YOUR TOP TEN REVISITED
by Michael Kilgarriff

While rehearsing for *Robin Hood* in December 1957 at the Pavilion Theatre, Liverpool, I had the good fortune to see a touring bill of the last generation of music hall veterans, including Randolph Sutton, Albert Whelan, G. H. Elliott, Hetty King, Dick Henderson, and Marie Lloyd junior. Inevitably, Marie junior sang *Don't Dilly Dally* carrying her mother's linnet cage. It must be admitted that I recall the prop more than the performance, but then the daughter of *The Queen Of Comedy* was not, alas, a chip off the old block. "That one will never be an artiste," said Marie to a dressing-room visitor while her daughter was on stage, "not as long as she's got a hole in her arse."

The Cock Linnet Song, to give it its sub-title, was written in 1919 by Charles Collins and Fred W. Leigh. But judging by the musical and lyrical sophistication of songs coming over from the U.S. around this time such as *My Melancholy Baby* (1912) and *They Didn't Believe Me* (1914), *Don't Dilly Dally* must have seemed a tad old-fashioned. Perhaps it was intended to evoke a bygone era, with Our Marie a survivor. Nevertheless, the chorus drives along catchily and is eminently singable, and it is no surprise that *Don't Dilly Dally* came top of last summer's *CB* poll of favourite music hall songs, conducted by Terry Lomas.

If your first choice was sung by Marie Lloyd at the end of her career, the second was in her repertoire at the very start. This is *The Boy In The Gallery* (c.1881), whose first verse begins: 'I'm a young girl and have just come over/Over from the country where they do things big.' What country? What things? The U.S.? Ireland? No-one has ever given me a convincing explanation. Not that it matters much, for the song has a pretty tune and I'm sure we have all at some time waved our handkerchiefs as the eponymous 'Boy'.

Third choice features the immortal boast: 'I've just had a banana with Lady Diana' from Ella Shields' *Burlington Bertie From Bow* (c1915) – not to be confused with Vesta Tilley's earlier *Burlington Bertie* of which it was a parody. Lady Diana was Lady Diana Manners, the reigning society beauty of her generation, later Lady Diana Cooper. Words and music were by William Hargreaves, who had written a very successful song for J. W. Rickaby called *They Built Piccadilly For Me (Silk Hat Tony)*. But the two numbers were so alike, with both featuring poverty-stricken toff jokes and the same slow sauntering ¾ tempo, that Rickaby turned it down. Hargreaves then offered it to Ella Shields, an American singer who had originally come to Britain a decade earlier as a 'coon shouter', and her reputation was instantly assured. Perhaps in gratitude Miss Shields became Mrs Hargreaves, though they divorced in 1923.

Choices 4 and 5 were both sung by the cadaverous Gus Elen, an artiste who also started his career in black-face before taking up the coster line of business. Though often regarded as an exemplar of the working-class, Elen's childhood was by no means deprived and his off-stage speaking voice verged on the genteel. Nevertheless he had a powerful if caustic individuality and number 4, *If It Wasn't For The 'Ouses In Between*, suited him admirably. The lyrics, dripping with irony, describe the singer's attempts to turn his backyard into an Arcadian idyll, perhaps guying the 1890s fad for suburban gardening.

Each chorus begins: 'Oh! It really is a werry pretty garden', a curiously late usage of Sam Weller-style inversion of 'v' and 'w', but the oddest line is in the third verse:

'I wears this milkman's nightshirt,
and I sits outside all day,
Like the ploughboy cove what's
mizzled o'er the Lea.'

In John O'Keeffe and William Shield's 1787 ballad the flaxen-headed ploughboy '*whistled* o'er the Lea', so where does 'mizzled' – referring to fine rain or mist – come from?

'Ouses In Between was written by Edgar Bateman and composed by George Le Brunn in 1894, the team also responsible that same year for your 5th choice, *It's A Great Big Shame*, which treats of the henpecked husband, a subject discussed in many – one might say too many – music hall lyrics. On record and on film Gus Elen scowlingly pronounces 'put' in the last line of the chorus to rhyme with a southern counties 'putt'. Was this standard late-Victorian Cockney? Or just an Elen affectation?

