

# MR AND MRS. MUSIC

*The Call Boy Spends An Afternoon With Pearl Carr And Teddy Johnson*



Every year in May a large proportion of the British population watches the Eurovision Song Contest in the vain hope that a few votes will be given to the United Kingdom's entry. It seems that these days we are destined to be found near the bottom of the voting chart but it wasn't always the case and we must thank Pearl Carr and Teddy Johnson for giving Britain its first big success in this international competition when they came second in 1959 with their song *Sing Little Birdie*. Eric Maschwitz, then Head of BBC Television's Light Entertainment department, had asked Pearl and Teddy to take part, and although the Netherlands came first in the contest, it was *Sing Little Birdie* that actually reached the number one slot in the Netherlands hit parade! Pearl and Teddy were asked to appear in Holland, a visit they describe as 'unforgettable' and after they appeared on Dutch television, they were constantly stopped in the streets by people saying, "You should have won." The Johnsons were certainly lucky for Britain as the following year Teddy's brother Bryan came second for the United Kingdom with his song *Looking High, High, High*.

Of course, by 1959 Pearl and Teddy were riding high in the entertainment world with frequent appearances on television and radio, variety tours, summer seasons and pantomime engagements. They were also well-established recording artistes as well they might be, considering that both of them had, by that time, quite extensive careers in show business. It is their early careers that we will be focusing on in this article.

Pearl was born in Exmouth in 1923. Her father owned a fish and chip shop but her mother was a singer and dancer who performed under the name Lily Palmer. A contract that hangs on the stairs of the Johnson home shows that Lily received the not inconsiderable sum of £5 and 10 shillings for a week's engagement at the Palace Of Varieties, Chatham in 1910. Pearl's

mother also ran a private dancing school and Pearl soon discovered she had a talent for tap dancing. "I decided to join the well-known troupe, Terry's Juveniles," recalls Pearl, "I remember I auditioned with the song *You Must Say 'Yes' To Mr. Brown* and did a little tap routine and got in." Later, when she was too old for the troupe, Pearl became a Cochran Young Lady and appeared at His Majesty's Theatre in *Big Top* with Beatrice Lillie, Fred Emney and Patricia Burke. "During the run of the show, which took place in the war years, Bea's son was killed but she still went on with the show", remembers Pearl. Following *Big Top*, Pearl moved to the Palladium as one of Dorothe Morrow's *Three In Harmony* to appear in the Tommy Trinder revue *Best Bib And Tucker*, directed by Robert Nesbitt.

Pearl also started touring the Astoria cinema chain in cine variety and doing solo vocal work with various bands including Lew Stone, Phil Green and Leslie Douglas. It was with Douglas's orchestra that Pearl made her first recording in 1947 of two music hall songs: *Don't Dilly Dally On The Way* and *The Honeysuckle And The Bee*. Pearl was also increasingly busy with broadcasting work, appearing with the bands of Maurice Winnick and Cyril Stapleton. She also joined the well-known vocal group The Keynotes when Terry Devon left and in 1951

A vintage advertisement for the Manchester Hippodrome. The top section reads "MANCHESTER HIPPODROME" in large, bold letters, with "ARDWICK GREEN" underneath. Below that, it says "6.25 MONDAY, JULY 12TH 8.40" and "TWICE NIGHTLY". The main part of the ad is a grid of names: "TEDDY JOHNSON" (with "THE OUTSTANDING COLUMBIA RECORDING SINGING STAR" above it), "PETER SELLERS" (with "FROM RADIO'S 'GOON SHOW' AND 'RAY'S A LAUGH'" below it), "MICHAEL BENTLEY" (with "THE MISSING LINK" below it), and "PEARL CARR" (with "THE GLAMOROUS SINGING PERSONALITY OF RADIO &amp; TELEVISION" below it). At the bottom, there are more names: "TWO STIRLINGS" (with "ERDIE BRAGG AT THE PIANO" below it), "ALPHONSE BERGE &amp; HIS MANNEQUINS", and "SLIM RHYDER".

(Courtesy of Nick Charlesworth)

had the honour of being voted the Top Female Singer of the Year (1950/1) in the popular music magazine *Melody Maker*.

The beginning of the 1950s also saw Pearl working extensively with Bernard Braden on his various radio shows including *Breakfast With Braden* and *Bedtime With Braden* where in addition to her vocals, she was allowed to show her comedy side. In *Breakfast With Braden*, Pearl was supposed to be infatuated with Bernard:

- Pearl:** You haunt me Mr. Braden. I've got pictures of you everywhere. All over the walls, on the door, on the ceiling –
- Bernard:** On the ceiling!
- Pearl:** I like to look at you when I gargle. It brings it all back.
- Bernard:** It's no use Pearl. I'm not for you. You wouldn't love me when I'm old and worn out.
- Pearl:** (sobbing) But I do, I do.

