

# **BILLY MAYERL**

## **THE MAN AND HIS MUSIC**

### **BIOGRAPHY**

by

**JOHN F. ARCHER**

Author's Preface and Acknowledgements	2
Chapter 1 – Genius in the Making	3
Chapter 2 – Stomping at the Savoy	5
Chapter 3 – Syncopation by Correspondence	10
Chapter 4 – Treading the Boards	14
Chapter 5 – Billy Writes the West End Shows	18
Chapter 6 – Billy and the Airwaves	21
Chapter 7 – Billy the Bandleader	27
Chapter 8 – Billy the Man	30
Chapter 9 – Beyond the Hills	32

## **Author's Preface**

My earliest recollections of Billy Mayerl can be traced to the mid-1940s with a wind-up gramophone from my parents. This came complete with several ten-inch 78-rpm records, one of which was the duet version of Marigold played by Mr. and Mrs. Billy Mayerl, coupled with Ace of Spades. I liked this record and played it endlessly. I was struggling to master the piano then (I still am), and marvelled at the seemingly effortless technique displayed by the two pianists. In those days I was an avid listener to the wireless, and it seemed to me that Marigold must have been just about everyone's favourite to judge from the frequency with which it was asked for on record request programmes. However, I was blissfully unaware of the rest of Billy Mayerl's vast and quite unique output of compositions, to my lasting regret. This lack of awareness on my part seems to be mirrored in the general public, at least during the last thirty years.

This situation is quite remarkable since Mayerl wrote a large number of compositions, including transcriptions and arrangements. Many of them are quite exquisite, as well as satisfying to play if your technique is up to scratch. I suppose the reason for this anomalous situation is that his style of music waned in popularity in line with the decline in piano playing, and is perceived as being out of fashion today. Billy Mayerl deserves the same status as his friend George Gershwin, whose music has not suffered in the same way in spite of having its origins similarly rooted in ragtime.

It was only as a result of the chance acquisition of the Richard Rodney Bennett Long-Play album, recorded in 1975, that my interest in Billy Mayerl was rekindled. In fact, this LP did more to start off the current revival of interest in Mayerl than perhaps is generally recognised, when today there is a flourishing and vibrant interest in his music. Yet in spite of the Mayerl societies and the numerous recordings issued in the last few years, no coherent account exists of this quite remarkable man who was, by any standards, a genius. This biography, I hope, will help to fill this gap.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank a number of people for their help in research, and particularly Terry Wilkinson, founder and organiser of the Midland Gershwin-Mayerl Society; William Davies, broadcasting concert pianist and organist; Jack Wilson, former broadcasting pianist and orchestra leader; the late Mrs. Eve McNerney (née Hooper), former secretary to Billy Mayerl; Guy Rowland, pianist and dance-band historian; John Watson, collector and discographer; Robert W. Howarth, former Editor of the Billy Mayerl Circle newsletter; Eddy Stanbrook, Geoff Howe and my dear wife Joy for the many hours she spent in the British Library with me, consulting reference materials.

Grateful thanks also to the members of the Billy Mayerl Society and the many friends and associates, too numerous to mention individually, who have assisted, sometimes unwittingly, with the odd word or comment, and have thereby sparked off a fruitful line of research.

J. F. Archer. Alderton, Gloucestershire, 1995.

## Chapter One – Genius in the Making

William Joseph Mayerl was born on Saturday, 31st May 1902 at 53, Tottenham Court Road in the St. Pancras District of London. This bouncing baby with lovely brown eyes was the first son of Joseph and Elise Mayerl, a couple of mid-European extraction. They were not very well off and Joseph eked out a living by teaching the violin. However, it did mean that Billy grew up in a musical environment and so was exposed to music from a very early age.

It was natural, therefore, that the father should hope that one day his son would follow in his footsteps and also become a violinist; one who would be successful and famous so that he would not need to struggle in later life as his parents had done. He set about teaching Billy to play the violin when he was only four, just old enough to hold the violin and wrap his tiny fingers round the instrument's neck. Try as he would, however, Joseph could not instill in Billy any enthusiasm for the violin and neither did the young Mayerl demonstrate any natural ability for it. Billy commented in later years that 'I could just not connect brain and instrument.'

Joseph Mayerl, however, undeterred by Billy's indifference to the violin, and noticing his affinity with the family piano, taught him the rudiments of that instrument. Billy very quickly exceeded his father's teaching capability. An Italian piano teacher was engaged and young Billy's progress continued at an astonishing rate. His father, now hell-bent on his objective of making his son a musician, passed him on in hope to Trinity College of Music. Master Mayerl passed their preparatory examination and was enrolled as a pupil at the age of seven.

Tuition, for the first term only, was paid for by his father, but thereafter Billy was 'on his own.' He rose to the challenge and funded the remainder of his tuition at Trinity College by winning a series of scholarships that carried him through until he left at the age of fifteen. Billy loved the piano and found he had a natural flair for it. He found the piano as easy as the violin had been difficult. His tiny fingers were not able to stretch to some of the chords in Beethoven's concertos, Bach's fugues, and Chopin's preludes and waltzes and similar works, but he tackled them all head-on and practised for an average of twelve to fourteen hours a day so that eventually he could play them with ease.

We really know very little of Billy's childhood except that he also won a scholarship to his Day School, Kensington High, as well as to Trinity. In addition to his obvious flair for music he was also a very keen sportsman. He was an enthusiastic performer on the football field and in the swimming pool, with a particular liking for high diving. He also won several cups for running. In all these activities he displayed, from a very early age, competitiveness and a will to succeed which drove him through life at a rate that would make possible achievements of Herculean proportions in the world of music.

Billy had another strong musical influence in his family as well as his father: his grandfather. In fact, it is probable that his grandfather, a clarinetist, was the main influence in shaping the young Billy's propensity for hard work and determination in later life. A strict disciplinarian, he made Billy practice the piano for hours when he was not doing his school homework.

His studies at Trinity College consisted of half-hour lessons twice a week augmented by extra lessons if he was going to play in a concert. He studied from 1911 to 1915 under Miss Maud Agnes Winter, who was renowned as one of the best piano professors of her day. It is to Miss Winter that Billy was indebted for seeing him through all his exams and scholarships. Apart from giving him a thorough grounding in the Old Masters, as one would expect, she also ensured that his technical training was complete by giving him studies from Czerny, Bertini and Heller, not forgetting Schmidt's Five Finger Exercises.

The first recorded competitive Piano Certificate won by Billy, as a pupil of Miss Winter, was in September 1913 when he was awarded a Certificate of Merit in Class Four at the British Music Exhibition held at Olympia in London. He was to pass with honours in the Senior Division at the London Centre the following year, in December 1914, and would repeat this pattern many times in succeeding years. Miss Winter was to recall some twenty or so years later that Little Willy Mayerl was one of the best pupils she ever had. She also coached him for his public concerts, including his first major one at the Queen's Hall in 1911, at the age of nine.

When he was twelve he played Grieg's Piano Concerto there. Billy claimed that he had actually first appeared at the Queen's Hall at the age of six and a half, astounding though that may seem, when he played one of Grieg's compositions. Miss Winter seems to have been very fond of Billy: 'He was a dear little lad and so good, dressed in that little sailor suit! His lesson was always very well prepared, too, and I cannot ever remember having to be very angry with him.'

Unknown to the College authorities, or his father for that matter, Billy had developed a habit of visiting a place of entertainment called 'Gayland' in Shepherd's Bush. This seems to have been what today we would probably call an amusement arcade. In this venue were numerous nickelodeons that, in return for placing a penny in the slot, played American ragtime-style tunes of the day, such as 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' and 'Waiting for the Robert E. Lee'.

These experiences seem to have been Billy's first exposure to the American ragtime idiom, and it is clear that they had an enormous influence on the impressionable young college student. He was to relate later that these tunes 'had a thrill and liveliness which fascinated me. I never wanted anything so much in all my young life as to be able to infuse my weekly College compositions with some of that go and quick rhythm.'

It appears that too rigorous a diet of classical, highbrow music in his formal studies succeeded in pushing him headlong into a passion for syncopated jazz, as it was then called. He started trying his hand at composing in this style in 1915 at the age of thirteen, but was overheard playing it by Dr. Pearce, his harmony teacher, who happened to be accompanied by the Principal of the college. Their reaction was immediate and predictable. They said it was a monstrosity and a disgrace to the college, and that if he did anything like it again he would be expelled. After such a put-down, Billy's composing activities went 'underground' and it was only much later, in 1925, that his first syncopated jazz composition was taken out, dusted off, and presented to the musical world as 'The Jazz Master'. This was not his first published composition, however, for that honour fell to a descriptive set of pieces which he called the Egyptian Suite, published in 1919 when he was 17.

Billy left Trinity College at the age of 15, towards the end of World War One, having declined their invitation to stay on and continue his studies with a view to becoming a professor. It is believed that this decision was prompted largely by the need to earn some money to help support his family. Thus, the die was cast and the youthful Billy Mayerl emerged from the cloistered musical environment to make his way in the exciting world he saw all around him. It was 1917 and ironically, Scott Joplin, one of the major influences in early ragtime music, died on 1st April that year. The old order changeth.

