

50th year  
commemorating  
Billy's music  
1959-2009



Jan. 2009  
No. 26



Patrons:  
Sir Richard Rodney Bennett  
Eric Parkin, Susan Tomes, Peter Jacobs

Lothar Perl	Brian Willey & Mike Lorenzini	3
Fidgety Digits a review	Peter Joelson	4
Ena Baga.	Brian Willey	7
George Shearing : tribute	Brian Willey	8
Wallermania (Alex Hassan) CD and DVD review	Mike Harth	10
Christopher Duckett : BMS concert review	Mike Harth	12
Piano toning/voicing	Mike Lorenzini	13
Shallow Waters	John Watson	14
Just a Little Thing Called Rhythm SWCD38 CD review	Mike Harth	15
Julian Dyer piano recital	Mike Harth	17
Sid O'Connell - Obituary	Granville Cooper	18

*Editor : Mike Harth, artwork & layout : Mike Lorenzini assisted by Kathy Lorenzini*

The BMS website, [www.billymayerlsociety.co.uk](http://www.billymayerlsociety.co.uk) continues to attract interest in far flung places courtesy of BMS member Roy Wainwright.

All BMS members on the net please tell as many people as possible to set up links.

This year's concerts will include Alex Hassan who will be accompanying Rachel Barrell and Colin Zammit in a performance of Billy Mayerl songs.

They will also be recording a CD for Shellwood.

Exciting new talent discovery BMS member Christopher Duckett will be playing another entirely Billy Mayerl concert, this time to include some of Billy's rarer pieces.

Simon Mulligan will be giving a recital for the BMS and brings a great jazz influenced piano style to bear on his performances.

Our thanks go out to Mike Harth for providing articles and a challenging competition, also new BMS member Brian Willey and especially to Peter Joelson who has recently carved a niche for himself as a respected reviewer of classical and light music on CD.

### Concerts are now £14 inc. Refreshments

**Sunday** Concerts & Meetings at **Shellwood St Leonards Rd. Thames Ditton 3 - 6pm**

- Jan 25th ..... AGM followed by a members' meeting
- March 8th ..... *Concert* Alex Hassan *piano* Rachel Barrell *soprano* Colin Zammit *tenor*
- April 19th ..... BMS members' meeting
- May 31st ..... *Concert* Christopher Duckett *piano*
- July 26th ..... BMS members' meeting
- Sept. 27th ..... *Concert* Simon Mulligan *piano*
- Oct. 25th ..... BMS members' meeting
- Dec 13th ..... Members' Xmas concert (£5 per person)



You need to pay for your programme at least one week before your chosen date.

(no paying at the door) Members can bring 2 new guests to any concert/meeting subject to availability. Reservations are **£14** per person & include refreshments.

## Lothar Perl

As a new member of the BMS I read the January 2008 magazine from cover to cover and the Lothar Perl sheet music cover particularly attracted my attention the reason being that I have to confess I had never previously heard of him. So, for my own erudition, research was undertaken and I hope the result is of some interest to other members.

Lothar Perl was a naturalised American citizen, born in Breslau, Germany, on December 1<sup>st</sup> 1910. There are many gaps in his history but It's known he sailed to the U.S. through family migration fleeing the rising threat of Nazi Germany (he was Jewish as well as a composer of "decadent" music) He had a university and conservatoire education, and initially became a piano recitalist and accompanist to musicians, dancers and singers. Although he later became a music teacher at Los Angeles City College and the Adelphi College in New York he was also very active in the commercial world as a composer and conductor for films, TV, theatres and night clubs.

There is TV footage of him when he was the musical director of the Ernie Kovacs show in the States where, I'm sad to say, all they could find to show off his talents was to sit him on a keg of gunpowder (with a one minute fuse) at a grand piano, he proceeded to light the fuse and play Chopin's Minute Waltz finishing in time to cut the fuse to roars of approval from the audience. What a lost opportunity to hear him play his own compositions. But there was a serious side to his work, for he wrote many ballets for the Ballet Russe Company, David Lichine and Trudi Schoop. Notable



Lothar Perl and his first wife Gitta on the occasion of their marriage



instrumental works include: *Four American Variations On A Theme Of Paganini* (for piano); *Black and White*; *Cowboy*; *Ducky*; *Grasshopper Dance*; *Hollywood Stars*; and *The Last Mohican* amongst many others. His film scores were, *This Land is Mine* (1943) *The Unfinished Dance* (1947) and *Three Daring Daughters* (1948) the last two titles written in collaboration with musical director, Herbert Stothart.

The photo is a rare find given by Gitta Perl to Alex Hassan who has recorded all the Lothar Perl's on **SWCD1**. Gitta, his first wife, who is very much alive and in her late 90's still walks vigorously around New York from her flat in Columbus Ave.

Lothar Perl died in New York on April 28<sup>th</sup> 1975 at the age of 64.

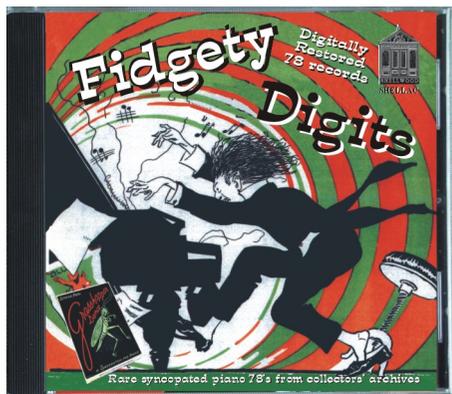
Brian Willey 2009

## SWCD36 FIDGETY DIGITS: Rare syncopated piano recordings 1927-1941

“ONE take, folks!” says Alex Hassan in his effervescent notes to this important release of rare recordings, very well transferred by Philip Legg; indeed, the listener is often left amazed that such virtuosity is possible. Some of those who have tried in vain to attempt to play some of these numbers may well be left feeling happily inadequate.

