



Fig 1. - Billy Cotton Band show with Alan singing



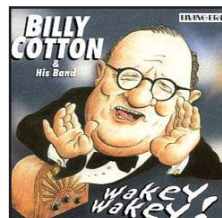
Young Alan Breeze

On the 17th May 1954 the Daily Mirror's Clifford Davies featured the following review in his regular 'Night Spot' column. "Television came up with a bang-up variety bill for the Queen's return on Saturday night. It could have been a Royal Command show. Best turn of the night was Billy Cotton and his Band. But of course this would have been nothing without that versatile fellow Alan Breeze."

I have dozens of reviews spanning thirty odd years of my father's performances as featured vocalist with the Billy Cotton Band. So how did Alan Breeze ever get the job with Bill in the first place? Going through his papers, I found what looked to be an attempt at a biography that my father started, but obviously never finished, reminiscent of his stuttering in the spoken word. Yes, he stuttered in speech, but was flawless in singing and I'm sure many people who knew

him have great humorous stories to tell in his regard even in his first encounter with Bill.

This took place in 1932 and he writes "Bill had in his new Stage show, an arrangement for a number called "Trees" and he needed a 'big voice' to get above the heavy orchestration, so he sent his manager Dave Toff, to find the owner of the 'big voice' he'd heard in the film "The 1st. Mrs. Fraser" a few days earlier. Dave asked me if I'd audition for Bill so I went along to the Hammersmith Palace where he was appearing in between the films. I took a number along called "That's why Darkies were Born" and gave the audition in his dressing room, which was very small. Clem Bernard brought his accordion in to accompany me and when I hit a big top note, Bill said "Christ! that's enough", "I nearly deafened him I think. Then he said "Yes, that's what I want son, but can you sing in tempo, you know, keep strict time?" So I drew myself up, all eight and a half stone of me and said "Of c-c-c-c-course I bleedin' well can, d-d-d-yer th-think I've c-c-c-come 'ere f-for?" I'll never forget the dumbstruck expression on Bill's face, because in those days he was a very strict disciplinarian and nobody spoke to him like that. Anyway, Dave Toff came in and Bill said "What about £6 a week for a month's trial?" I casually said OK and Dave typed out the contract on an old piece of paper. That was the only contract I ever had between Bill and I." For the next 40 years, my Dad and Bill enjoyed unparalleled success as the UK's best loved Big Band with Radio and Television Shows that spanned decades. (Fig 1. - Billy Cotton Band show with Alan singing) Wakey! Wakey!



became the Nations catchphrase and it is still being used today. What a life, what a career. The amount of Stars that were launched on Bill's Saturday Night TV show rolls off the tongue like vintage wine. Tommy Cooper, Russ Conway, Frankie Vaughn, Cliff Richard, Jayne Mansfield, Adam Faith, Sandie Shaw, Joe Brown, Alma Cogan, Bob Hope, Cilla Black, the list goes on forever. The Dancers used to move the scenery on and off the stage and the band turned into comedians for some numbers which Alan was particularly fond of. He became the Nation's favourite singer and Bill the best Band. Songs like "I've got a lovely bunch of Coconuts" is a very rare shot of Bill, Alan, Kathy Kay and Bill Herbert performing "Coconuts". "My old man, said follow the van" is another standard. These and many more were instant hits with the public.



Tommy Cooper



Jayne Mansfield



Russ Conway



Fig. 2 - Alan Breeze, Bill Herbert, Kathy Kay, Billy Cotton

Bill and Alan were lovers of fast cars and Bill was accomplished at all things 'sport'. He played League Football with Charlton, raced motorbikes and cars, had a pilot's license and a large boat and had also tried his hand at Boxing. He was a drummer boy in the First World War and even took over as Bandleader for the Chelsea Water Board. My Dad said there was a "marvellous spirit in the band, we were more like a big family". The first female vocalist was Doreen Steven, but the lady most remembered for that role was Kathy Kay who was with Bill for 12 years. Rita Williams and the Bandits were also a key part of the Band. They were Bill's singing group. Many others contributed to this outfit including the incredible tap dancing talents of Ellis



Kathy Kay

Jackson. Funny how things happen in life. Many years later, when I was in the Andrew Lloyd Webber/ Tim Rice hit musical "Jesus Christ Superstar" in London's West End, I met Ellis's grandson Johnny Worthy. Grisha Farfel, Bill's trumpet player also

featured his great solo talents in the Band along with my Dad's closest friend, Clemmie Bernard.