## Chapter Two – Stomping at the Savoy

Billy, in a sense, had already dipped a toe in the commercial music world while he was still a student at Trinity College. He was in the habit of sneaking into cinemas whenever an opportunity presented itself, usually when the attendant's back was turned. Unlike most boys of his age, however, Billy was more interested in the musical accompaniment to the silent films rather than the films themselves, but was not always very impressed with what he heard.

At the age of 13, convinced that he could play better than any of the pianists he had heard in cinemas, and desperately needing some pocket money, he approached the manager of his local cinema. With all the exuberance of youth Billy told the official that he had only to hear him play and he would be convinced that Billy should be given a job. Much to Billy's chagrin, the manager reacted by ordering him out for his audacity. 'But you haven't heard me play', Billy protested. 'No, and I don't want to,' was the terse reply. 'You're missing a big chance,' Billy warned him.

The manager leapt from his chair and towered over Billy, who thought he was about to be thrown out. To his surprise, however, the manager led the way through the dimly lit, smoke-filled and sweat-laden atmosphere of the auditorium to the battered piano, hidden behind a curtain from where the pianist could view the screen. 'Go on then,' he thundered. 'There's the ivories. Hit 'em!' Billy recalled that it wasn't much use hitting half of them because they just didn't play. But he attacked them with fervour and great panache and in the process worked his way through all the old warhorses from the standard silent movie repertoire of the day: music for love scenes, comedy, trains in tunnels, rushing water, pathos, farce and all the other familiar sounds that one could hear night after night in the cinemas of that time. He was quite exhausted at the end of all this, given the limitations of the piano, but it was worth it when the manager, somewhat condescendingly, agreed to take him on.

Billy earned the princely sum of seven and sixpence a week for his first professional engagement. He was advertised as the Wonder Boy Pianist, but was required to play five hours per night for seven days per week. Initially, Billy enjoyed it, but it soon became boring and he started to look for something to relieve the monotony. It occurred to him one night, during his normal half-hour break, that it might be fun to take the chocolates and nuts tray round at the interval and so, after persuading the boy who normally sold them to let him take over, he proceeded to enjoy himself. His enjoyment was short-lived, however, because he was spotted by the manager and given a severe dressing down for degrading himself and the cinema by daring, as his Wonder Boy Pianist, to hawk peanuts.

Billy, who by now felt a little more sure of himself, wasn't prepared to stand for this treatment and walked out, leaving the manager high and dry. He went straight to the rival cinema across the road and, giving himself a raise in the process, offered his services for ten shillings a week. The rival cinema manager jumped at Billy's offer, since his reputation had already preceded him. Thereafter, Billy during the next few years found himself in much demand at cinemas in the East End of London, with occasional engagements in the West End.

It was during Billy's busy schedule of cinema appearances that he met for the first time his future wife, Jill Bernini. She was the pianist in the orchestra at The Imperial Theatre, St. John's Hill, Clapham Junction, where Billy played for a time. Originally a variety theatre, the Imperial was converted to a cinema in 1914, but still retained its music-hall atmosphere. Although Billy worked mainly as a freelance pianist, picking up what work he could, for a time during this period he was also employed by Charles de Groot, the impresario and bandleader at the Piccadilly Hotel, London. Billy, however, was not very impressed at the wages on offer. He was later to declare that 'nobody would buy me for very much in those days. De Groot paid me £4 a week and thought I was well paid ... I didn't ... and solo piano work for eight hours at a stretch in picture houses was enough to break your heart and hands!'

After a long stint in a cinema or playing at a dance, Billy would often accept invitations to play at private parties for the well-to-do in Mayfair and its environs. This sometimes meant playing until three or four o'clock in the morning and very often being treated like some low form of life by stuffy butlers. Life was hard on the fringes of the music industry, and he had to be prepared to more or less accept anything that came along to make a decent living. In order to get around between engagements Billy had by this time acquired a motorbike, which by all account was a bit of an old banger and none too reliable. This didn't exactly enamour him to the local residents when he departed in the early hours of the morning.

During Billy's 'moonlighting' period he suffered some kind of paralysis in his left arm. This happened while he was playing for a dance at the house of one of the Mayfair Set and proved very embarrassing, not only when it happened but also for some time after because he could not work. The problem was diagnosed as being due to some kind of neuritis resulting from overwork and lasted for three months. But no sooner had his left arm recovered than his right arm became similarly afflicted. Billy had quite routinely been playing the piano daily for ten hours at a stretch when the problem occurred, and he resolved not to be such a fool again!

Billy's big break came when he was talent-spotted by Bert Ralton, an American bandleader, and William F. de Mornys, the impresario and Entertainments Director of the Savoy Hotels Group. There are several versions of how this came about. According to Billy himself, an account repeated many times with variations, he was discovered in 1920 in a Southampton hotel, where he was playing in the resident dance band, by Bert Ralton who had just arrived from the United States on a transatlantic liner.

The story goes that Ralton's regular pianist had become ill and he had been forced to leave him behind. Bert Ralton heard Billy playing in the ballroom and approached the piano at a suitable break in the proceedings and uttered the immortal words that have now passed into Mayerl folklore: 'You play nippy, kid.' Ralton allegedly then offered Billy a job as pianist in the band that he had brought over from the United States to provide dance music at the Savoy Hotel in London.

Billy, having been offered a wage of £20 per week (another version states £30) plus a share in all proceeds when the band played away from the hotel, accepted with alacrity. 'First, it seemed rich with promise for the future; and second, it would make me rich enough to marry the girl I had been head over heels in love with, since, it seemed to me, the very beginning of time. A fortnight later, I was playing in the Savoy Havana Band.'

However, in spite of the undoubted romantic appeal of the above account, it is impossible for it to have happened exactly in that way. My researches reveal more than a few inconsistencies in this 'official' version. Firstly, Bert Ralton arrived in this country in the summer of 1921 (not 1920) on what he had planned to be the first stage of a working holiday around the world. He was still in New York as late as November 1920, recording with George Gershwin as a member of the Vernon Trio, and that was before he went to Havana early in 1921 to lead a band. Incidentally, these recordings were never issued commercially.

It appears that Ralton didn't have a specific job to go to when he arrived in England, but carried with him a Letter of Introduction to Columbia Records from their sister company in the United States, for whom he had recorded. He clearly wouldn't have been in any position to offer Billy a job in the Savoy Havana Band at the time he first landed at Southampton. Prior to going to Havana, Bert had spent two years with the Art Hickman Band in San Francisco, California as one of their star musicians, justifiably earning the title of the 'Kreisler of the Saxophone' because of his smooth, sweet style of playing, before he felt the urge to move on and form his own band.

Ralton was travelling with two of the musicians from his Havana Band and, on arrival in London, contacted Columbia Records. They, in turn, introduced him to the Savoy Hotel management and William F. de Mornys (informally known as Bill), who was planning to introduce into the Savoy Ballroom a 'modern' band capable of doubling as a showband as well as providing music for dancing.

This meeting led to the formation of the Savoy Havana Band in the autumn of 1921. For the purposes of recording and stage appearances, however, the band continued to use the title of The New York Havana Band for the first few months of its existence. Interestingly, the pianist listed for all of the New York Havana Band recording sessions and initial Savoy Havana sessions was John Firman (the brother of Bert Firman, the well-known bandleader and Director of Light Music for the Zonophone Record Label from 1925 to 1928), which lends support to the belief that Mayerl joined the band some months after its formation and was not therefore a founder member. Bert Firman, who is now a very sprightly octogenarian, has confirmed to me his brother's role as pianist in the early Savoy Havana band. Firman's last recording session with the Savoy Hotel band was c.5th April 1922. By the next session, c.12th July, Billy Mayerl had succeeded him. From this one concludes that Billy became a permanent member of the Savoy Hotel sometime in the period April to June, 1922.

To add to the mystery surrounding Billy's initial meeting with Ralton, when John Firman left the Savoy Havana Band in May 1922, Bill de Mornys is reported as saying that he found a very good replacement playing in a club in Richmond, Surrey; 'a cheerful little pianist called Billy Mayerl.'

It is possible that Billy and Bert did meet in Southampton in late 1921 or, more likely, early 1922, but that Ralton – who had been in Britain for some months by this time – had travelled there from London especially to audition Mayerl. He might have been prepared to do this because he was finding recruitment of suitable musicians for his Savoy Band quite a problem. Ralton wrote at the time, ‘there were few English musicians at that time whom jazz had really reached.’ If Billy had been playing in the dance band of a large Southampton Hotel at the time of the meeting it would probably have been at the South Western Hotel, a rather grand hotel even for those days, which was owned by the London South West Railway before the Second World War.