The increasingly busy Miss Carr also featured on Robert Farnon's programme *Journey Into Melody* and was given her own BBC showcase *In The Blue Of The Evening*.

Pearl met Teddy in 1951 on the Light Programme show *Black Magic*, starring conductor and pianist Stanley Black. Teddy was the compere and Pearl was the girl singer. Stanley asked Teddy to sing duets with Pearl but Teddy was unsure saying "I'm not good enough to sing with Pearl Carr." However he was persuaded to do so and thus began their partnership, both professional and private.

Teddy was born in South East London in 1919 and by the age of 14 was an amateur drummer and singer with his own band - Teddy Johnson and His Rhythm Kings. "I had a business card printed, which stated 'All combinations supplied, from piano and drums up to a nine piece band', and I used to go knocking on doors of people who could possibly offer me work. What a bloody cheek I must have had!" recalls Teddy. "Usually though there were about four or five of us and we would do gigs for five

shillings!" "You can see I didn't marry him for his money", said Pearl, laughing.

This teenage impresario, on leaving school, became an office boy for Motor Union Insurance. "I didn't like that first job so I just walked out", said Teddy. "I received half a month's pay on the second Saturday and never went back on the Monday so I still owe the company a few days wages!" Another office job followed before he was offered a job as drummer on the P&O ship, *SS Corfu*. The job title was actually Assistant Steward Drummer and as well as his musical duties, he was also expected to carry out mundane tasks like dusting! "That shows the respect they had for musicians", laughs Teddy. "I was eighteen at the time and that is when I became a professional musician. When I started the trip I could not read a note of music but during the voyage I taught myself. The trip lasted fourteen weeks and I did about four of these trips in total. We played a wide variety of music, everything from popular songs and dance music of the day to classical pieces and light opera. For the first time I had money in the bank."

Teddy then moved up a notch when he got work with the National Entertainment Association, who employed musicians on the big liners. "I must confess that I never thought I would be good enough as a singer and musician," recalls Teddy. "I had always been a fan of music hall and variety when growing up and I had an ambition to be an entertainer or comic."

Teddy made his first broadcast in 1939 for Radio Ceylon, when he was en route to Australia on *SS Orion* where he was drummer and vocalist in a quartet. He sang *Music Maestro Please*. "I was probably a little breathless at the beginning of that number", remembers Teddy, "as I had to weave my way from the drums to the front and just got to the microphone on time! I remember the trumpeter, who was very experienced, saying to me, 'Teddy, you are a very good singer but a bloody awful drummer'." Teddy's musical career at sea came to a standstill with the Second World War. He was in the merchant navy for four years, finishing up on the *Queen Mary* as a butcher, until invalided out in 1944. "During the war, the *Queen Mary* liner was used as a troop ship and sailed all over the world", recalls Teddy. "When it visited New York I was able to see such artists as Frank Sinatra and Benny Goodman and I also managed to buy a decent drum kit."

After the war Teddy worked as a drummer at the Streatham Locarno, where he received a telegram from Jack Payne resulting in a BBC broadcast. Unfortunately Teddy made a mistake and sang out of tune in the verse of the song *A Lovely Way To Spend An Evening*, resulting in the BBC banning him, claiming he wasn't good enough. The organisation also wasn't happy that although Jack Payne had auditioned Teddy, he had not taken part in an official BBC audition. After working for a while with the bands of Phil Green and Roland Peachey, Teddy decided on a new career direction by becoming an announcer for Radio Luxembourg in May 1948. "I loved that job and stayed two years", recalls Teddy. "I played the 'Top 20' records of that time and I believe I was the first official regular British disc jockey on radio. My show was two hours long which is now commonplace but at the time was very unusual." When Teddy left Radio Luxembourg his place was taken briefly by Roger Moffatt before Pete Murray took up the reins.

Teddy made his first record in 1950, *Beloved Be Faithful*. This proved a success and Teddy started touring in variety. At this time lots of American stars were crossing the Atlantic to appear at the London Palladium. The singer Jo Stafford was one of those keen to visit our shores and Mitch Miller, head of A&R for Columbia in the States and EMI's own Norman Newell hatched up an idea whereby she would record a couple of duets with Teddy. However this was no ordinary recording session as



Teddy recorded his part of the duets in England whilst Jo recorded hers in America – the first time this particular technique had been attempted. “Sadly, it wasn’t a success”, recalls Teddy, “as they chose old songs, one British and one American. The American song was *There’s A Small Hotel* and the British number was *The Moment I Saw You* from a Cicely Courtneidge revue.”

