After the show, he then came around and spoke to me about the sound and thanked me for doing it, so I figured I had got away with it quite well! But I will never forget Frank. I had only seen him in the movies until then.”

Johnnie was the last manager of the Metropolitan, Edgware Road, which is now sadly a police station, but he told me, “When I took up my post with Granada TV we had the Palace Theatre at Chelsea and with it came the

Met, which was the biggest and nearest theatre to the West End. All the greats had been there but at that time when I came along it was losing money big time. I think it really had tatty nude shows in too which was such a shame for this fine old theatre. We did manage to book some acts that made money. I do recall the wonderful and great Max Miller who had a fee of a £1,000 per week, which was huge money in those days but Max was worth it and he knew it really! We made a profit but Max was clever too as he made sure the bar till was ringing all night as he stood in the bar and while the punters bought him drinks he, of course, never paid for one himself! People said he was tight but I saw it with my own eyes - they would not have let him buy a drink, such was his popularity.” Johnnie told me that the last days of the Met were really funded by all-in wrestling, “I booked it and it went well and made a huge profit so with that we were able to book a variety show during the rest of the week. It was a shame that the fine old music hall was to see its last days with wrestling but at least it kept it open a few years longer.”

Johnnie told me about his move into television: “The boss of Granada just asked me one day if I fancied becoming a TV producer. Can you imagine that really happening today? Anyway I said ‘yes’ and we had a chat and then he said, ‘Look, get yourself down to the Chelsea Palace and start to learn from there’. My first big TV job was a show which went out live called *Spot the Tune* with Marion Ryan and we had Pete Murray hosting it. Then after that finished we had to have a quiz to replace it so we started *Take A Letter*, which was hosted by Bob Holness, who, to many, is known now for the quiz *Blockbusters*. Great shows and great times but all were live so if you made mistakes, of course, they went out live across the United Kingdom to millions of homes!”

Johnnie has given us so many big names across the years including, of course, great comedians like Bernard Manning, Frank Carson, George Roper and Charlie Williams. Johnnie revealed this great story about working with Bernard who, he said “was a kind man without a doubt in real life but of course his persona was that of a git really and he loved that people bought into it. Once, on *The Comedians* he was on before George Roper and all the comedians used cue cards to remind them of the gags that they were going to tell. Well, Bernard spots George’s cue cards and unbeknown to George who is in his dressing room and has no idea what is going on, does all of his jokes. He then introduces George who promptly dies, as, of course, the audience had just heard them! Cruel but so very funny. You had to be on your mettle with those boys. Bernard would often tell a blue gag knowing that I would have to take it out of the final edit!”

“On an edition of the *Wheeltappers* show we had the singer Frank Ifield as a star guest and, of course, he had been around a while so Bernard goes to introduce him with ‘this next guest, if we have another world war I am getting right behind him. Why? Well he has not had a bloody hit in years – welcome Frank Ifield.’ Johnnie laughed, “The thing was that Frank was so wound up about hitting the stage I am sure he had no idea what Bernard had said about him! Hilarious though and of course he did not mean it at all. Bernard, though, could have a wicked sense of humour.”

The Wheeltappers And Shunters Social Club was another big hit for Johnnie but he tells me that booking the host Colin Crompton was problematic. “Oh yes,” remembered Johnnie, “we had real working men’s club concert bookers, you know, saying that the character Colin had created was in fact giving them a bad name. Great publicity as it hit the press and the show was huge by then. Colin also upset the residents and holiday makers of seaside town Morecambe by doing a routine with jokes like ‘they don’t bury the dead there, they just stand them up in a bus shelter’, ‘the place is so boring the only excitement is watching traffic lights change colour’, and ‘it’s like a cemetery with lights.’”

As we sat in the hotel with the camera rolling and the darkness now descending on Blackpool, with the famous lights now springing to life, Johnnie was in no mood to end the chat and told me all about his show *Scene At 6.30* which, of course, gave a huge break to The Beatles. Johnnie revealed, “With this show we had some great guests on and the Beatles were one of them but truthfully, because I was so busy all the time, I had not noticed how famous they had become. Their manager Brian Epstein was a good guy who also got them and many other acts into better suits and wearing their hair in a classy way, which made it easier to have those kinds of acts on the show. But we had them all - The Rolling Stones, Lulu, Gerry Marsden and then we saw them become huge all around the world.” Johnnie also hosted the show *Cinema* when Michael Parkinson left to go and take the reins of his now famous chat show. Johnnie revealed, “This was a great show for me. I mean, I got to meet all my idols from the golden age of cinema. I remember once that the Hollywood legend David Niven came on the show and we took him out to lunch prior to the recording. He was, as always, beautifully dressed but during the lunch, my assistant made a hearty laugh and her steak, complete with

sauce, flew onto his shirt and tie. She jumped up, knocking the gravy into his lap, to boot! Horrific really but he took it with good grace, and on screen he appeared just wearing a black polo neck!”

Johnnie has been responsible for so many acts getting their break on television like *The Grumbleweeds*, Tom O’Connor and Russ Abbot in a show he devised called *Firsttimers*. “It was a great time”, recalled Johnnie, “because you were allowed to have a go and show people with talent and give them a window. Of course, if they were good they all survived and I am proud to say that many of them did.” Johnnie, though, has very little time for reality television shows. “*Strictly Come Dancing* is, of course, a variety show held together by the wonderful Bruce but I don’t watch things like people sat in a room or a cooking show. When I started with Granada I was taken around by the head of Granada Cinemas and I had to be in full dinner suit to meet the patrons, always on show and ready with a smile, no matter who you had on the bill. Plus, we had all sorts of publicity stunts that helped promote the shows and stuff like that. It really has all changed now and it would seem old fashioned to be doing some of that stuff but you never see a manager now, do you, at a theatre or cinema?”

Johnnie told me that he remembers Blackpool with affection for his stage shows of *The Comedians*: “Great audiences and great fun. It may have lost many of its great and wonderful theatres, like the Hippodrome and the ABC, but you know it will come back as people always want a laugh. As Charlie Williams would say, ‘Without a laugh, where would you be? Dead.’ and then he would howl with laughter.”

Johnnie left me spellbound with his stories of the variety world, the world he first got to know from his father, The Great Hampo and Gladys. He also told me of his affection for the talent of artistes like Mrs. Shufflewick, “Ah yes, people you never failed to have a laugh with and they were great. They are still remembered today and in my opinion will be for years.” A little like Johnnie Hamp.

(Editor’s Note: Johnnie Hamp’s autobiography *It Beats Working For A Living* is published by Trafford Publishing, £12.00 ISBN: 978 14251632 73)



*Colin Crompton in
The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club*