There's an international feel to this collection, a United Nations of syncopated piano playing, with contributions from the US, UK, Europe, South Africa and Australia. The Australian is Sefton Daly, a mysterious character who cut six sides on New Year's Eve, 1942, all available on the Crystal Stream label for those who wish to investigate further. He also appeared in the 1953 film, “Wherever She Goes”, playing the part of a piano player in this story of the early life of Eileen Joyce. He is indeed an elegant and sophisticated player, with hints of a classical training. Isador Goodman was another classically trained Australian pianist whose big tone and confident arpeggios impress with the other wartime recording here, “Bless 'em All”.

Lothar Perl, recorded in Germany before his emigration to the US, will be an astounding discovery to those not yet acquainted with his few recordings. A composer of several film scores, including that for the Renoir film “This Land is Mine”, starring Charles Laughton, Maureen O'Hara, George Sanders and Walter Slezack, Perl (1910-1975) was a youngster when he recorded these quaintly named titles. The possessor of a superb technique, playing and composing, his workings of the themes



are both witty and imaginative. Four sides are included here; the remaining two, Hollywood Stars and Goldfish or Flying Fish are on a super-rare 78, Polydor 24257 which it is hoped will surface soon.

Ernst Fischer, another German composer, wrote a good deal of light music for orchestra, including a splendid suite, *Südlich der Alpen*, and for solo piano; some of these solo works were arranged later for piano and dance band or two pianos, the syncopated pieces here recorded in 1928 and 1933 before the age of *entartete musik*. On this showing, the young Fischer had wonderful technique for writing for the keyboard; exploding with energy, and the epitome of the Weimar Republic in its last years, “Jack” Bund and the Drei Virtuosen play his pieces “Little Fool” and “How Nice” leaving this listener hoping there is more from these sources.

Raie da Costa, the South African pianist who recorded much in her short life (1905-1934), was one of the finest of the fine pianists playing syncopated music. Her classical training coupled with her very individual working of her material makes it a nightmare for other

pianists to emulate. Many of her recordings are stupendous, and “Varsity Drag”, from 1928, belongs to that category, with passage-work, particularly in the right hand, demonstrating her truly virtuoso status.

Chicago-based Lee Sims founded the “Lee Sims School of Music” and was highly regarded by Art Tatum, unsurprising when “Mine, All Mine” is auditioned. Garland Wilson’s “Shim Sham Drag” is a fine example of American syncopated playing, big and bold and striding. He also recorded with Nat Gonella, and with Jean Sablon and Django Reinhardt; sadly short-lived, Wilson spent several periods working in France where he died just 44. Pauline Alpert’s “Chopsticks” may sound as though it’s going to be a trite bonbon and ends up nothing of the sort. A highly imaginative take on a simple theme, the variations she conjures up are a delight. Much recorded, this outgoing gal never fails to entertain. Willie Eckstein (1888-1963) was a child prodigy, classically trained in Montreal; offered a scholarship to McGill University in 1900, he declined as the family was not wealthy enough to support him, and he went on the vaudeville circuit. What he lacked in height (he was too short to be considered for army service during the First World War) he more than made up for in talent. “The Boy Paderewski” or “Mr Fingers”, as he was known, grew up with ragtime, and “I’m All A-Twitter”, written for an early talkie, “Close Harmony” also starring an uncredited Jean Harlow, combines his classical training with the popular contemporary syncopated style with great success. Oscar Peterson was an heir to this Canadian talent.

Nevill (Henry) Melland’s “Fourth’s

Fever” is a real rarity, one of two sides recorded in 1927; a player with an individual voice, his tiny discography has much to celebrate. Monia Liter had a busy career; he accompanied Al Bowlly, recorded the “Alamein Concerto” with Mantovani, composed and conducted. His recording of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” betrays a deep feel for arrangement, and coupled with his big Russian piano playing heritage the effect is unique.

Arthur Sandford also recorded with Mantovani, among these “Flying Saucers (Bees in the Bonnet)”, and with Charles Williams, and he was pianist for Debroy Somers early in his career. Unaccompanied recordings are rare; “Don’t Worry ‘Bout Me” with “What Goes Up” shows what we have missed in syncopated music from this classically trained pianist, a seemingly effortless ability to produce perfect passage-work.

We have much of Patricia Rossborough’s work to choose from on record; she also appeared in a variety short, “Pathetone Parade of 1940” along with Nosmo King. Her sturdy rhythmic playing may lack the effervescence of Da Costa but her playing of this CD’s title “Fidgety Digits” is a very fine performance, with such control of the keyboard. Donald Thorne played in the Ambassador’s Club band, composed and arranged; his syncopated works for piano solo were published and are much sought after. “Spring Feelin” and “Firecrackers” are two demanding pieces full of, as Alex says in his notes “thorny passage-work”, both upbeat energy-giving pieces. Harry Engleman’s “Cannon off the Cush” and “Snakes and Ladders” are a couple of sensitively played pieces and Jack

<sup>6</sup> Wilson's "Raindrops" medley from the same time works very well. Engleman and Wilson worked together, too, between them producing many sides.

Finally, Britain's best known and prodigiously talented musician, Billy Mayerl, is represented by both sides of a 78 called "Billy's Own Selection" dating from 1933. The ease with which this virtuoso of syncopated playing combines these various hits he had is utterly breathtaking and fascinating in their effect. As well as composing and arranging for piano, Mayerl wrote for orchestra, works becoming increasingly known. However, it is for his school and his piano playing that he is most fondly remembered, playing which never fails to lift the spirits. I cannot recommend this release highly enough!

