

# Al Bowlly Crooned His Way through Dazz

By Steve Frangos  
The National Herald Staff Writer

## PART TWO

**CHICAGO** - In the winter of 1934 Albert Bowlly arrived in North America already an internationally recognized recording star. The American press was keenly aware that Bowlly had already established his "reputation in this country entirely through [his] distinctive phonograph records which Victor issued here, long before they came over (Aiken Journal and Review April 10, 1935)."

Al Bowlly, with orchestra leader and arranger Ray Noble, and Billy Harty, a friend and drummer, arrived with the intent of forming an entirely new orchestra. Glenn Miller, just then a rising star himself, hand-picked all the musicians including such individuals as Claude Thornhill, Charlie Spivak and Bud Freeman. Bowlly and company opened at the prestigious Rainbow Room atop the RCA Building in Radio City on Fifth Avenue in New York City. They toured clubs, theaters, and saturated the radio with live performances from around the country.

On December 18, 1934, Bowlly married Margaret Fairless (known as Marjie) an English dance hostess, in New Jersey. Without missing a beat Bowlly toured all corners of the United States. Al Bowlly gave one stellar performance after another, even as his new marriage suffered the consequences of his ever more demanding successes.

Right at this very moment in time, young George Thomas Simon, a new drummer in the Miller Orchestra, later recalled: "One of the nicest guys I ever met was Al Bowlly [the] South African singer, whose warm and tender phrasing was a true reflection of his personality...One of my fondest memories is of Bowlly taking me aside and telling me he'd like to sing me a song that Glen had just written. Actually, only the melody was Glenn's; the lyrics were by Eddie Heyman, best known as the lyricist of "Body and Soul."

Al was a very sentimental guy who had no trouble showing his emotions, and I thought he was actually going to cry as he sang without any accompaniment, the new song he had just learned and which obviously had affected him very much...I've been unable to forget the original lyrics of "Now I Lay Me down to Weep," as Al Bowlly crooned them just for me that early

morning in the band's dressing room:

*Weep for the moon, for the moon has no reason to glow now;  
Weep for the rose, for the rose has no reason to grow now;  
The river won't flow now,  
As I lay me down to weep.  
You went away, and the break in my heart isn't mending;  
You went away, and I know there is no happy ending,  
There's no use pretending,  
As I lay me down to weep.  
When you were mine, the world was mine,  
And fate constantly smiled.  
Now in its place, I have to face  
A pillow of tears, all through the years.  
Though you are gone, I still pray that the sun shines above you;  
Time marches on, yet I know that I always will love you*

The exact path of Bowlly's tour is not now known. Whatever the route may have been Al Bowlly's recordings of songs such as "Blue Moon", "Easy to Love", "I've Got You Under My Skin", and "My Melancholy Baby" were considerable financial successes. This led to Bowlly's own radio series on NBC. If Bowlly's NBC special live radio performances and regular program are any indication of who heard him sing (and where) we can have a better understanding of his influence. I almost went snow blind trying to read through the dozens and dozens of local radio show listings for Al Bowlly's radio performances during his United States tour.

To give some scope to the kind of exposure Bowlly enjoyed on the radio (outside of New York City), let me list just at random a dozen cities in which his program was aired: Oakland, California; Chicago, Illinois; Evansville, Illinois; New Orleans, Louisiana; Lowell, Massachusetts; Trenton, New Jersey; Cleveland, Ohio; Xenia, Ohio; Dallas, Texas; San Antonio, Texas; Seattle, Washington; and Sheboygan, Wisconsin.

Given that Bowlly was never shy about his Greek background, his father hailed from Rhodes, it seems impossible that he did not meet some fellow Hellenes during his travels.

Newspaper accounts I've read during Bowlly's USA tour sound much different than the various biographies and liner notes. While all sources agree it was a triumphant tour the newspaper accounts report it was the Ray Noble Orchestra with



Al Bowlly, charismatic and brilliant musician, left us too soon.

Al Bowlly and not the other way around. Obviously, celebrity culture and its resulting tabloid accounts are never to be understood as history. Al Bowlly, Ray Noble, Bing Crosby, the Andrews Sisters, Frank Sinatra and all the rest were living through a moment of transition in public entertainment. Up to the 1930s, the vocalist was just another band member. The name and focus of the orchestra or dance-band was on the conductor, who was also most often the musical arranger.

Al Bowlly is credited with instantly recognizing the emotional and performative possibilities of the, then, new technology. Bowlly, "disliked the term 'crooning', and preferred 'modern style singing'...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...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](http://www.memorylane.org))."

One musical success followed another. Al Bowlly's recording of "My Melancholy Baby" was made in New York City on March 15, 1935 and was his big signature commercial hit of this period of his life.

*"Come to me my melancholy baby,  
Cuddle up and don't be blue...  
All your fears are foolish fancy,  
maybe  
You know dear that I'm in love with you!  
Every cloud has a silver lining*

# ling U.S. Tour, Died in London Blitz

*Wait until the sun shines through  
Smile my honey dear, while I kiss  
away each tear*

*Or else I shall be melancholy too!*

Another measure of Bowly's success is that he ultimately traveled to Hollywood to perform in the film *The Big Broadcast* of 1936.

