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Al Bowlly: The Jazzy, Hellenic Prince of 'N

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Iodern Style Singing' Conquered U.K.

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PART ONE

CHICAGO - Many Greek immigrants and their descendants have achieved great material and artistic success. But how much of that can be attributed to their ethnicity is not always clear. At times it is simply not a factor in their creative work. On other occasions it is only possible to understand their artistry as a direct consequence of their Hellenic roots.

Isocrates' maxim that one is only a Greek if that identity is claimed by the individual is the best rule one can follow in any investigation into the roots of artistic expression. Still with that being said it is equally true that unless we are aware that an artist is of Greek heritage we cannot begin to include them in our general investigations. The vast majority of academics simply wave aside any and all such possibilities. They already know what is acceptable by their non-Greek colleagues for study.

As I begin my exploration here, I think it must be recognized, even if only in passing, that at the exact historical moment Al Bowlly was establishing himself in his career, other Greeks born in the diaspora were also making their first attempts to enter the world of entertainment: the Andrews Sisters, the Contis brothers, Georges Guétary, George Melachrino, Jimmy Mesene, and Georges Metaxa among many others.

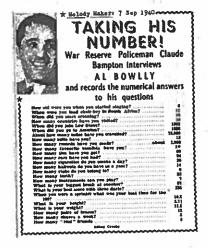
So let us boldly go into the realms of modern musical history where our academic cousins fear to tread.

Albert Allick "Al" Bowlly, who was always frank and open about his Greek background, was the first internationally recognized pop-Star of Great Britain. He is said to have coined the term 'crooning' based on a book he is credited with author-"Modern Style Singing" ('crooning") (London: H. Selmer & Co, 1934). As one reads in one newspaper account after another, Bowlly throughout his musical career is deemed second only to Bing Crosby in ability and popularity. Far from being a forgotten showman of yesteryear, Bowlly's recordings are readily available in a variety of collections and his signature pieces can be seen in movies and television programs. Obviously, the unique performative style this man is credited with developing, 'crooning', continues to influence musicians.

There is one other point to remember: hearing is believing. If at any point during this account you doubt what I am reporting about

the popularity of Bowlly's music simply go to the Internet and listen of his songs one www.Youtube.com. If you like what you hear, you can stay on the Internet and either order one the many available Bowlly compact disks or download a Bowlly MP3 file of just one song. I have even seen advertisements for Al Bowlly ringtones for cell phones, drawn from his more than 1,000 individual recordings. Your neighborhood mall stores that sell music are also sources for music by Al Bowlly. Now, if you're interested in Al Bowlly's story, but not enough to spend any money, go to your neighborhood library and order one of Bowlly's new compact disks through interlibrary loan. You can listen to him sing while you re-read this account.

Albert Alick Bowlly was born on January 7, 1899, the fourth of the ten children of Alick Pauli (1867–1927), a Greek, and his



The public was fascinated by Al Bowlly, as is seen in this newspaper item with all his vital stats.

Lebanese wife, Miriam (Mary) Avoub-NeeJame (1874-1949). Alick Pauli hailed from the island of Rhodes and met his future wife aboard the ship they were both taking to Australia. The couple are said to have been married in the Perth Cathedral and at some point migrated to what was then known as Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique). For reasons lost to history, Alick Pauli's surname was written as "Bowlly" when the family left Australia. As Pauli only spoke and read Greek, the mistake went unnoticed (as it did for many Greek sojourners processed through Ellis Island).

Al Bowlly always claimed to have been born in a box car. Apparently, the Pauli/Bowlly family were in Lourenço Marques, the capital (now known as Maputo), of Portuguese East Africa, when "[J]ust

previous to his birth a black plague had struck the little colony where his people had settled. So his dad packed the family into a box car to find a future home and to leave the plague behind...En route Al Bowlly was born, and his people settled in Johannesburg (Galveston Daily News June 28, 1931)." The Pauli/Bowlly family had fled to the town's bay area (then known as Delagoa Bay) and taken the Delagoa Bay Railroad line (which was to be the main railway along the coast) to the Union of South Africa.

Bowlly became the family's official name on, February 21, 1903, when Alick Pauli was naturalized in Pietermaritzburg, Natal, South Africa. Initially, Al Bowlly was baptized a Roman Catholic, his mother's religion, but at some later time young Alick adopted his father's Greek Orthodox faith. All we really know of Alick's youth is that sometime in 1913-1914, he left school to work in his uncle's (or in some accounts his older brother's) barber's shop (Oakland Tribune January 1936).

Clearly the young man was restless, as Bowlly, over the next six to eight years, aside from being a barber, also worked as a jockey and even a prizefighter. Young Alick, a person of unquestioned energies, also began to sing and play the ukulele, banjo and piano in clubs and other venues around Johannesburg during the evenings. Some accounts even assert that young Bowlly sang in the barber shop to entertain the customers.