*Peter Joelson 2009*

#### TRACKLISTING

- 1 Cowboy: 1935 Lothar Perl: Odeon 0-11727
- 2 Mine, All Mine: 1927 Lee Simms: Brunswick 3754
- 3 Spring Feelin': 1928 Donald Thorne: Columbia UK 5155
- 4 Billy's Own Selection Pt. 1: 1933 Billy Mayerl: HMV DB1219  
Penny Whistle, Marigold, Wisteria, Chopsticks, Ace of Spades
- 5 Little Fool played by Jack Bund & Bravour Dance Band:  
1933 Ernst Fischer: Parlophone R-1499
- 6 Colour Scheme: 1943 Sefton Daly: Columbia (Australia) DO-2541
- 7 Shim Sham Drag: 1936 Garland Wilson: Brunswick 02283
- 8 Grasshopper Dance: 1934 Lothar Perl: Polydor 24256
- 9 The Varsity Drag: 1928 Raie Da Costa: Parlophone R176
- 10 Cannon off the Cush: 1935 Harry Engleman: Panachord 25820
- 11 Fidgety Digits played by Patricia Rossborough: 1937 Thomas Haines: Parlophone F-1149
- 12 I'm All A-Twitter: 1929 Willie Eckstein: Canadian HMV/Victor 216541
- 13 How Nice: The 3 Virtuosos Robert Renard's Orch 1928 Ernst Fischer: Parlophone F-360
- 14 Raindrops Medley: 1935 arr/played by Jack Wilson: Regal Zonophone MR1825  
Butterflies in the Rain, Dance of the Raindrops, When I met my Girl in the Rain
- 15 Ducky: 1932 Lothar Perl: Odeon 0-11727
- 16 Don't Worry 'bout Me / What Goes Up: 1939 Arthur Sandford: Columbia UK FB2265
- 17 Snakes And Ladders: 1936 Harry Engleman: Panachord 25859
- 18 Chopsticks: 1932 Pauline Alpert: Sonora Set MS460
- 19 Fourth's Fever: 1927 Nevil Melland: Parlophone R3495
- 20 Firecrackers: 1928 Donald Thorne: Columbia UK 5155
- 21 Alexander's Ragtime Band piano: Monia Litter:  
1934 Irving Berlin: Brunswick UK 01814
- 22 Billy's Own Selection Pt. 2: 1933 Billy Mayerl: HMV DB1219  
Ace of Hearts, Junior Apprentice, Hollyhock, Canaries Serenade, White Heather
- 23 The Last Mohican: 1933 Lothar Perl: Polydor 24256
- 24 Bless 'em All piano: Isador Goodman 1941 Fred Godfrey: Regal Australia G24380

## Ena Baga

A Reminiscence by Brian Willey



I was intrigued to see, in the January 2008 BMS magazine, John Playle's photograph of the gravestone that graces the last resting place of acclaimed cinema organist and pianist, Ena Baga. Sadly John didn't say where he had seen it, but I guess it's not too far from the Hammersmith area, for that was where she had resided.

She was born in Islington, the fourth and youngest daughter of a half-Italian father (his mother was Irish) and a part-Italian mother. Her dad was a professional pianist, harpist, and conductor so she had a perfect start in her musical life. In fact all four Baga sisters became professional musicians and Ena's equally talented younger sister, Florence, also became a cinema organist, working under her married name of Florence de Jong.

I got to know Ena Baga many years ago and in 1994, having then just read her cleverly titled autobiography 'Bagatelle', I wrote to her to tell her how much I had enjoyed reading it. Her reply a most charming letter reminisced about Sandy Macpherson growing mushrooms in his spare time in the old Jubilee Chapel in the East End of London where the BBC

Theatre Organ was housed. She also mentioned how much she admired Sidney Torch, who used to listen to her recording sessions when she was resident organist at Blackpool Tower Ballroom during the war. In 1994 the Tower celebrated its centenary and she was thrilled to have received an invitation to attend as a surprise guest organist. Well, I should think so too after all she was then only 88 years old! She was 98 when she died in 2004 a Queen of the Keyboard to the very end.

This isn't intended to be a bagagraphy sorry I mean a biography but just a fond memory of a great lady.



Ouresteemed editor Mike Harth has returned from sunny Spain and is now resident in the Hackney area of London. He celebrates his 83rd birthday this year, actually he shares the day and month of Billy's birth date on the 31st May and will, we hope, be able to attend Christopher Duckett's concert on that day here at Shellwood.

After a lifetime of playing the piano (we played 2 piano arrangements for over 30 years) it is sad to relate that arthritis has finally made it too painful for him to tickle the ivories any more. This hasn't dimmed any of his other faculties musicwise and his energy is still an example to us all.

He has passed his extensive sheet music library into my keeping containing as it does a lifetimes passionate selection of great piano pieces, I hope I have enough years left to explore everything he gave.

Thanks Mike.

*Mike Lorenzini* 2009

## <sup>8</sup> A salute to Sir George Shearing who will be 90 in August 2009

I am not often enthusiastic about many who are ennobled, but I was singularly delighted when jazz pianist George Shearing was awarded a knighthood - bestowed upon him in June 2007 when in his 87<sup>th</sup> year. In 2009 he celebrates his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday so we are well in time to acknowledge the occasion and wish him continued good health and happiness.

Blind from birth, George was the youngest of nine children, born on August 13th 1919 some 4 miles west of London in a very run-down area of Battersea, familiar for its dogs' home and the huge four-chimney derelict power station.