Number 6 should surely have been higher up the poll: *Daisy Bell*, a perfectly constructed waltz with an irresistible swing. Written and composed by Harry Dacre in 1892, it was first performed in New York by Katie Lawrence whose career, despite that early success, failed to blossom. Back home in the U.K. Dacre produced another lilting waltz song, *I'll Be Your Sweetheart* (1899) but after nearly one hundred and twenty years *Daisy Bell* still commands a prominent place in the international pantheon of popular song.

Number 7 only just scrapes into contention as a music hall song, for *On Mother Kelly's Doorstep* dates from as late as 1925, but as its writer and composer, George A. Stevens, was seventy-one that year we can

perhaps accept it as of Victorian/Edwardian vintage. It was introduced by Fred Barnes, who never made much of it and was happy for Randolph Sutton to take it on. What I remember vividly of Sutton's performance over half a century ago was his unforced charm, the sweetness of his smile and the gentle gesture – putting a hand to his ear – which invited us to sing the chorus, rather than the usual peremptory 'All together now!'. A class performer.

In 1968 the song was given a new lease of life by Danny La Rue whose recording reached number 33 in the charts. Ten years later he was still singing it at the final walk-down of *Aladdin* at the London Palladium, a panto in which I played Slave of the Lamp and had perforce to suffer Dan's rasping delivery twice-daily for the entire run.

The original performer of number 8, *Lily Of Laguna*, was Eugene Stratton; that magical night in Liverpool I saw it beautifully rendered by G. H. Elliott, *The Chocolate-Coloured Coon*, who after Stratton's death in 1918 assumed his mantle and remained faithful to the black-faced minstrel tradition till the end of his days.

Lily was written and composed in 1898 by Leslie Stuart, a musician superior to the usual run of songsmiths, and includes an eight-bar symphony – 'The Shepherdess's Call Up The Mountainside' – to showcase Stratton's much-admired soft-shoe dancing. There are dozens of Lagunas (lagoons) around the world; which one Stuart had in mind is anybody's guess. His splendid 1891 march *Soldiers Of The Queen* (1891) is still an essential in the repertoire of every military band.

Number 9 is another sway-along waltz, *Down At The Old Bull And Bush.* Written in New York in 1903 by Andrew B. Sterling and composed by Harry Von Tilzer, the original title was *Under The Anheuser Bush.* A change of lyrics for British tastes was successfully achieved with the assistance of Russell Hunting and Percy Krone, and on this side of the pond the silvery tones of the statuesque Australian Florrie Forde helped to propel the song into the national consciousness where it remains to this very day.

Harry Von Tilzer's brother, Albert, composed *Take Me Out To The Ball Game*, and their niece, Frances Gumm, is better known to posterity as Judy Garland. A talented family, you might say.

Your final choice connects with the first in that it was sung by Alec Hurley, Marie Lloyd's second husband. *'Arry, 'Arry, 'Arry* dates from 1902, words by Fred Leigh and F. Murray and music by the ubiquitous George Le Brunn, the only composer to appear in the poll twice (see *'Ouses In Between*). Bud Flanagan claimed that Hurley's stage persona, understated and unemphatic, influenced his own performance style.

My own favourite didn't appear in your top ten at all, for it is rarely heard today, if at all. *Sing Us One Of The Old Songs*, written in 1900 by W. B. Kelly and J. H. Woodhouse and sung by Millie Lindon, is a sentimental ditty, but sincere and unmawkish. A music hall singer, past his prime and in poor health, breaks down in mid-performance, prompting this response from his audience:

'Sing us one of the old songs,
George,
One of the songs we know.
Try old man, do what you can,
And we'll make the chorus go.
We can't forget what you used to be,
In the days when life was new.
Sing us a song, and if you go wrong,
We'll help to pull you through.'

A kind-hearted – and very British – reaction, allied to a waltz melody whose simplicity makes the storyline all the more affecting. For me, now in my mid-seventies and increasingly given to retrospection, the line 'In the days when life was new' is the most poignant in the entire music hall canon.