Another American star to work with Teddy was the comic Jack Benny. Benny appeared at the Palladium in 1952 when fellow American, singer Dennis Day, acted as his ‘feed’. When Benny was offered two further weeks in variety at Manchester’s Palace Theatre and the Glasgow Empire, Day was unavailable due to prior commitments so Teddy took his place, not performing his usual vocal act but appearing as the comic’s stooge. This brief change of persona was actually instrumental in Teddy landing a role as a straight actor in a radio drama series. The radio producer Eddie Fraser happened to see Teddy with Jack Benny and having seen him earlier on a variety tour, decided he would be the ideal person to play Steve Gardner, a singer turned private eye, for a Scottish Home Service detective drama serial *Steve Gardner Investigates*. “I can’t remember the last time anyone ever mentioned it”, chuckled Teddy, when asked to recall this programme. “I was the only non-Scot in the cast. Steve Gardner was supposed to be a singer who came up to Glasgow and became a sort of amateur detective, trying to solve a crime. I also sang in the first two episodes but we soon dropped that as the singing was superfluous to the story and it was very hard to keep coming up with ideas, which justified the character singing. The scripts by Eddie Boyd were very articulate and in fact Eddie won a Bafta for them. I’d go up to Scotland for five or six days and record the entire serial. It was the most wonderful contract for me and, of course, completely different to anything else I was doing.” The six-part series proved very popular and Teddy did about six different serials finishing in 1957 when Pearl and Teddy travelled to the States. They restarted in the sixties but sadly the Home Service wouldn’t air them nationally at the time, as they were considered too Scottish! They were, however transmitted worldwide and the BBC later had a change of heart and a serial was broadcast on Radio 4 in 1971.

In the latter part of his career when Teddy was presenting a regular music programme on Radio 2, a listener wrote to him saying, ‘You’re my favourite radio voice from the Steve Gardner shows and here you are doing these awful programmes on Radio 2 during the day introducing the worst music!’

Pearl and Teddy married in 1955 and for a while continued with their solo acts as well as coming together for duets. Their new double act was tried out at the mecca for variety, the London Palladium. “We started at the top”, said Teddy, “the best place to try out a new act!”

The years that followed saw the twosome busy on stage in variety and summer seasons, hosting around 180 editions of their own Radio Luxembourg show, and making many television appearances. In 1958 Pearl and Teddy joined the popular television children’s show *Crackerjack*, staying for two series and working with Ronnie Corbett, Eddie Leslie, Raymond Rollett and, of course, Eamonn Andrews and in 1960 they were honoured to be chosen to appear in that year’s Royal Variety Performance.

On the recording front, they began singing together as early as 1952 and as well as their Eurovision success, they reached the charts again in 1961 with *How Wonderful To Know*. They also made well-remembered versions of two Ivor Novello songs *My Dearest Dear* and *I Can Give You The Starlight*, which displayed to excellent effect their polished and sincere vocal style.



The duo also proved popular in pantomime. Teddy’s first pantomime appearance was covering for David Whitfield for a month as the Emperor in a 1954 production of *Aladdin*. The following year Pearl and Teddy were booked for Derek Salberg’s production of *Cinderella* at the Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham with Ted Gatty and Terry O’Neill. “Derek Salberg looked after us well,” remembers Teddy, “and he had two dressing rooms made into one with a connecting door.” This pantomime was repeated with equal success at the Grand, Wolverhampton the following Christmas. 1966 found Teddy working for Salberg again when he once again covered for Whitfield in *Robinson Crusoe*, this time for the whole run of the pantomime. Whitfield had been involved in a court case, accused of indecent exposure during his summer season in Llandudno and Salberg felt that the publicity would not be conducive to a good pantomime season. By mutual consent Whitfield withdrew and Teddy replaced him.

In 1983 they were the proud recipients of the Gold Badge of Merit from the British Academy of Songwriters, Composers and Authors and three years later had the honour of being the joint subjects of *This Is Your Life*.

In 1987 their careers took a change of direction when they made their debut in a West End stage musical. Stephen Sondheim’s *Follies* opened at the Shaftesbury Theatre with an all-star cast that included Pearl and Teddy as well as Diana Rigg, Daniel Massey, Julia McKenzie, Dolores Gray and Adele Leigh. They stayed with the show for the entire eighteen-month run. “I loved it”, said Pearl. “It was fantastic to be involved in a real West End musical.” And, of course, Pearl’s early training in tap and dance came in useful for the big production number *Who’s That Woman*.

Pearl and Teddy were regarded in the profession as a vocal speciality and as such were in constant demand throughout their long careers. But did they have any unfulfilled ambitions? “Having done virtually everything else,” confessed Teddy, “we would have dearly loved our own television series. Sadly, it wasn’t to be.” Be that as it may, looking back over the years, Pearl and Teddy can be justly proud of the contribution they have made both separately and together to British show business and the popular music industry. They are now enjoying a well-earned retirement. So Pearl and Teddy, to quote Abba, *Thank You For The Music*.

**Geoff Bowden**