Interestingly, when well-known Hampshire journalist John Edgar Mann was researching the likely location of the Mayerl–Ralton meeting for an article he wrote in 1992, he interviewed the 77-year-old Southampton jazz pianist, Monty Worlock. Monty, it transpired, had travelled to London regularly from Southampton, as a teenager, for lessons in the syncopated style from Billy Mayerl himself at his Hanover Square School. Strangely enough, during all the lessons Monty received from the maestro he never once mentioned that it was in Southampton that his chance meeting with Bert Ralton set him on the road to future stardom. Unfortunately, Ralton never had an opportunity to state his version of events because he died tragically in a shooting accident in South Africa in 1927.

My own opinion is that Billy probably heard on the musicians’ grapevine that a vacancy was in the offing for a pianist in the Savoy Havana Band, and applied for the job. He was auditioned by Ralton and then taken on. This is nothing like so colourful as the various other versions of the meeting but likely to be nearer the truth. Whatever the precise circumstances of their meeting, it is quite clear that Billy got his big break working under Bert Ralton’s leadership in the Savoy Havana Band. They got on extremely well together, and Billy said later ‘it was always a pleasure to work under him. We were a happy family and we helped to make broadcasting history.’ Billy’s first recording session with the Savoy Havana Band took place c.12 July 1922, and for the next three-and-a-half years he was the permanent occupant of the piano chair.

The New York (Savoy) Havana Band was probably the first dance band to play on the stage in Britain when it made its theatre debut at the London Coliseum on 13th March 1922 for a week in twice-nightly variety. A photograph exists of the band on stage on that occasion, and the person sitting at the piano is Billy Mayerl. Perhaps he was just ‘guesting’ with the band for that performance and as a result was then offered a permanent job at the Savoy. The Coliseum show was a great success. The public clamoured for more and more encores every night, and Bert Ralton was then faced with the pleasant but difficult duty of bringing his session to a halt because other acts were still waiting to follow. This occasion must have given a huge boost to the band’s morale and standing since it demonstrated their tremendous appeal to the general public, and not just the privileged few who could afford to listen to them at the Savoy. The Band made a further Coliseum appearance later in the year. They also appeared in the revue ‘You’d Be Surprised’, which opened at the Royal Opera House on 27 January 1923. Described as a ‘jazzaganza’ or jazz ballet, it starred Ninette de Valois, Leonide Massine and George Robey. The show transferred to the Alhambra on 18th April 1923.

The age of popular broadcasting was just starting, and Bill de Mornys was keen to get the Savoy Havana Band ‘on the air’. Before this could be accomplished, however, it was necessary for the band to be vetted by John Reith, the Director-General of the BBC, who was far from keen on the idea. Reith was finally persuaded to go and see the bands’ stage show at the London Coliseum and, following this, somewhat to everyone’s surprise, gave his approval.

The band’s first broadcast took place on 13th April 1923 from the BBC’s new permanent studio at No. 2, Savoy Hill. Bert Ralton conducted and Ramon Newton sang the vocals. The programme ran for half an hour from 10.00 to 10.30 pm and contained 12 numbers. Thus started the immensely popular broadcasts of the Savoy Havana Band, and the British listening-public’s long-running love affair with Billy Mayerl, who was a featured soloist from the outset. It is doubtful, however, if many of the listeners to the wireless in those early days could have actually named the pianist they heard playing with the band; that sort of fame was to come later. The first direct broadcast from the Savoy Hotel itself was made on 3rd October 1923, and featured the Savoy Orpheans as well as the Savoy Havana Band. Thereafter, regular broadcasts from the Savoy on a weekly basis became a standard part of the BBC’s programme schedules.

Shortly after landing his job at the Savoy, Billy felt secure enough to propose to Jill Bernini, his heartthrob from his days at the Imperial Cinema at Clapham. But to his disgust he discovered that, in the meantime, she had got herself engaged to the drummer in that cinema’s orchestra. Billy persisted with his advances, however, and finally Jill changed her mind and said ‘Yes.’ They married on 19th April 1923, at the Hammersmith Register Office in the presence of Joseph Mayerl and A.A.Umbach. Billy was 20-years-old and Jill was 27. At the time of their marriage, both of them were residents of Shepherd’s Bush in London. They proved a good match and Billy was to write many years later that ‘my romance still lives and we are sweethearts to this day.’

Changes were just over the horizon, however, and Billy's new-found friend and leader, Bert Ralton was soon to disappear from the Savoy scene. There is a suggestion that Bert felt he had been slighted when he was passed over for the leadership of the newly-formed Savoy Orpheans Band, which was planned to be the larger and more prestigious of the two bands. Bill de Mornys had been scouring the world for top-flight musicians to staff the Orpheans, and now wanted an accomplished musician with a commanding presence to lead them.

He did not want a showman for this position, which automatically ruled out Bert, and he eventually chose a man who had been writing arrangements for the Savoy Havana Band for a few months with great success. This was a tall, good-looking man with a military bearing, who had trained at Kneller Hall: Debroy Somers. The appointment clearly upset Bert Ralton who thought that he should have been promoted to the position of Number One Bandleader at the Savoy. He decided to leave and, in the autumn of 1923, formed another band, taking as many of the Havana musicians as were prepared to join him on an overseas tour. The intention was to tour Australia, but they stopped off on the Continent *en route* to play some concerts, and eventually arrived in Melbourne on 23rd November 1923.

Billy chose to stay on at the Savoy. After all, he had only recently got married, and the idea of setting off on such a long tour clearly did not hold much appeal for him. Ralton and his band, which included most of the original members, departed from London on 13th October 1923, leaving behind a much-changed Savoy Havana Band. After Bert Ralton had gone, Billy found himself working under the band's new leader, the violinist Reginald Batten. By this time, Billy, himself, was well-established and rapidly becoming a celebrity in his own right, not only with the dancers in the Savoy Ballroom, but also with the growing number of listeners to 'the wireless'.

Eric Coates, the celebrated English composer, remarked on Billy in 1935 when interviewed by Irene Ashton for the Mayerl School Magazine: 'I remember how fascinated I used to be. [...] To hear him playing unaccompanied with only the shuffle, shuffle, shuffling of feet on the ballroom floor as a background was, to me, a most unforgettable and bewitching experience.'

Billy's days with the Savoy Havana Band were historic in several ways. Firstly, he was with the band when regular broadcasts were inaugurated, as mentioned earlier, but also it was while playing with the band that the gramophone industry changed over to the new electrical system of recording. Billy's initial recordings with the band, for Columbia, had been made by the acoustic process.

These acoustic recording sessions were often very amusing for the players: they had to huddle together in front of the huge horn, which was the equivalent of the microphone in those days, in order to make sure that they were all heard. When Ralton whispered 'Solo Billy!', the rest of the band would duck to allow the sound waves of his piano to pass over their bent bodies to the horn.

In spite of all these gymnastics, the piano still came out as a 'feeble little tinkle'. Thus it was with a great sigh of relief and sense of achievement that Billy stepped into the recording studio to make history by becoming the first English pianist to record light music by the new electrical system. On this historic occasion, he recorded three of his own compositions, 'The Jazz Master', 'The Jazz Mistress' and 'All-of-a-Twist' as piano solos. These recordings were made on 24th September 1925, and were subsequently released on HMV B2130 and B2131 the following month.

News of the rapturous reception being accorded to Paul Whiteman's excursions into symphonic jazz in America had reached these shores in the spring of 1924, and the Savoy Management decided that they would try out their own version of this large-scale orchestrated jazz on the British public in January of the following year.

Accordingly, the first British public performance of syncopated music took place to a packed house (estimated at between three and four thousand people by a newspaper critic who was present) at the Queen's Hall in London on Saturday, 3rd January 1925. The concert was given by The Savoy Orpheans Augmented Symphonic Orchestra, assisted by The Savoy Havana Band and The Boston Orchestra. In the first part of this concert Billy played a number of piano solos, but unfortunately we cannot tell from the official programme what the titles were. It is interesting to speculate whether the audience was treated to previews of 'The Jazz Master' and 'The Jazz Mistress' in advance of their being published! What we do know is that Billy played as a piano solo 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' in the second part of the programme, one of the tunes, we are led to believe, responsible for turning his head from the straight and narrow at Trinity College in his early student days.

This first syncopated music concert was such a runaway success that it was decided to schedule another one later in the year, and 28th October found Billy again at The Queen's Hall, rendering completely from memory, in marvellous style, Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue'.

Mr. Mayerl was the first pianist in this country to play this celebrated composition in public, and it is admitted that he did it full justice and interpreted it in truly masterful fashion, his execution being nothing short of 'marvellous', as the Keith Prowse Courier was to report. It has been alleged that George Gershwin himself was present on this occasion, and he probably was, but I have been unable to substantiate this. Strictly speaking, Billy Mayerl did not give the first public performance of 'Rhapsody In Blue', as is generally claimed. This took place in a broadcast from the Savoy Ballroom on 15th June 1925 between 9.00 and 10.00 pm when the work's composer, George Gershwin, and Billy Thorburn (the pianist with the Savoy Orpheans) played a duet version of the Rhapsody, together with the 30-piece Savoy Orpheans Concert Orchestra (a combination of the Orpheans, Havana Band and the Boston Orchestra) conducted by Debroy Somers.