His coalman father, and railway-carriage cleaner mum, had eight other children, and their family life was tough. After formal local schooling he attended Linden Lodge in Wimbledon, a specialist centre for the blind where he learned to read Braille music and play classical piano. It was soon evident however that jazz was his preference and, although offered grants to attend university, it was more essential to earn money for the family so, on leaving school at 16, he played piano in a Lambeth pub before joining a local band.

His relaxation at home was listening to American jazz pianists such as Art Tatum, Albert Ammonds, Meade 'Lux' Lewis, and Teddy Wilson, absorbing all he could of their styles and techniques. By the mid-1930s he had joined a 15-piece all-blind orchestra directed by Claude Bampton, who was sighted and conducted with a huge baton which, although unseen by the players, guided them with its '*swish swish*'. During the next decade, George Shearing's talent



as a jazz exponent made him in demand as a pianist with the best-known band-leader names of the day, Ambrose Vic Lewis, Harry Parry, and Frank Weir.

I first met George in the mid-1940s when he was appearing in a regular BBC Saturday morning radio programme, 'To Town on Two Pianos', which he shared with fellow pianist, Arthur Young. My first impression of him was one of utter amazement, for I had never before seen a blind person play the piano. He was led into the studio by his wife, who guided him to the piano. Once seated he adjusted the piano-stool for height, and immediately began flawlessly playing a Bach fugue. I had work to do, but it was almost impossible for me to tear myself away from watching and listening to him. From then on I was a life-long admirer and avid fan.

It was Glenn Miller's pianist, Mel

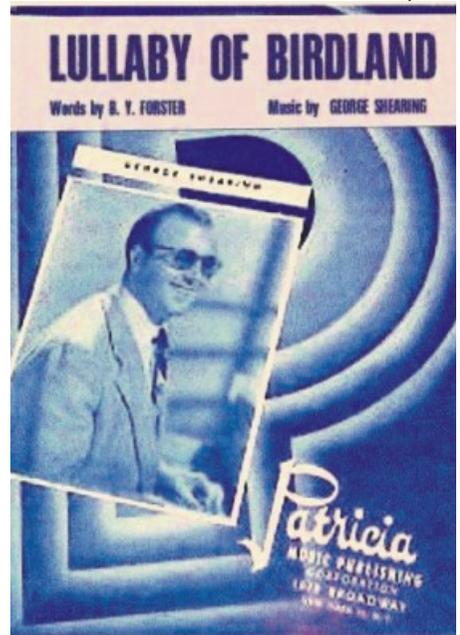
Powell, back in 1944, who first suggested that America might offer George greater opportunities for his talent and, in November 1946, he paid a visit to the States to investigate the opportunities of its jazz scene. By the end of 1947 he had left our shores for good and settled in New York. Although it took a few years for him to establish himself he finally became a revered jazz performer. A composer of over 200 tunes, he is perhaps best known for *Lullaby of Birdland*, inspired by the famed New York Broadway nightclub 'Birdland', in which the Shearing quintet was first booked to appear in 1952. George claims it took 10 minutes to write down the melody, and he did so while eating a steak lunch! With the quintet he became known for a 'block-chords' style of playing, and his fame spread internationally. The quintet disbanded in 1978 after an astonishing 29 years together when he then toured extensively and also became a prolific recording artist.

Since his early 20s George Shearing has been showered with awards. In 1942 he won a 'Melody Maker' poll as 'Best Jazz Pianist' an award he would win six more times in succeeding years. In America he now has Honorary Doctorates of Music from three colleges and, back in Britain, Battersea has named a specialist recreational centre after him. He was presented with an 'Ivor Novello Award' in 1993 for 'Lifetime Achievement' and it was on that occasion that I met him once more for the first time since 1946. We had a long conversation about our shared memories from almost 50 years earlier and, considering the eventful life he has experienced since then, his recall was astonishing.

He has played for the Queen at a Royal

Command Performance, and at the White House for three of America's presidents. Although a naturalized American since 1955, the first major recognition of his Britishness was the award of an O.B.E. in 1996 for 'Services to music and Anglo-American relations'. And now he is a Knight of the Realm. Being an American citizen, he technically cannot be named with that title but no-one bothers about that. All his British and world-wide jazz fans now think of him as Sir George Shearing truly a musical giant of our time.

Brian Willey



Brian Willey seems to have had some incredible opportunities to meet many of the Stars of our musical heritage-but it wasn't just luck. He was a BBC sound engineer and radio producer throughout his working life and the encounters were all part of his daily routine. He freely admits it was a dream job in the golden age of Radio musical entertainment.

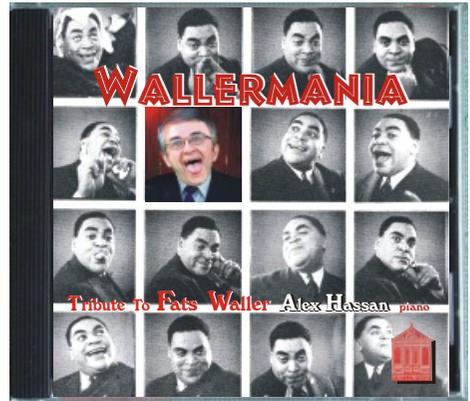
Editor

I must start off this review by saying how much I love the cover of this disc, which reminds us, with a wonderful collection of different expressions, that Fats was, first and foremost, an entertainer. I doubt if he ever forgot his audience for a moment; he was at the opposite extreme from those high-priests of pianism who give the impression that an audience is a regrettable necessity. I have never forgotten seeing a clip from a movie in which he played a lift-attendant, and in which he totally dominated the scene in spite of the peripheral nature of his role. But he was also a wonderful pianist, up at the top of the roster of stride pianists, and perhaps of them all, without any lowering of standards, the most fun to listen to.