By 1937, Bowly, fresh from his triumphant two year tour of the United States was back in England with his own band, the Radio City Rhythm Makers. For all the attention given to this man's artistic career, Al Bowly's, business savvy seems to continually escape attention. Bowly always tried to have as many performative venues open to him as possible. Occasionally one will read about how work dried up for musicians and other performers at the beginning of the war. But even a cursory exploration into World War II and the arts reveals the exact opposite. For all nations involved in the war, morale was a central concern, so the entertainment industry world-wide experienced an unprecedented boom.

Throughout the late 1930s, even while with his own orchestra, Bowly also regularly performed and sometimes recorded with the orchestras of Sydney Lipton, Lew Stone and Maurice Winnick. Music buffs always stress that the versatile Al Bowly also recorded in 1940 with Ken 'Snakehips' Johnson's West Indian Orchestra.

It is here in the life story of Al Bowly that we meet yet another Greek musician of the diaspora, Jimmy Mesene. Mesene was born on March 6, 1908 in Cardiff (Wales); his father was a Greek running a shipping business. When he was fifteen Jimmy Mesene was sent to Greece to learn the shipping business but the Great Depression ruined his father and brought the young man back to England. Already a superb guitarist, Jimmy soon became a highly successful musician. Extensive fan sites on the Internet exist for Jimmy Mesene as they do for Al Bowly, but with the extra advantage of extensive commentary by James Messini, Jimmy's only son who now lives in near Melbourne in Australia (see esp. <http://virgin.net/davidh.taylor/jimmyson.htm>). Not only was Al Bowly best man at Jimmy Mesene's wedding when he married Emily Isobel Gilbert on March 29, 1934, he was godfather to the couple's only child, James.

During the early 1940s, Bowly and Mesene teamed up, performing on the London stage and on BBC radio, alternating as "Two Greeks and

Their Guitars" and "Radio Stars with Two Guitars." Among many recordings, the two recorded Nicky the Greek (Has Gone) on April 2, 1941 with Pat Dodd on piano (HMV BD-922). In point of fact Al Bowly's last recordings were made with Mesene just two weeks before his death.

It was during the London Blitz: "His last date was at the Rex Theatre in High Wycombe on 16th April, 1941. After the show, Al returned to his flat in Dukes Court, Piccadilly. On this night London was suffering one of its heaviest air raids. Instead of taking cover in the air raid shelter, Al was sitting up in bed reading a cowboy book. In the early hours of April 17, 1941 a German bomb came silently down and exploded in the street outside Al's window.

After the "all-clear" had been signalled, the caretaker made his rounds to see that everyone was all right. When he entered Al's flat, located on the corner of Jermyn Street and Dukes Street, St. James, he found him dead on the floor beside his bed, killed outright by the blast from the bomb. He was buried on April 26 in a communal grave at Westminster city council cemetery, Hanwell, after a funeral service conducted by the dean of the Greek Orthodox Cathedral in London. The gross value of his estate was £1163 2s. 8d. although at the time of his death he had only £3 10s. 9d. in his bank account, something of an irony given that his signature tune was 'Buddy, Can You Spare a Dime?' ([www.memorylane.org](http://www.memorylane.org))."

Albert Bowly's legacy is that for the people of Great Britain, his music signals the late-1930s and the war years. That the Andrews Sisters can claim this same cultural role in the United States is obvious to any Hellene.

Bowly's music has been showcased in more feature films, after his death, than he ever did alive. He can be heard singing 'Midnight, the Stars and You' and 'It's All Forgotten Now' on Stanley Kubrick's classic 'The Shining' (1980) and his voice can be heard in the charming French film 'Amelie' singing 'Guilt'. His music is often used as background in British TV series set in the twenties and thirties, such as 'Poirot', 'Miss Marple', 'Goodnight Sweetheart', 'Pennies From Heaven', 'Edward & Mrs. Simpson' and other programs ([www.memorylane.org.uk](http://www.memorylane.org.uk)).

On October 19, 2007, the BBC first aired their documentary, "Al Bowly: The Very Thought of You." Literally hundreds of Al Bowly's recordings and even those with Jimmy Mesene can be heard on the In-

ternet at the [www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com) site. For those of you not familiar with computers this is a site that features both short and long films that you can view for free. These can be seen at any neighborhood library with online computer facilities.

Our all too brief survey of the life and career of Al Bowly is an effort to introduce new individuals into the overall exploration of Greek contributions to the fields of performance and promotion in the diaspora. As Al Bowly, a self-identified Greek from South Africa was establishing himself in Great Britain, at essentially that very same historical moment, other Greeks born in the diaspora were simultaneously making their first attempts to enter the world of entertainment: the Andrews Sisters, the Condos brothers, Georges Guétary, Jimmy Mesene, Georges Metaxa, George Melachrino and many others. Wouldn't some kind of overall comparative study on this group of performers seem logical for Modern Greek Studies programs to pursue?

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## GREEK POETRY

### Hymn on the Birth of Our Savior

*When Augustus became  
sole ruler on earth,  
the multitude of rulers  
came to an end.  
And when You were incarnated  
through Her who was pure,  
the multitude of pagan gods was  
abolished.  
All cities came under one  
terrestrial king,  
and all nations believed  
in one divine realm.  
Augustus decreed that there  
should be a census of men:  
we believers took as our official  
designation the name of God.  
Great is Your mercy,  
o Lord our God incarnate:  
glory unto You.*

Kassiani.

Translated by Vayos Liapis in  
"The Greek Poets"  
Constantine, Hadas, Keeley  
and Van Dyck.