Bill de Mornys is reported as saying that, at a subsequent concert at which the Rhapsody was played (presumably the one at which Mayerl played the piano part), it received a very cool reception from the critics and public alike. This same experience was repeated in the provinces, and it was to be several years before the composition became the firm favourite it is today.

One other little-known anecdote from Mayerl's Savoy days is worthy of inclusion in this section. During Billy's residency with the Havana Band one of the smash song hits of the day, which was sung, played, and recorded by the band was 'Show Me The Way To Go Home'. Billy claimed that he was part composer of this song in association with some of his musician friends. The story goes that Billy and several other musicians including Jimmy Campbell and Reg Connelly were relaxing in a bar off Charing Cross Road in the spring of 1925 and Billy was playing the piano. (A variant of this account gives the location as the ballroom of the Criterion Hotel after all the dancers had left.) One of them said: 'It's getting late – show me the way to go home, someone', and the boys took the cue from there. Billy maintained that he based the tune on an old Canadian lumberjack song. They improvised on it, and between them fashioned it into the song that was soon to be acclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic. The irony of this story is that although they were all convinced that they had a hit on their hands, try as they would they couldn't get any of the established music publishers to take it on. Finally, Jimmy Campbell and Reg Connelly had the song printed and set themselves up as publishers in a small room at 16 Tottenham Court Road, London. The song was a big hit, as we all know, and this is how the great music-publishing house of Campbell and Connelly was founded. The published copy of 'Show Me The Way To Go Home' gives the composer's name as Irving King, which is, of course, a pseudonym.

The Savoy years for Billy were happy but absolutely exhausting. The long hours at the hotel, coupled with his arranging, broadcasting, composing and recording activities, were beginning to take their toll and it appears that at the end of 1925 he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. On medical advice he decided to leave his job at the Savoy in January 1926 and take a complete change. (Jill Mayerl, writing after her husband's death, claimed that Billy left because he was bored.) Perhaps both factors weighed in his decision. In any event, we believe that he had already decided the time was right for him to launch a new business venture that he had been planning in his mind for about eighteen months.

## Chapter Three – Syncopation by Correspondence

It was in the autumn of 1924 that Billy's friend Geoffrey Clayton, then working for music publisher West's, persuaded him to be his companion on a business trip to the United States. After all, it had been several years since Billy had taken a holiday and, since Geoffrey needed the services of a good syncopated pianist whilst over there, it was a logical move. It was on the return leg of the journey back home that the germ of an idea for a correspondence-based course on syncopation for the solo pianist took root. They had often discussed informally the future of rhythmic music in this country, and with their knowledge of the way 'syncopation' was sweeping the United States they believed there was a great potential market for tuition from among the thousands of amateur and professional pianists up and down the country who were desperately struggling with the demands of the new fashions in solo piano playing. How much greater the interest would be if the tuition came from 'the famous solo pianist from the Savoy Havana Band who could be heard regularly on the wireless!' Their predictions were to prove very accurate, as subsequent events would soon show.

Geoffrey Clayton was so excited at the prospect of starting a School of Modern Syncopation for the Pianoforte that he decided to throw in his publishing job at West's, and Billy didn't need much persuasion from his doctor to give up his job at the Savoy. The basic groundwork for the Course was prepared during 1925, with Billy writing the technical sections and Geoffrey organising the layout, continuity and administration system. Geoffrey's great strength was his organisational ability, and this was to prove invaluable in the early years of the School. Preparing the first Course of Instruction proved to be a very tedious business, but eventually the prototype with all of its examples and exercises was ready for trial.

Intent on ironing out any bugs in the system before putting it on the market, they asked six keen student friends to try it out, and to make any constructive criticisms they felt to be necessary. Their comments were noted and the Course was modified to take them into account, so that by the time it was marketed it was a tried and tested product. The pair were now all set to go and, spurred on by the flood of requests that Billy was getting for tuition, they decided to press the button. They had spent most of their spare time, and all their savings, on preparing the course, and therefore it was with some trepidation and a heightened sense of expectation that an advertisement was placed in the musicians' trade paper *The Melody Maker* for February 1926.

Prominent in the advertisement was the statement that 'Syncopated Piano Playing can be taught'. The blurb continued: '... not merely a list of breaks but everything about solo piano playing. ... gives all Billy Mayerl's own embellishments and explains how. Covers the whole field including the all-important left hand. No knowledge of harmony needed.' The reader was invited to apply for details to The Billy Mayerl School at 46 Hallswelle Road, London, NW11, its first temporary address, which was Geoffrey Clayton's private residence at the time. The February issue of *Melody Maker* also carried some editorial to the effect that The Billy Mayerl School of Modern Syncopation for the piano was about to open its doors, and that correspondence courses had been arranged.

By March 1926 the search for suitable premises was over, and the Billy Mayerl School was installed in new premises at 29 Oxford Street, opposite the celebrated *Frascati's* Restaurant. The offices, which were located on the sixth floor, were modern and complete with central heating (quite an innovation in those days) and their own lift.

The initial response to their February advertisement must have been good, since the *Melody Maker* reported that Billy Mayerl and Geoffrey Clayton had threatened to stop any further advertising of the School because they were having difficulty in coping with the demand for lessons. Although this comment was most likely hype, probably originating from Clayton, there is little doubt that the 'adventurous pair' had struck oil.

They claimed to have been kept busy at all hours answering queries and enrolling pupils, not only from all over Britain but from as far afield as Germany and Italy. In retrospect, Billy and Geoffrey were lucky to have had the facility of being able to advertise economically in the *Melody Maker*, which had only started publication the previous month, in January 1926. An alternative campaign in a cross-section of the National Dailies of the time would have been much more expensive and probably much less effective because of their less specialised readership.

At the outset, the operation was very definitely do-it-yourself style, with Billy packing the lessons and 'keeping the books' while Geoffrey typed the correspondence and generally handled communications. After a few weeks of this frantic activity, they felt confident enough to engage the services of an office-girl-cum-secretary, Miss Eve Hooper. I was privileged to meet and chat with Eve in the summer of 1992, and found her full of very pleasant memories of those early days.

Apparently, it was great fun in the summer, when Billy would send out to Frascati's for ice creams if the weather was particularly hot. He didn't mind taking his turn at licking stamps after such a pleasant chore. The business continued to expand 'and as it did so we took on another secretary, Vesta Harrison, to help with the mountain of typing, and also took over two other rooms on the same floor', Eve told me.

One of Eve's specific duties was to answer queries from students on the Progress Sheets that they were required to send in at the end of each part of the Course. These had to be completed before they would be sent the next part. The initial Course material consisted of printed text and musical exercises only, but by 1929 the School had introduced specially-prepared 10-inch gramophone records to complement the written material. These contained illustrations, played by Billy, of the practical exercises in the course. This concept was quite revolutionary then, and undoubtedly played a major part in popularising the Course. Prospective students who applied for details of the Course were sent a copy of the School's prospectus entitled 'Lightning Fingers'. This nicely produced booklet went into many editions as the School grew and prospered. By 1929 it was offering four Courses of Instruction in Modern Syncopation and Rhythm as follows:

The Course in Modern Syncopation for the piano. With this should be taken:  
Personal Demonstration Course in Modern Syncopation (which was illustrated  
by means of gramophone records recorded by Mayerl personally).  
The Advanced Course in the Modern Rhythm Style of Playing.  
Personal Lessons from Billy Mayerl himself.

By the beginning of 1928, the School had some three thousand students on its books, and branches opened in South Africa and New Zealand. In 1929, Bombay in India and Germany were added to the list of overseas centres. The Courses had to be specially translated into German for the latter country. Meanwhile, the demand for personal lessons from Billy himself continued to grow rapidly, and his reputation spread far and wide. He was asked to give lessons to royalty including HRH Prince George (later to become the Duke of Kent), the Prince of Wales (King Edward the Eighth to be) and the Infanta, Princess Christina Maria of Spain.

The well-known American film and radio crooner and musician Rudy Vallee, whom Billy had first met when he played in the Savoy Havana Band, also became a postal student from four thousand miles away. Many other famous musical stars of the day received lessons at the School including Binnie Hale, Laddie Cliff and Jack Venables. The prospectus 'Lightning Fingers' carried personal recommendations by some of the biggest names in the popular music profession, including Paul Whiteman, Carroll Gibbons, Jack Hylton, Horatio Nicholls, Jack Payne, Debroy Somers and Van Phillips. In the late twenties and early thirties there couldn't have been many pianists in Britain who hadn't heard of the Billy Mayerl School and, of course, a very significant proportion of them signed up for the Correspondence Course. It is interesting to note that, although everyone knew the organisation as the Billy Mayerl School, it was incorporated as a private limited company on 2nd June 1928 under the name of Modern Postal Tuition Ltd. It had an issued share capital of £5,000 and its two directors were Billy Mayerl and Geoffrey Clayton, with Richard Page as Secretary.

A mainstay of the School from early 1931 was Madge Howard, who became Assistant Teacher to Billy Mayerl. She had first met Billy when she attended the School for personal lessons in 1929. She had so impressed him with her skill that he decided to devote some time to teaching her the techniques of instructing students. Madge, who had only played for dancing classes before attending the School for lessons, soon became a renowned teacher of the syncopated style and an essential asset of the School.