Having said that, I have to confess that I've never rated his compositional gifts quite as highly as Alex does in his notes, but I suspect I am somewhat out on a limb there, and that my opinion is not shared by the majority. So let's get to what Alex is offering us, and find out if listening to this CD will alter my opinion at all.

To start off we get a medley he entitles *Wallerama*. The only tune that I'd come across previously among the eight included is *Black and Blue*, one of my favourite Waller numbers, the minor key, as so often, adding a touch of something extra, but the others are all of a good standard, without the careless repetitiveness that for me mars a number like *A Handful of Keys*. The pianism, too, is of a high standard, though it sounds much more like Alex than Fats.

After that comes one of the later piano solos, *Palm Garden*, affectionately played and with well-judged



embellishments that add to its appeal while keeping within the original's style. The second medley that follows, entitled *Walleresque*, consists of ten songs only a longtime obsessive collector like Alex could have turned up so many unknown or practically unknown numbers and this time I thought I didn't know a single one of them beforehand. Then, halfway through this track, I recognized one of them, and looking at the list I immediately knew it was *I Got Love*, which was one of the Waller songs of which Billy himself made a transcription. Among the other numbers I particularly liked *Willow Tree* and *Sweet Savannah Sue*.

Following that came what is probably the best-known number on the disc, *Alligator Crawl*, which, with *Viper's Drag*, were my introduction to Waller a good few years ago, and neither of which, at a time when my tastes were rather more oriented towards the classical repertoire than they are nowadays, had much appeal. Listening to Alex's performance, I had to concede that I had judged A.C. too harshly, though I still wouldn't rate it amongst Waller's best offerings.

The third medley, *Walleristic*, ends with a reference to what is probably

Fats' best-known song, while along the way we get the delightfully titled *Snake Hip Dance* and one of the many songs on the theme of the origin of jazz, *How Jazz was Born*. It's interesting to observe how much the meaning of the word jazz has changed since it first arrived, so that now it means something quite different from then: Billy's *Jazz Master*, for instance, wouldn't nowadays be thought to have any connection with jazz.

By the time I'd heard this collection through, I'd listened to nearly thirty Waller songs, and my opinion of the general standard was much higher than I had expected, while when I looked at the playlist, with well over another dozen to come, I realized that he was a much more prolific composer than I'd thought, and I was particularly looking forward to the selection from a show to which he wrote the score. First, though, there was another piano solo, *Happy Feeling*, and I found the first section of this a bit uninventive, though the second and third strains were more interesting.

Then came the selection from a musical, *Early To Bed*. Though there was no obvious big hit, the numbers were all tuneful and enjoyable, and I'd be interested to know how successful it was.

The *London Suite*, as I'm sure you all know, was composed while Fats was staying in London just before the outbreak of World War Two, and is his most serious attempt at composition. It's surprising to be informed that this recording is the first of this modern era. The six numbers all take their titles from various London areas, beginning with *Piccadilly*, which to these ears sounds much like New York than London, at least till the ending.

*Chelsea*, which follows, has a

more romantic feel, while *Soho* makes me feel that when it was written the area was a good deal less frantic than it is now. *Bond Street* is another good number, if not perhaps quite suggesting the opulence associated with it nowadays. The Chinese connection of *Limehouse* is hinted at in the opening by chords in fourths, while its melody is perhaps the most arresting in the set.

Finally comes *Whitechapel*, and I think Fats must surely have been aware of its considerable Jewish population, as the main melody has a distinctly Jewish cast. Alex brings a good deal to the suite, and I thoroughly enjoyed his version.

The last medley, *Walleristic*, contains another nine numbers, of which *My Fate is in Your Hands* was the only one I'd heard previously. Even after discounting what Alex does to lift them, I must admit that I was surprised by how high the general level was, none of the songs sinking to the level of banality one sometimes finds in his piano solos, and I wonder if the discipline of setting music to a lyric raised Fats' game. As a result of listening to this disc my opinion of Fats as a composer is much higher than it was before I heard it. If you don't know Waller, this CD would make a good introduction, while if you are already a fan it is quite simply an unmissable addition to your collection. The purist may object that Alex doesn't sound like Waller, but would you want what could only be a pale reflection of an inimitable talent, when instead you are offered Waller numbers that you almost certainly didn't even know existed.

As you may be aware, during the period when he was recording this CD, Alex also gave a live recital for the members of the Billy Mayerl Society,

<sup>12</sup> and this was recorded by the regular team of Phil Legg and Mike Lorenzini so that it could be put on a DVD. This is available to members of the BMS. It is interesting to compare the raw live performances with the polished ones on the CD, and for the real fan I recommend getting both.

The first surprise is that Alex plays the medleys without any help from the printed music, or even some form of crib, so I guess his memory is stacked with all these Waller melodies. It's fascinating to watch his hands while hearing the music, and a real bonus for those who weren't able to attend the actual recital. The musical content is almost entirely the same: *Palm Garden* isn't included on this DVD, but instead we get Alex's version of *I'm Crazy 'Bout My Baby*.

Alex's style is somewhat different from that of Fats, but somehow he gets over the feel of this ebullient performer, and the result is indeed a worthy tribute.

Mike Harth 2009



## **BMS Recital August 10 2008: Christopher Duckett**

This is the first time in the Society's history that it has put on a recital comprised entirely of compositions by Billy: Susan Tomes came nearest to it in her second recital for us, but she also included, one may say for light relief, a suite of four pieces by Willie 'The Lion' Smith which she had previously played for a ballet company, and I remember her telling me afterwards that it was technically the toughest recital she had ever given, because there was no let-up,

as there would be in a classical recital. Certainly that considerable proportion of the Society's membership who are themselves pianists are aware, often painfully so, of just how demanding Billy's pieces are, so quite clearly Chris Duckett had taken on a considerable challenge, and I was very curious as to how he would cope.