There were of course some tragic moments, but not everything goes smoothly. Take the time we were called at home by the police in Jersey who said that Alan had been in an accident and was fighting for his life. The Band was playing a Traditional Summer Season in Jersey and the BBC used to shoot feature slots for Bill's upcoming Shows. On this particular occasion, they were filming a comedy sketch where Alan was supposed to sit at a piano and the piano would explode, leaving it in pieces. Somebody however, loaded the piano with far more gunpowder than usual and the whole thing blew up. Many people from the BBC were injured, including Alan, who had a large splinter from the piano stuck in his back. Fortunately he survived.

Everyone has their influences and Alan's came from his father Louis Breeze who was a featured Baritone singer with the famous D'oyly Carte Opera Company and a professional singing teacher. I caught the singing bug from early Sunday morning trips to the BBC with my Dad for the live Sunday Lunchtime Radio program. Alan strangely enough, didn't want me to take up singing and when I took my first professional job in Malta, he flew out to demand I come home (as I was only 16), but I got round him and he let me stay. I persevered however and when he came to see me playing Eva Peron in Evita at the Prince Edward Theatre in the West End (Fig. 3) he cried all through and said it was the proudest day of his life, it was a



Fig. 3 - Michele Breeze as Eva Peron singing "Don't cry for me Argentina "

moment I shall always cherish. My dad sang with Bill Cotton for 37 years with five Royal Command Performances. Record Mirror said "It's high time someone drew attention to an astounding world record in our show-business. Strangely, it had been set up so gradually that most people don't realise just how astounding it is. I refer to the term of service of Alan Breeze with the Billy Cotton Band. " After all the years of happy, loyal and dedicated service, the parting of the ways was not such a happy one. In 1966, my dad, Alan Breeze was sacked from the Band. It is an understatement to say that my dad was absolutely devastated and he was never the same again.

Alan put it down to Billy Cotton Jnr, Bill's son, who had taken over as BBC1 Controller and he produced Bill's shows. In an interview with The Sun, Alan said " When Billy told me I had been axed I was very angry. I asked him how he could do such a thing to me? It was then to my horror, that he started to cry "and Bill snr. said " If I raise any objections, I'll be out ". By these simple exchanges, it was apparent that Bill snr. was no longer in control of his own destiny. How sad that a relationship such as this could end with neither party being in control of a lifetime of work they had lovingly crafted with their respective talents. For weeks afterwards, "Old Bill" sent Alan's wages to him in Flixton, Suffolk, where we owned and ran a pub called The Flixton Buck. My Dad always sent them back, uncashed! He was a proud man and he worked all those years for Bill without a contract, except for the one he signed in 1932 for a month's trial. That was how it was back then, they worked on trust and respect.

Times sure did change. For awhile, Alan locked himself away, feeling embarrassed and hurt about what had befallen him.

Sadly, Billy Cotton snr. died on the 25th March 1969, while watching a Boxing Match. He was a great entertainer, sportsman and one of the UK's legendary Big Band leaders. My dad was distraught at the passing of "Old Bill" whom he still had a great affection and respect for.

In 1968, Alan took a lead role in a new West End Musical at the Palace Theatre, based on the plays by Noel Coward called "Mr. & Mrs." alongside John Neville, Honour Blackman and the indestructible Hylde Baker. Later in London, he took part in a Festival of Light Entertainment in 1974, where he received a rapturous reception for his rendition of "Coconuts" in the true tradition of the Band he had dedicated his life to. He retired in 1975 and died on January 15th 1980. He was 70.

The Billy Cotton Bandshow is a British institution. Roast Beef Sunday lunch then "Wakey! Wakey! Hey you down there - yes you with the glasses". We shall never see the likes again and more is the pity, because here was a generation of talent who innovated and went where no one had before.

Billy and Alan met by chance and gave pleasure down the years to millions of fans and breaks to many young hopefuls who themselves were setting out on the precarious and rocky road to Stardom.

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