One other personality associated with the School, who was better known in South Africa than in the UK, was Teddie Garratt, who set up a Branch of the School in Johannesburg. Teddie, who was born in Northampton, was pianist with the Al Collins Orchestra at the Piccadilly Hotel in London in 1920, before going to Norway, and later Germany, with various bands. He gave up the music business at his father's request and emigrated to South Africa to learn glass making. Music was still his first love, however, and eventually he returned to it and took a playing job in a Johannesburg Cafe whilst giving piano tuition on the side.

He knew Billy from his West End dance band days and, on hearing that Billy was seeking a person to represent his School in South Africa, offered his services. Teddie eventually opened branches throughout the Southern Provinces, complete with music salons, recording studios and gramophone and record shops. A very live-wire personality, Teddie virtually put South African dance music on the map single-handedly, and became very successful. He is probably only remembered in this country, today, for the Book of Syncopated Breaks he co-authored with Billy Mayerl, which was published in the 1930s by Francis, Day & Hunter.

In 1931 Billy decided that the time had come for a move to more prestigious premises. Accordingly, having examined several alternatives, the School relocated early in 1932 to imposing new premises at the prestigious Steinway Hall, located at 1 & 2 George Street, Hanover Square, London, W1. A separate, private entrance into the building was constructed for the use of teaching staff and students, so that the School premises could be completely self-contained.

For those lucky enough to have a lesson with the great man, there was a long walk through various doors and offices to the main teaching studio, which also served as an office for Billy Mayerl. The studio, which was large and lofty with plenty of light provided by two long windows, contained, appropriately enough, a Steinway grand piano.

In parallel with the popularity of the Correspondence Course, there was a growing demand for personal lessons, and this requirement was satisfied by opening regional branches of the School in most of the principal cities of Britain. These local branches catered for those students who preferred to work their way through the Course under the direct supervision of a teacher. They were generally run by independent piano teachers versed in the Mayerl Method, and were often housed in the premises of large piano retailers who, of course, generally welcomed the tremendous influx of business that endorsement by Billy Mayerl meant. Probably the most successful and enthusiastic of the branch schools was that in Birmingham, run by Howard Redley. Howard was rewarded for his dedication to the 'cause' by being made a Vice-President of the School in 1935.

In 1934 another innovation was introduced for students and ex-students of the School, in the form of the Mayerl School Club Magazine. This publication was the official organ of the School, and was the outcome of many requests for something of that nature from former students whose contact with the School usually ended when they finished the Course. The magazine provided many services to the School members, its most popular feature being a monthly transcription by Billy himself, usually of a popular song of the moment, as well as his analysis pointing out its salient features. Printed on good quality paper with a page size of 8 x 10½ inches, the monthly subscription publication was very good value for the equivalent of about £1.25 per year.

Billy also contributed a lesson on a key aspect of syncopated playing to each issue. Thus the magazine became a much sought-after teaching aid and reference source for all syncopated pianists. It fulfilled several other needs, among the chief of which was to let everyone know what was going on at the School and to chronicle the activities of Billy Mayerl himself. Moreover, the magazine served to weld together the disparate members of the Club and presumably made them feel part of a large family. For the first year or so of its existence the magazine was edited by Billy Mayerl, in conjunction with Geoffrey Clayton, but in 1935 the services of Irene Ashton were secured as editor. The vivacious Miss Ashton, a revue actress and piano graduate of the Royal Academy, was also a skilled dancer. Billy had met her initially when she came to him as a pupil.

He clearly had a high opinion of her, but it was on the occasion of a variety show in March 1935 with Laddie Cliff that they met again, at the Shakespeare Theatre, Liverpool. The following day, at the premises of Rushworth and Dreaper, the well-known Liverpool Music House, Billy invited Irene to become editor of the School Club Magazine. She accepted enthusiastically and officially took over as editor in June 1935 and stayed on to edit for just over a year. She also contributed several articles to the School Club Magazine.

During this time Irene Ashton interviewed a number of musical celebrities for the journal but, more importantly from Billy's point of view, helped to relieve him of some of the tedium and painstaking application that producing a monthly magazine of forty pages entailed. He could then concentrate on more creative work. This relief was purely relative, however, because he still continued to contribute the monthly lesson and transcription as well as the editorial, whilst at the same time keeping up his tremendous output of music for shows, composing piano solos, broadcasting and making personal appearances.

Although Irene Ashton left the permanent staff in the autumn of 1936, she continued to represent the School at major exhibitions, such as the Woman's Fair at Olympia and Radiolympia, where she demonstrated modern syncopated piano on the Billy Mayerl Stand, very often in conjunction with Billy himself. Her last recorded work with Billy was in 1939, when she toured in variety as a member of his Claviers quartet, just prior to the outbreak of war.

Geoffrey Clayton, like Billy, seemed to lead several disparate lives and, quite apart from supervising and organising the smooth-running of the School, wrote a humorous column for its magazine in addition to a similar article for the monthly Melody Maker. His particular brand of humour is very dated today, and can perhaps be best described as being in the style of P.G. Wodehouse.

He left the music publishing business in 1926 to join the Billy Mayerl School, returning to it in 1932. In fact Geoffrey resigned his post as Director of Studies in October, 1932 to become Managing Director of The Peter Maurice Music Publishing Co. This was by no means the end of his association with the School, however, because he remained a Director of Modern Postal Tuition Ltd. and continued to help in the day-to-day running of the School on a part-time basis. His departure was felt, of course, by everyone at the School, and Eve McNerney (née Hooper) told me that it was her job to take any outstanding correspondence to Geoffrey's office at Peter Maurice every Friday for him to dictate suitable replies or advise on how to proceed. Geoffrey also continued to assist Billy by accompanying him on branch visits, acting, as it were, as a kind of public relations consultant right up until the outbreak of war. The School magazine ceased publication with the outbreak of hostilities, and it is not known what became of him after that.

Discussion of the Mayerl School staff would be incomplete without mentioning Billy's younger brother Fred, who joined the headquarters team around the end of 1934. It is understood he assisted with the administrative running of the School in the early stages, but took over as editor of the Club Magazine when Irene Ashton left in 1936. He also contributed many articles from 1937 onwards to the magazine, usually in the form of interviews with 'stars' from the world of music. One or two of his articles were of a technical nature, although nothing is known of his piano-playing prowess. It was inevitable that he would be overshadowed by his famous brother. Curiously, he never referred to himself by name but signed all his articles 'F. M.'

When interviewed by the Radio Times in May 1939, Billy claimed that the School had a total staff of 117 in Branches all over the world. 'We have taught over 30,000 people of whom 5,000 have become professionals,' he said. These are impressive statistics, to say the least, but they don't tell the whole story. Alas, the School doesn't appear to have been very successful financially, although the personal publicity for Billy must have been tremendous. It seems to have had financial problems right from the early days and this possibly accounted for Geoffrey Clayton's departure in 1932 and Billy continuing his relentless round of variety appearances, recording and composing activities. They almost certainly needed the money! On 29th March 1940, Modern Postal Tuition Ltd. went into voluntary liquidation with total assets of £309-10s-4d. Its creditors received 6/9d (34p approx.) in the pound.

Interestingly, Billy did manage to reopen the School after the war, in 1952. It was operated by a completely new company called The Billy Mayerl School Ltd. from premises at 395a, Edgware Road, London, W2. The Director of Studies at this time was none other than former pupil and manager of the pre-war Manchester School Branch, Alf Lancaster. Billy, himself, was also teaching a few selected pupils at that time. The official stationery for the School in 1954 claimed, somewhat surprisingly, that it still had branches throughout the UK as well as in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Hong Kong, etc. Unfortunately, it doesn't appear to have been too successful and in any event Billy could only give the School a small amount of his time because of his BBC commitments. He decided to close it in 1957, no doubt influenced by his increasingly poor health. The company was officially liquidated in 1961, two years after Billy's death.

The truth was that Billy's sort of music had largely gone out of fashion. The war had changed everything, including tastes in music, and the demand for lessons was therefore greatly reduced. In the last year or two before closure it must have been difficult for the School to make ends meet. Thus ended quietly a venture which thirty years earlier had taken the popular music world by storm, and in its heyday had been one of the most innovative ventures of its kind!

## Chapter Four – Treading the Boards

It is believed that Billy made his first professional appearance on the variety stage in 1920, as an accompanist, when he was 18, but his first adult engagement in London was with Bert Ralton and his New York Havana Band at the Coliseum on 13th March 1922. It should be remembered that the concept of putting a dance band, and a ‘hot’ one at that, on the stage was a revolutionary one at that time. The show bands of Jack Hylton, Jack Payne, Ambrose, etc. were still very much in the future in 1922, which highlights the extent of Bert Ralton’s pioneering outlook. Billy’s next stage appearance was also with the band, which by then had been renamed the Savoy Havana Band.