I knew that Chris was a member of the Society, and there was a slight element of doubt in my mind as to whether we were accepting a slightly lower standard because of this, but my fears were soon set at rest. I was unable to get to the live recital, so had to wait until I could get a copy of this DVD, when it was quickly apparent that Chris has the requisite stamina in spades as well as the necessary technique. As this is not a commercially available recording I'm not going to discuss each item individually they're listed elsewhere for the benefit of those who want to get hold of a copy.

Chris looks as if he'd be more at home on the rugger field than the concert platform, so the delicacy of touch and lightly rhythmic feel he displayed in *Sweet William*, which opened his recital, were something of a surprise, while *Shallow Waters* showed a genuine lyrical touch, by which time I was already confident that the Society had picked a winner.

*Marigold* may be Billy's best-known piece, but it is also one of his more difficult, so that its popularity is something of a surprise. As I had already come to expect, Chris made light of the difficulties, concentrating on its lightly rhythmical qualities. It was in the next piece, *Virginia Creeper*, though, that he really showed his mettle: the attack and technical command made me feel that

this was pretty much how Billy would have played it. Like so many of Billy's pieces, much of what they have to offer is lost if there isn't sufficient energy propelling the performance.

I have heard *Cricket Dance* played before, but this was the first time I really felt the appropriateness of the title, Chris's performance bringing out its onomatopoeic quality. *Sleepy Piano* was perhaps a touch fast for my taste, though Billy's own performance on record is even speedier. *Cobweb* showed Chris's abilities as a colourist, and *Balloons* provided further evidence of his rhythmic control and attack, while in *Honky-Tonk & Railroad Rhythm*, in spite of their technical difficulties, there was not the slightest coarsening of tone. It is clear that Chris is a real find who ought to be much better known on the recital circuit than he is, and a pianist who is bound to assist materially in getting Billy's music more widely known and appreciated.  
Mike Harth 2009

- 1 Sweet William
- 2 Shallow Waters
- 3 Ace Of Clubs
- 4 Ace Of Hearts
- 5 Marigold
- 6 Virginia Creeper
- 7 From A Spanish Lattice
- 8 English Dance
- 9 Cricket Dance
- 10 Harmonica Dance
- 11 Hollyhock
- 12 Meadowsweet
- 13 Bats In The Belfry
- 14 Evening Primrose
- 15 Sleepy Piano
- 16 Song Of The Fir-Tree
- 17 The Harp Of The Winds
- 18 Cobweb
- 19 Limehouse Blues
- 20 Phil The Fluter's Ball
- 21 Balloons
- 22 Orange Blossom
- 23 Honky-Tonk
- 24 Railroad Rhythm

## Piano toning/voicing 13

Occasionally I'm asked how to get a piano to sound as good as it can be and my reply is that all pianos get too bright after being played for some time so it's a good idea to have it toned/voiced to suite the room the piano is in giving the pianist a better change of controlling contrast between quite and loud playing.

The method of achieving this is as follows, first the piano has to be freshly tuned then the action is removed (in the case of grand pianos only) so that the hammers can have their faces sandpapered to remove any grooving and to restore a slight point at the strike sweet spot. Now comes the tricky part, the technician takes an instrument containing 3 or 4 sewing needles mounted firmly a few mm. Apart so that about an inch of the sharp ends project, this is then used to stab through the hammers hard outer felt to a spot just behind the hammer head, the idea being to provide a softer cushion effect. This is done on one note near the centre of the piano, then the client can hear the difference it makes clearly. When that is Ok'd the rest of the hammers are treated to match. Not for the amateur to do. I can recommend the tuner/restorer:

David Locke 020 8653 0133.

He tones all the pianos at Shellwood.

Mike Lorenzini

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Radio Pie magazine Oct.1936

## Our Tune: Shallow Waters

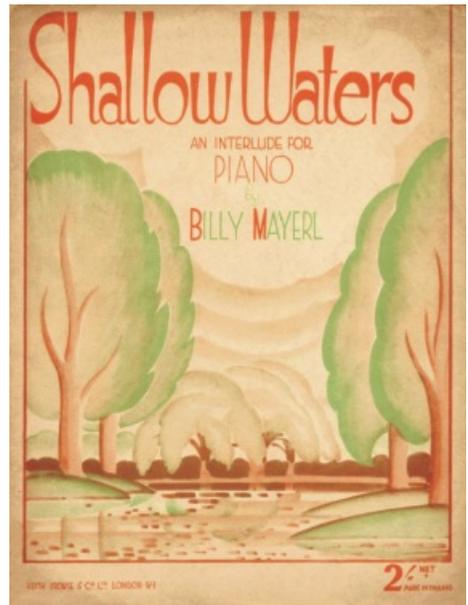
Once a piece of music has been published, it can be used in ways quite different to that originally intended by the composer. Many applications would have been completely unforeseen. For example, concert music from all ages and genres has been used to create atmosphere in feature films, television programmes and advertisements.