Again, published accounts vary about this period of Bowlly's life but all available documentation agrees that he became a naturalized citizen of South Africa when on 12 March 1921, he obtained a pass port. This move anticipated Bowl ly's intent to go to Great Britain and establish himself as a performer Bowlly would not take so direct a route to his dream. In 1922, Edga Adeler, one of South Africa's to bandleaders, heard Bowlly per forming and offered him a job Bowlly soon became a valued mem ber of the Edgar Adler Band. It 1923, Adler's band began a tour o east Africa, Rhodesia, India, China Sumatra, and Java, all with Bowll in tow. In 1924, young Bowll threw a pillow at Adeler while the were onstage, and each went their separate ways. Bowlly immediatel joined the Jimmy Lequime Orches India, Calcutta, in banjoist/guitarist. When Lequim went to Singapore in 1926, Bowll became not only the band's fea tured singer, but a spectacular h performer at the internationally recognized Raffles Hotel.

Next Bowlly, along with Moni

lodern Style Singing Conquered O.V.



Al Bowlly played the banjo, ukulele and the piano in Johannesburg venues. A human dynamo, he was also a prizefighter and a jockey.

Liter, pianist for the Lequime Orchestra, travelled to Berlin, where he rejoined Edgar Adeler but also performed with other bands such as Arthur Brigg's Savoy Syncopators, Fred Bird's Salon Symphonic Jazz Band, and George Carhart's New Yorkers Jazz Orchestra. In July 1927, Al Bowlly made his first commercial recording, as a vocalist with Arthur Brigg's Savoy Syncopators on "Song of the Wander".

In July 1928, Fred Elizalde invited Bowlly to join his band at the Savoy Hotel in London. Soon after his arrival, Bowlly on August 18, 1928, recorded his first solo vocal performance, a cover of Irving Berlin's, "Blue Skies". John Bush underscores, in his online biography of Al Bowlly, the sheer speed at which Bowlly's career took off, "Just one year after his 1927 debut recording date in Berlin, Bowlly arrived in London for the first time...That year, "If I Had You" became one of the first popular songs by an English jazz band to become renowned in America as well...During the mid-'30s, such songs as "Blue Moon," "Easy to Love," "T've Got You Under My Skin" and "My Melancholy Baby" were sizable American successes — so much so that Bowlly gained his own radio series on NBC.

While the Fred Elizalde Orchestra disbanded in 1930, the Bowlly's popularity seemed unlimited. In November 1930, Bowlly signed a recording contract with Ray Noble, who was musical director at His Master's Voice (HMV) studios, which led to his recording some 500 songs over the next four years. Bowlly was no one's puppet. In May 1931, he signed another contract and joined a new band put together by Roy Fox at the Monseigneur Restaurant located in Piccadilly, London. Bowlly would spend much of his day with the Noble in the HMV studios rehearsing and recording while at night he performed live on the plush Mon-seigneur stage. Through record sales and radio performances, Al Bowlly was inundated with offers to tour Great Britain and elsewhere.

Somehow, given his demanding schedule, young Bowlly appeared in two British films in 1931, "A Night Like This" and "The Chance of a Night-Time" and then one in 1932 "The Mayor's Nest" and two more in 1933, "Up for the Derby" and "The King's Cup".

Bowlly's popularity made him a magnet for women. Albert Bowlly married a dance hostess, Constance Freda Roberts, on December 18, 1931 at the St. Martin register office in London, but the couple broke up three weeks later and finally divorced in January 1934.

While all accounts agree 1930 to 1934 was Bowlly's most productive period in terms of recording music, I am nevertheless still confused by how many recordings he ultimately recorded. Various sources say Bowlly made 200 individual 'vocal refrains' in 1931 alone, I have seen very specific figures such as 678 'sides' meaning 678 songs on 'one side' of a 78rpm record. But then that would mean Bowlly only recorded 339 records which seems

far too few. Others say that Bowlly, in his overall life time, more than 1000 recordings. Part of the problem seems to be that not all sources distinguish between recordings Bowlly made exclusively for release as 78rpm records and those he recorded for films. Unwittingly, Bowlly made this discography problem all the worse by freelancing from time to time and so recording with a number of companies when not under exclusive contract. As we shall, see the ultimate number is insignificant compared to the overall influence his musical career has had on his fans as well as (and perhaps more importantly) on his fellow musicians.

Modern readers may be unaware that Al Bowlly, Bing Crosby, the Andrews Sisters and later Frank Sinatra began to perform at a unique moment in modern musical history. Prior to the arrival of Bowlly, the vocalists who had performed on record or the stage had never been given individual credit. The vocalist was simply another member of the orchestra which until this time always appeared under the bandleader's name. Bowlly, Crosby and the rest transformed the entire order and orientation of popular music through their performances and the new style of singing they

Al Bowlly was acutely aware of

this new style of singing and attributed it to the innovations in technology that were then underway. Bowlly, "disliked the term 'crooning', and preferred 'modern style singing', the title of a book issued under his name...[where he] observes that the modern intimate style of singing depends on the microphone, and that the microphone gives a new timbre to the voice, amplifying previously unheard harmonics. The techniques of the dance-band style of singing are characteristic of Bowlly: for example, a slight portamento, an added grace-note, a fresh attack, and a dragging behind the tempo followed by a catching up. His technique is heard to advantage in 'The Very Thought of You', recorded with Ray Noble's New Mayfair Orchestra, HMV's house band, in 1934 (www.memorylane.org).'

By 1934, Al Bowlly was clearly looking for something different in his life and career. In August 1934, Bowlly left England with Ray Noble and drummer Bill Harry to form a new band in New York City. Riding a wave of critical and popular success, nothing seemed impossible for the Greek crooner from South

Africa.

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