They opened in ‘You’d Be Surprised’ at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden on 27th January 1923. The band were recording for Columbia at the time, and it is reasonable to assume that they would have played some of their recorded favourites in the stage show. Life would have been pretty hectic for Billy in those days because immediately after their stage appearance the band would have to dash back to the Savoy Hotel, where they would play into the early hours of the morning, as dictated by the patrons.

The daytime would bring little respite either for Billy, because there were frequent recording sessions and new numbers to be rehearsed with the band, as well as test radio transmissions for the Marconi Broadcasting Co. The advent of regular radio broadcasts in September 1923 more or less precluded stage appearances for Billy and the Savoy Havana Band from then on, except on an *ad hoc* basis as and when they could be fitted in.

Billy’s next foray into variety was as a solo artist. Having launched his School of Syncopation, he decided in 1926 to leave the the-to-day running of it to Geoffrey Clayton and Eve Hooper, and start a new career ‘on the halls’. After all, he had to ensure that the public wasn’t allowed to forget his newfound fame as ‘The Lightning Pianist’ with the Savoy Havana Band. Only too aware of the fickleness of popular taste, Billy felt he had to cash in on his popularity as soon as possible. The associated publicity would also greatly assist his School, so no time was to be lost. Accordingly, the following advertisement headline became a familiar one in the trade press in early 1926: ‘Now Booking Vaudeville, BILLY MAYERL, The World’s Greatest Syncopated Pianist from the Savoy Havana Band’.

His first booking came from the Argyle Theatre, Birkenhead where, as he was to admit later, he learned a few salutary lessons as a solo performer. Apparently, the first house on his opening night at the Argyle was a terrible flop. After playing his heart out with all sorts of pianistic fireworks in his first set, he at least expected some applause, but there wasn’t a single clap. The second number he played was also rewarded with silence. It was unnerving, and when he got the same treatment after his third piece, all he wanted to do was get off the stage as quickly as possible. Finally, when he rose after his fourth set there was a feeble clap from a remote corner of the auditorium. In desperation, he decided that he would show this Liverpool audience his party piece and announced that he would now attempt something never before done on the stage. He would play two pianos at once. The response came from a voice in the Gallery: ‘Play two pianos at once! You can’t bloody well play one at once, let alone a couple.’ This caused the audience to laugh derisively, and finally the curtain was rung down to the sound of thunderous booing. A distraught Billy, reeling from this baptism of fire, ran to his dressing-room and broke down in tears.

He recovered his composure when the House Manager came to see him and congratulate him on his performance. Dan Clarke, who was one of the most popular music-hall managers in the business, told him not to worry about the boos, but to alter his programme for the second house and include ‘The Rosary’, the overture ‘Poet and Peasant’, ‘The Maiden’s Prayer’ and other music the patrons knew and loved. He was sure this would solve the problem. The next time Billy went on he brought the house down. The golden rule he learnt then is to give the public what they want and not what you would like them to hear. Billy was never to forget this advice for the rest of his career. [Though the sophistication of his compositions certainly did a good deal towards educating them. *Ed.*]

Billy developed and refined his act very quickly and by April 1926 was receiving rave reviews for his stage performances. The act by this time consisted of Billy playing selected popular tunes of the day in his own unique manner, followed by some of his own syncopated compositions, such as ‘The Jazz Master’ and ‘The Jazz Mistress’. Budding pianists up and down the country were trying to play these extremely popular pieces in the new syncopated style, and what better example could they have but to hear them played by the great Billy Mayerl himself? These were normally followed by a request slot where Billy would offer to play any tune the audience would care to name. It is understood that no member of the audience ever caught him out although, according to Jill Mayerl, there were a few anxious moments that Billy confided to her later. The highlight of the act, which was always a wow with audiences everywhere, was Billy’s playing of two grand pianos at the same time, which he did as an encore. This ‘party piece’ remained a central part of Billy’s act for many years.

Billy continued to play the principal variety theatres, appearing at the Alhambra, London during the week commencing 10th May 1926; and then on to the London Coliseum in June, where he quite literally stopped the show. Apparently, at many of his performances the numerous bows and encores which audiences demanded held up the show and prevented the next act from coming on. The great reluctance with which they allowed Billy to leave the stage was positive proof of the tremendous popularity of syncopated music with theatre and music-hall goers at that time. The reviewer for the *Melody Maker* was ecstatic in his praise for Billy: 'Mayerl these days seems to be at the very height of his form, and the astounding perfection of his technique is a source of wonder to all who hear him.'

It was while they were both appearing on the same bill together at the Coliseum that Gwen Farrar, a famous and popular entertainer of the day, suggested to Billy that they might usefully team up together as a double act, and persuaded him to take up singing. Gwen, who played the cello and sang to the accompaniment of Norah Blaney at the piano, was looking for a new partner because the latter was leaving to get married. Surprisingly, in the light of his success as a solo artist, Billy agreed, and they opened together at the Coliseum in August 1926.

They played all the major theatres in London, including the Palladium and the London Hippodrome, during a successful but very stormy partnership that lasted for three and a half years. Gwen Farrar generally sang comic songs, accompanied by Billy at the piano, but the act gave them both scope to demonstrate their individual skills as musicians, and Billy sometimes even sang as well. Gwen played the cello extremely well, having been classically trained at the Royal Academy of Music, where she obtained her LRAM and won three gold medals.

She belonged to that small elite of performers who were considered to be above the 'rank and file' and, as a result, often appeared in revues, which tended to employ only the better type of artist. Perhaps Billy thought that by associating with Gwen he could enhance his social status. She was, in fact, the daughter of Sir George Farrar, a South African gold millionaire, and had been educated at an exclusive girls' school at Ascot from which she ran away. She certainly didn't need the money, but seemed to enjoy the attention and adulation she received on the stage. Today, Gwen would be said to have belonged to the 'fast set' because she loved to live life to the full, and adored fast cars, nightclubs, and horse riding and racing. She possessed a rather masculine voice, which made her very popular with many of the lesbians in London, a fact that no doubt helped to pull in the crowds.

Billy and Gwen most probably first met when they were working together on the Archie de Beer show 'The Punch Bowl'. This was a lavish revue to which Billy contributed two numbers, one of which, 'Georgie Porgie', was featured in the show by Blaney and Farrar. The show opened at the Duke of York's Theatre on 21st May 1924, and later transferred to His Majesty's Theatre on 22nd June 1925.

One spectacular revue in which they were scheduled to appear led to unexpected problems. This was 'Whitebirds', which in the event flopped badly and closed after a very short run at His Majesty's Theatre in the summer of 1927. Lew Leslie had been engaged to produce, and his first action was to take on a galaxy of additional stars including José Collins, Maurice Chevalier, George Gee and Billy Milton, to the extent that Billy and Gwen were forced to take a back seat. This was in addition to a chorus line of 50 'Whitebird Steppers' and an orchestra of 50 musicians.

The producer then tried to separate Billy and Gwen, and give them individual roles within the revue. Billy was to appear half-dressed, while Gwen was to wear brown tights and give an imitation of Florence Mills. They both refused to go along with these requests and, fortunately, after much heated argument with the producer, Farrar's solicitor managed to find a clause in their contract which made them 'an inseparable turn'. The separation demand was dropped and they subsequently appeared together in a scene called 'A Few Minutes at the Piano'.

Their other West End show of note was the revue 'Shake Your Feet' which featured Jack Hylton and his Band and opened at the London Hippodrome on 20th July 1927. This show was presented by Laddie Cliff, who was to become one of Billy's greatest friends. Billy wrote a few years later that 'One of my happiest memories is when I worked under Laddie Cliff's banner in "Shake Your Feet".' Billy was attracted to working with Laddie Cliff because of the latter's obsessive love of pianos. This manifested itself in 'Shake Your Feet', which called for five grand pianos in its production. Five Steinway grands were purchased by Laddie at a cost of £1,000, an unbelievably small sum by today's standards, but a realistic bulk purchase price in those days. He would never hire a piano for a show, and always insisted on buying the pianos needed.

It was in 'Shake Your Feet' that Billy danced in the chorus. A critic reporting on the show commented that 'the young gentlemen, whilst good individually, could have done with a spell on the square with a good drill sergeant.' Billy, to my knowledge, never tried his hand at the dancing game again. He knew where his real talent lay!

During the run of this show Billy shared a dressing room with the entertainer Billy Milton, who reckoned that he brought him luck by asking him to deputise for him at a charity concert. Billy Milton went down so well with his songs at the piano that he was asked to replace Melville Gideon in a new production of the Co-Optimists. On another occasion, Billy Mayerl asked Milton if he wanted to make a fiver. Naturally, Milton said yes. 'Well, learn this by tomorrow,' said Billy Mayerl, handing him a sheet of music. The following day they recorded the 'Doll Dance' for the Broadcast label, which was sold at Woolworth's stores, and he got his fiver.

During their partnership Mayerl and Farrar made sixteen records: eight for Vocalion, two for Columbia and six for Decca. These are quite rare today, but fortunately some tracks have been reissued on CD for anyone who wants to taste the flavour of the act. Billy only made a few recordings as a vocalist. Apart from the aforementioned, he also sang occasionally with his Vocalion Orchestra. There is also his imitation of Stanley Lupino in the 'Love Lies' piano medley. It has to be said that he made the right decision in sticking to playing the piano.