With the passage of time come new initiatives, creating new opportunities for using music. One such instance emerged unexpectedly during a recent online search by this writer for information about Billy Mayerl. For in the category 'Choosing piano music for civil weddings and civil partnership ceremonies', [bridalmarch.co.uk](http://bridalmarch.co.uk) suggest his *Shallow Waters* be heard during the signing of the register. It would be interesting to know how many times this actually has been chosen in preference to the other suggestions, which number over thirty. Mostly these are classical works, but included are Gershwin and Eric Coates. None of Billy's other works are recommended in this context. It is explained that 'Excluded from the lists are many suitable pieces by less well-known or forgotten composers, which would be appropriate if the bride, groom or their guests are musicians or classical music enthusiasts, and would appreciate something really unusual.' Clearly much thought has gone into the various suggestions.

The man behind the venture is Sussex-based pianist Phillip Sear. His aim is 'to promote the use of live music in general, and piano music in particular at civil wedding and partnership ceremonies

(And, indeed, at similar religious or other ceremonies).' Mr. Sear has a penchant for exploring the lesser-known repertoire. His tastes range from neglected Victorian salon pieces to inter-war rhythm piano transcriptions, as well as much else of interest. He is a prolific contributor to Youtube. Currently he has more than 500 of his piano performances on the online video sharing resource (an heroic achievement recognised by *The Gramophone*). Renditions of particular interest to members include works by Lee Sims and Alec Templeton and song transcriptions by Fred Hartley and Tony Lowry. In a recent conversation with this writer Phillip Sear said he is exploring the possibility of adding some pieces by Billy Mayerl. More information about the artist is available at [psear.co.uk](http://psear.co.uk).

**John Watson, December 2008**



No doubt the diehard fan of the pianola would disagree with me, but I feel that its chief glory, and the main justification for its continuing relevance, lies in the area we enter with this disc, rhythmic numbers, where the very considerable library of recordings is a unique, and uniquely valuable, treasure-trove. There may be plenty of present-day pianists who have a high degree of technical proficiency, but very few of them have a feel for the idiom, since classical training doesn't equip them for the very different demands of the rhythmic style, and so we are dealing with something that is to a large extent a lost art.

Nowadays few of us have pianolas or player-pianos, while the rolls to play on them are an expensive adjunct where one piece can easily cost as much or more than a single CD, so this CD represents incredibly good value for money! Julian Dyer, the industrious editor of the Player Piano Group bulletin, is also an extremely experienced pianist with a huge collection of rolls from which the selection here has been made.

First off is Jerome Kern's *Who*, played by one of the best-known pianists of the era, Victor Arden his 2-piano teaming with Phil Ohman is legendary. Continual variations maintain a high level of interest. *It's De-Lovely*, which follows, was cut direct onto paper without first being played, a quite common procedure, and which might be thought to produce truly mechanical music. Really, though, it is equivalent to the composer writing a piece down without playing it, as many did and do: it is the performer's task then to bring it to life. This performance is delightfully swingy.

*I'm Lonely Without You* is an interesting example of the co-operation between player and arranger, where the latter is largely responsible for the rhythm style. Much of *Sweet Man* is, very effectively, 'charlestonned' the most characteristic dance of the twenties, it seems to have disappeared completely, though the rumba has a similar basic pulse. *Raggedy-Ann's* plethora of decorations is never allowed to obscure the melody, and there is a surprising change of tempo to conclude. Then *I Call You Sugar* is a good example of what a performer can do to lift a less than top-quality number.

OMeOMy is immediately recognizable as being by Roy Bargy, one of the finest novelty composers of the period. This is not from the book of eight that he published, but just as good, and one wonders why it never appeared in print. *Are You Happy* is another by the partnership of Vee Lawnhurst, the pianist, and Howard Lutter, the arranger, that produced track 3 on this disc, and this one is even more inventive.

*Moonlight on the Ganges*, with its unforgettable opening phrase, has a touch of exoticism, while *Positively Absolutely* is more high-spirited. *There's Everything Nice About You* is played by Phil Ohman in, as Julian says in his notes, a delightfully bouncy style.

*Spring Fever* is, like OMeOMy, a novelty rather than an arrangement of a song. Its composer, Rube Bloom, also produced a piano tutor which was very popular in its day. *Your Time Now* is by a considerably more famous pianist-composer, Fats Waller. As well as the unmistakable wallerisms, it showcases its composer's genius as a player.



*Ruffenreddy* is one of Bargy's novelties that did get published. There seems to be some uncertainty about authorship, Charley Strait, who duets with Bargy on this recording, being credited as responsible for most if not all of the original. Be that as it may, it was Bargy who put it into the final form which was published in his set of eight, and to my ears it sounds very much in his style. All of which is pretty much irrelevant to the fact that it's a delightful number.

*Sunnyside Up* is recorded by the 'whirlwind pianist', Pauline Alpert, who here manages to restrain her natural ebullience to keep in the spirit of the number. *Blue Shadows* was recorded by yet another of the perhaps surprising number of female pianists that excelled in the idiom, Annabelle Taylor.

*Was That The Human Thing To Do?* is played by yet another female, Dana Suesse, who was in her day known as the female Gershwin, though she is, sadly, pretty much forgotten today. This is not one of her own compositions, but attractively played.

*Just a Little Thing Called Rhythm*, the title track, is another recording by Phil Ohman, and demonstrates the same

irresistible sense of rhythm. *If I Had A Million Dollars* is played by Arden, teamed on this occasion with Adam Carroll, in a recognizably more modern idiom.

*Baby Face*, one of the more familiar numbers in this selection, is another enjoyable Lawnhurst-Lutter collaboration, while *Where the Shy Little Violets Grow* is another Pauline Alpert roll, with her in rollicking form.

*Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man*, in this version by Phil Ohman, is played as a foxtrot. One wonders what Jerome K would have thought, though it's still enjoyable, and I'm reminded that Gershwin's *The Man I Love* first appeared as a foxtrot and only became the ballad we know today at a later date.