Gwen's background and personality made her a very difficult partner to work with, and many were the arguments, tantrums and moods with which Billy had to contend. Although he was always patient and understanding with her when she had these moods, there were many occasions when he felt he just couldn't continue. Somehow, he managed to suppress most of his true feelings, but as the act prospered Billy became more and more indispensable and self-sufficient. This meant that he could have left the act at any time and continued successfully on his own, whereas Farrar undoubtedly needed his support.

This situation aggravated Gwen intensely as time went on, and it showed in many ways. She was particularly difficult over theatre bookings, refusing to work outside London, and only in the best theatres at that, where she would always insist on topping the bill. A manager was employed to book their forward dates, administer the finances and make hotel reservations. Gwen always demanded five-star hotels and often would refuse a booking if the hotel in which she was accommodated was not up to her standard. Again, she would think nothing of going off to the South of France with her friends and breaking a booking if the mood took her. Billy, on the other hand, couldn't afford to act so irresponsibly. He lacked the security of Gwen's wealth, and needed the money, quite apart from deploring the lack of professionalism displayed on these occasions, but she just didn't seem to understand.

The last straw for Billy came when they were appearing at the Coliseum in 1930, where they had been frequent visitors and were very popular. An argument ensued when they were trying to agree their programme for this date. Gwen wanted to include a new number 'Masculine Women and Feminine Men'. Billy, however, thought that it was just a little too racy for the rather prim and proper Coliseum audience. At this point Gwen became obstinate, dug her heels in and said the number was in and that was that.

It so happened that Sir Oswald Stoll was at 'band call' on that particular Monday morning and, on hearing the number in question being rehearsed, commented that he did not like it and asked for another number to be substituted, thus vindicating Billy's own thoughts on the matter. Gwen remained adamant, however, and insisted that it should stay in. No matter how Billy tried to reason with her, she remained firm in her resolve to walk off the stage if he dared to drop the number and change it for something else.

Billy didn't believe that she would carry out her threat because Sir Oswald Stoll had personally made the request for it to be dropped. When the performance started, they both came on to tremendous applause and Billy felt sure that all would now be well. At the appropriate time, when they would normally have featured the dreaded number, Billy started to play the introduction to an alternative number he knew she liked, which was also a firm favourite with the audience. Gwen promptly glared at him, slung her cello over her shoulder, and walked off the stage. Billy kept playing in the hope that she would come back, but to no avail. By this time, Gwen had left the theatre and he was left to close the act on his own.

When Billy came off stage there were already reporters waiting, wanting to know what had happened. He merely said that she had been taken ill and gone home. The affair could still have been patched up even at this stage, but unfortunately Billy and Jill went to the Kit-Kat Club for dinner after the show, where they saw Gwen enjoying herself with some friends as if nothing had happened. The whole incident was followed up by the Press, who scented a story, and Billy was inundated with phone calls the following day from reporters, but he refused to speak to them. Gwen rang him later that day to apologise, but he wouldn't talk to her either. Eventually, they got together just before that evening's performance and agreed to substitute another number in their act for the rest of the week. This incident marked the beginning of the end for Mayerl and Farrar, and although they made further appearances together, the partnership was dissolved soon afterwards.

When the die was finally cast, Gwen tried her level best to persuade Billy to continue with the partnership, but this time he was the obstinate one, and he'd had quite enough of Miss Farrar. They finally parted in April 1930. Commenting on their partnership some years later, Billy gave as the reason for the break-up the fact that Gwen had to go out to South Africa to administer her father's business following his death. 'We parted with the happiest recollections of a partnership good to look back upon and definitely profitable', he said. Obviously, Billy was a perfect gentleman, and didn't wish to reveal the true facts about the break-up. We are indebted to Jill Mayerl for the above account, some twenty years or so after Billy's death. Gwen Farrar soon teamed-up again with her old partner, Norah Blaney, and they made five records for Columbia between April and July 1930. They were still recording together in 1935.

This was not the end of double acts for Billy. By July 1930 he was making appearances with Miss Marjorie Lotinga with a new act in which they appeared at several leading variety theatres, including the London Coliseum. The new act, however, now revolved around Billy, who was very much to the fore and was able to display his personality to a much greater extent than when he was working with Gwen Farrar, who had tended to keep him in the background. He continued to sing in his new act as well as play the piano, and also featured his, by now expected, stunt of playing two pianos at the same time. One new feature of the act was to read out loud the storyline of a 'thriller' into which he introduced various ingenious sound effects played on the piano. Miss Lotinga, on the other hand, sang and danced in her usual delightful fashion and the act went down well with audiences.

The new act had only a short life, however, and Billy was once more preparing for a change. The middle two weeks of August found him rehearsing to go on tour with the Co-Optimists, including writing music for their new show, as well as penning the complete musical score for the production of 'Nippy'. In spite of all this he somehow still managed to find time to answer and comment on the students' reports from his School of Syncopation. There was never a dull moment with Billy! It was small wonder then that during his 14-month stint with the Co-Optimists he was ill for most of the time. He claimed that he had his first real nervous breakdown in this period, which caused him to sprint all the way to a Post Office at one stage to send an alarming telegram to his wife which read: 'I am dying. You must come at once.' He didn't record what Jill's reaction was, but he did say later that it was all a case of nerves.

The theatre programme for the Co-Optimists' appearance at the Golders Green Hippodrome in December 1930 makes fascinating reading and gives an idea of the flavour of Billy's performance. In the first half, Billy appeared in 'a spectacular presentation of Oriental Splendour, "My Turkish Delight" (proving that the Yeast rises even higher than the vest!).' Somehow, it is difficult to believe that Billy was comfortable in this pantomime-type role. In the second half of the programme Billy took 'a flight of fancy' with Phyllis Monkman in 'Sky Lady', but in his final solo spot just prior to the grand finale he is once more back with his two-piano trick.

After his spell with the Co-Optimists, during which he suffered these several bouts of ill health, Billy decided that he had had enough of touring and henceforth would concentrate on composing and conducting for the West End theatre and for films. Radio, too, was also an important force in show business and Billy wanted to do more of it. The main thrust, therefore, of Billy's work for the remainder of the 1930s tended to be in these areas and his old type of solo piano act became much more of a rarity. He did, though, make the occasional special guest appearance at selected theatres during this period, including a Royal Command Performance at the London Palladium.

An interesting experiment in which Billy took part happened in the earlier part of 1932, when times were hard and financial backers for shows were very scarce indeed. At this time a group of performers – which included Barrie Lupino, Marjorie Lotinga, Leslie Sarony, Billie Hill, Bobby Comber, Ivan Samson and, of course, Billy Mayerl – got together to put on their own show. They had the courage of their convictions even if no external backer was prepared to take the risk. The show was called, appropriately enough, 'Between Ourselves' and Billy wrote the music for it as well as starring in it. It started a provincial tour in April 1932 and Barrie Lupino in a press interview at the time said that it was the intention of the company to bring the show to London afterwards.

In fact, the show never made the West End and it folded after a few weeks. One presumes that the artists received precious little income during the show's run, and Billy would have been forced to write it off to experience. The financial blow to Billy was, however, softened to some extent by the royalties he would have earned on the three published songs from the show (he wrote five in all), although one assumes that they had little chance of becoming best sellers. Times may have been hard, but that in no way lessened Billy's personal work load. He continued to pour out music for shows, as well as numerous piano works and arrangements. Fortunately, his creative gifts never deserted him.

## Chapter Five – Billy Writes the West End Shows

Billy Mayerl's first foray into the world of West End shows took place when he composed three songs for 'The Punch Bowl' in 1924. He was just 22 years of age. The show opened at the Duke of York's Theatre on 24th May 1924, and subsequently transferred to His Majesty's Theatre in June 1925. One can safely assume in view of its relatively long run that it was a successful show. Billy's numbers for the show included 'Georgie Porgie', which, he was later to claim, became popular as an audition piece and work-finder for budding chorus girls, many of whom found stardom after using it. This was also the number that Billy said he played and recorded with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra whilst he was in America in 1924. This cannot be true since Whiteman's recording was made in June 1928.

On returning from his trip to America with Geoffrey Clayton, Billy was asked to provide two songs for 'Charlot's Revue' which opened at the Prince of Wales Theatre on 23rd September 1924. The numbers were 'Love's Lottery' and 'Keep it Snappy'. It is believed that Billy was persuaded to take a financial stake in the show, a decision that lost him in excess of £1,300, a lot of money for a young man of 22 in those days. He was rapidly coming to terms with the financial uncertainties of the West End stage, and would not be caught so easily next time.