*Cryin' For My Used To Be* is a very recent appearance on the scene, having until then been thought lost. It's a very worthwhile find, showing its two players, James P Johnson and Fats Waller, in more poetic mood than one might have expected.

The disc concludes with *Molasses*, another piano solo, played by its composer, Luckey Roberts, with irresistible verve, nicely rounding off what to an aficionado of the genre must surely be an irresistible collection, bringing back to life a period and style that has, alas, gone out of circulation without being replaced by anything better, or even as good. You're unlikely to hear these pieces as well performed as here, so don't miss them..

## BMS Recital Nov. 2nd Julian Dyer at the Pianola

Besides recording SWCD38 (reviewed elsewhere on this page), Julian gave a recital for the society. I was

surprised and disappointed to see that there was a fair number of empty seats. Don't the members care for this unique music, or do they perhaps have the idea that the pianolist just gives a mechanical performance which any Tom, Dick or Harry could do as well? I quote from Julian's notes to the recording:

*The new music was hard for ordinary mortals to play with any proficiency, and the roll arrangers made sure the player retained its supremacy by raising their craft to extraordinary levels....This is not mechanical music\; [the piano player] is a musical instrument which manages the notes so that the Pianolist can concentrate on the interpretation.*

Nor is this selection the same as we were given during the recital: over half the numbers are different, the most interesting probably being two of Lothar Perl's novelties cut by Frank Himpsl and four of Robin Frost's compositions cut by Tim Baxter.

We start with one of Perl's novelties, *Crazy Top*, a fine example of this composer's genius. After that come two pieces, *Just a Little Thing Called Rhythm* and *There's Everything Nice About You* which are both on the CD, so I won't discuss them here: following them comes the first piece by Robin Frost. It seems this composer, an American born in 1930, doesn't value these 'funny little pieces', as he refers to them, very highly, but to me and many others they are a unique modern contribution to ragtime. They mostly require a considerable virtuoso technique, so are well suited to putting on roll. *Orange Pie* and *Pain Perdu* are good examples of his style, which combines classical ragtime with a more modern feel.

This is followed by Duke Ellington's *Black Beauty*, a charming

number in which I rather doubt whether he is referring to the famous book by Anna Sewell. *Wagneritis* makes one of my least favourite composers sound quite attractive, with versions of numbers mainly from Tannhauser and Lohengrin.

The next five numbers, *Was That The Human Thing To Do?*, *I'm Lonely Without You*, *Where the Shy Little Violets Grow*, *If I Had A Million Dollars*, and *Cryin' For My Used To Be* are all on the CD, so we pass on to another Frost piece, *Shoot Out at Bad Rock*, a particularly attractive numbers where we can clearly detect the gunfire. *Cold Soup*, which follows, isn't quite up to the same level, but then it's back to the Wild West for *Little Rock Getaway*

Looking at the *World Through Rose Colored Glasses* was a new one to me, enjoyable enough, and with a low-key ending.

*A Tenzel Far Die Machtetunem* is one of a set of two Jewish dances Julian informs us there was a sizeable market for Yiddish music of the period. Then came the second Perl number, *Zebra Stripes*, another example of his unique talent.

*Hot Piano* is something of a hotchpotch of styles, but great fun for all that, while *Humorestless* is Zez Confrey's take on Dvorak's *Humoresque*, one of many during that period, when ragging the classics was a popular pastime. *I Should Care*, the next number, is more ballad-like than the rest of this collection, though given an upbeat treatment to conclude.

*The Lady Who Couldn't Be Kissed* is a number I hadn't heard previously by the prolific Harry Warren, but *Two Cigarettes In The Dark* was

Altogether more familiar, especially as Billy used it for one of his song transcriptions.

Finally we were given a roll that Julian had cut himself, *Moya Marusechska*, a Russian dance by Vilnov. In rather different style to the rest of the pieces, it still provided a rousing finale.

Then Julian treated us to an encore, *La Calinda* by Delius, rather better known, since I had often played the Joan Trimble 2-piano arrangement with Mike Lorenzini. I have to say I prefer it that way, but this reduction worked reasonably well.

As you can see, well over half the numbers are not on the CD, making this disc more than well worth having, especially as some of the pieces are unlikely to be available elsewhere. Our thanks to Julian for bringing all this delightful music to our attention.

DVD is available to BMS members £10



## Sid O'Connell - Obituary

I am sad to inform members of the BMS of the recent death of Sid. He was well known to a number of BMS members. Sid was born 3rd of June 1926 to a comparatively poor Catholic family. His schooling was somewhat interrupted by the second World War but he gained a scholarship to Trinity College Cambridge to read Natural Sciences.

He was called up into the RAF in 1945 as an instrument repairer and instructor and after his demob in 1948 went on to complete his scholarship at Cambridge.

Sid was always interested in sound recording and reproduction and at a time when the best equipment was unaffordable he designed and built high quality loud speakers on a shoestring. Sid arranged and was greatly involved with

the first large scale surround sound recording at Alexander Palace where Yehudi Menuhin conducted the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and a choir of a thousand voices in a performance of Handel's Messiah, all of which contributed to the eventual development of the Soundfield microphone.

After retirement he took up music specialising in the application of computers to piano performance. This involved the measurement and recreation of historic performances by famous pianists/composers, ranging from Fats Waller, Billy Mayerl, Art Tatum to Rachmaninov. Some of Sid's recreations fooled even well respected musicians.

His passing leaves a gap in our lives and an empty seat at the BMS concerts which he so often attended.

*With thanks to Granville Cooper 2009*



Sid O'Connell  
1926-2008

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July 26th ..... BMS members' meeting

Sept. 27th ..... *Concert Simon Mulligan*

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