His next writing venture was for 'The London Revue', which opened at The Lyceum on 2nd September 1925. This required him to write six numbers. 1926 was a fallow year for Billy on the show writing front. Presumably, his hands were full with the problems of getting his School of Modern Syncopation off the ground and, of course, pursuing his solo variety career. By 1927, however, he was back on the songwriting scene. He wrote 'What Are You Going To Do?' for 'Whitebirds', the ill-fated show in which he appeared with Gwen Farrar. It opened at His Majesty's Theatre on 31st May and ran for only a few performances. This was followed up with two songs for 'Bow Wows' at the Prince of Wales Theatre on 12th October, while in 1928 Billy wrote the music for just one show, the touring musical comedy, 'Oh! Letty'. 'Love Lies' and 'The Co-Optimists' were the musical shows to which Billy contributed songs in 1929. They were produced in addition to a substantial number of more serious works such as 'Sennen Cove' and 'The Legends of King Arthur', but that didn't seem to deter Billy, as music just continued to pour from his fingertips.

One curiosity which is perhaps worth noting here is that in the piano medley which Billy Mayerl recorded of a selection from 'Love Lies', he suddenly bursts into song in the last number, 'I Lift Up My Finger and Say Tweet, Tweet', and gives a very passable imitation of Stanley Lupino, who sang it in the show. This is the only example of Billy singing on one of his piano medleys. The show opened at the Gaiety Theatre on 20th March 1929. It was The Co-Optimists, however, who sparked Billy into writing six songs for their new show in 1930, and these were published in a special song album by Keith Prowse. Billy actually toured with the show for 14 months, which may have accounted for his greater involvement.

1930 was the year for 'Nippy', Billy's most important show to date, about a waitress in a Lyon's Corner House. This was the first musical comedy for which Billy wrote the complete score, and it opened at the Prince Edward Theatre on 30th October after a trial run in Edinburgh. It starred Binnie Hale, Clifford Mollison, Arthur Riscoe and Reginald Purdell with the Debroy Somers Band. Billy wrote around a dozen numbers, including the romantic 'Two of Everything' and 'Your Sunny Disposition and Mine', and, in complete contrast, the humorous 'A Couple of Fine Old Schools', about Eton and Borstal. A ballet sequence was also included to the tune of 'The Toy Town Party'.

Nippy was moderately successful, running for 137 performances which, by Prince Edward standards, was very good indeed. The theatre was only built in 1930, and had a reputation for being unlucky. After 'Nippy' closed there was a succession of shows that failed and so in 1936 it was converted into a theatre restaurant and renamed The London Casino. It was 'Nippy' first and foremost which established Billy Mayerl as a major composer for the musical theatre. For the record, Billy also contributed to two other shows in 1930: 'Darling, I Love You' and 'Silver Wings'. The main hit tune in the latter proved to be 'Indispensable You', which was written by Billy.

In 1931, he composed the complete score for 'The Millionaire Kid', which opened at the Gaiety Theatre on the 20th May. Frank Eyton provided the lyrics and Harry Acre's orchestra was in the pit with H. B. Hedley at the piano. The show was produced and directed by Billy's friend Laddie Cliff, with whom Billy was to work on several more musical comedies prior to Laddie's tragic death in December 1937. Although 'The Millionaire Kid' received very favourable reviews from the critics, who were especially complimentary about Billy's music, it flopped and was taken off prematurely after a short run. Eight new pieces had been written for the show, of which 'Devonshire', 'Thank You Most Sincerely', 'Dance The Polka Again' and 'I'd Be Lost Without You' are particularly tuneful and enjoyed a modicum of popularity at the time. Frank Eyton, once more, provided the lyrics for the songs.

One other show for which Billy wrote three numbers was 'My Sister and I', all with lyrics by Frank Eyton. It opened at the Shaftesbury Theatre on 23rd February 1931 and flopped after four days. Billy received the princely sum of £2-12-6d (about £2.60) for his three songs. All in all, 1931 was not exactly a vintage year for Billy's show music. He did, however, write 'Honeysuckle', 'Mignonette', 'Scallywag', 'Oriental' and 'Pastorale Exotique' that year, which must have more than compensated for his theatrical disappointments.

'Between Ourselves' was the only musical show for which Billy wrote in 1932. It was a touring revue and didn't reach the West End. Five numbers were written, though none of them were particularly memorable.

1933 was another fallow year for show tunes, and so we pass on to 'Sporting Love', which was the hit show of 1934, opening at The Gaiety Theatre, London on 31st March. Prior to its move to the West End, 'Sporting Love' had opened in Glasgow on 22nd January for two weeks before moving to Edinburgh and Manchester. Billy was with the show from the outset, and whilst he was away from his London base he had to make special arrangements for all of his students' progress reports to be delivered to him for his personal comments.

The show was written by Stanley Lupino, who also starred in it, ably assisted by Laddie Cliff, Gilly Flower, Marjorie Browne and Jenny Dean. Billy wrote all the music, and the accompaniment for the show was by his own orchestra. Frank Eyton once again provided the lyrics to the songs.

The show, as one might have gathered from the title, had a horse-racing theme and concerned the antics of Stanley Lupino and Laddie Cliff, who accidentally backed an outsider that won. Eight numbers were composed for the show, of which the principal ones were: 'You're the Reason Why', 'Have a Heart' and 'A Shooting we Will Go'. Billy conducted the 26-strong orchestra throughout the performance. He and his orchestra also entertained the audience during the interval, together with vocalist Irene North, who was a member of the cast.

Soon after the show opened, Billy wrote in the School Magazine that 'the real papers were loud in their praise of the show and we are playing to capacity business'. Unfortunately, he was taken ill with shingles in May, and was absent from the show for about a month, during which time George Windeatt deputised for him after just one rehearsal. 'Sporting Love' ran for three hundred and two performances, and its success helped the Gaiety through a sticky patch financially.

1935 found Billy busy with the music for 'Twenty To One', described in advertisements as 'The Funniest Musical Sporting Event ever staged by the Theatre management'. Its debut was at the Wimbledon Theatre in 1935, and this was then followed by a successful tour. The show, in a revised form, eventually opened at the London Coliseum on 12th November 1935, with a fine West End cast, including Lupino Lane, and with Billy Mayerl's orchestra in the pit. On this occasion, however, Billy was not conducting because of other engagements, and Harold Brewer took over the baton for the show's run.

Once again, horse racing reared its head in the plot, together with the activities of the Anti-Gambling League. The cast was enhanced by a vivacious chorus line that, with the help of two very funny comedians and Billy's sparkling music, more or less guaranteed a success. It ran for 383 performances during which time it was seen by almost half a million people. The show was revived in London during the Second World War at the Victoria Palace.

Flushed with his success in 'Sporting Love', Billy was asked to write the score for 'Over She Goes' in 1936. This was to feature the, by now, familiar team of Stanley Lupino and Laddie Cliff. It also starred Adele Dixon, Eric Fawcett, Richard Murdoch and Syd Walker, as well as a bevy of lovely ladies, including Sally Grey, Teddy St. Denis and Barbara Francis.

Described as 'a musical tantivy', it opened at the Saville Theatre on 23rd September 1936. Billy's own orchestra was in the pit, and was conducted by him for the duration of the show. In the opinion of most people, including the critics, 'Over She Goes', contained some of Billy's best and most tuneful show music. It was also Billy's own favourite show, a preference shared by Stanley Lupino.

The two main song hits in the show, 'I Breathe on Windows' and 'Mine's a Hopeless Case', were recorded by the Henry Hall and Joe Loss orchestras and became best sellers. Billy, himself, recorded a selection of the music with his Saville Theatre orchestra. The show ran for 248 performances and was later made into a successful film. The Saville Theatre, which survived the war, was converted into two cinemas in 1969, now known as Studio 1 and Studio 2.

'Crazy Days' was the show for 1937, and was also the last to be produced by the Stanley Lupino–Laddie Cliff team. The break-up was caused by Laddie Cliff's illness and eventual death on 8th December 1937, just before the show opened for a try-out in Streatham. His place in the production was taken by Leo Franklin at short notice. It opened in the West End at the Shaftesbury Theatre on 15th September 1937 with a strong supporting cast which included Marjorie Browne, Fred Conyngham (an Australian dancer), Gilly Flower, Arthur Rigby and dancer Gloria Day. Billy Mayerl composed all the music and conducted his own orchestra, with Frank Eyton providing the lyrics.

The story, as usual, was inconsequential and was set in a haunted manor house in the middle of a deserted moor. It was typical Lupino slapstick with plenty of laughs. The show did not, however, enjoy a long run, which may have been due to the missing ingredient of Laddie Cliff. A critic wrote at the time: 'The best things were Gloria Day's dancing and Billy Mayerl's gay and pretty music'.

The hit songs from 'Crazy Days' were: 'Stranger in a Cup of Tea', 'Love was Born' and 'You're not too Bad Yourself'. The Cinephonic Music Co. published the sheet music, including a piano selection and a souvenir album. Recordings made of the show music included a piano selection played by Billy Mayerl, and a vocal selection by Marjorie Browne and Fred Conyngham, accompanied by The Shaftesbury Theatre Orchestra, conducted by Billy Mayerl.

Billy didn't produce any show music in 1938, but in 1939 he was back on the West End scene with 'Runaway Love', which eventually opened at The Saville Theatre on 4th November after a provincial tour. The familiar songwriting team of Mayerl and Eyton were once more at the helm, and it starred Eric Fawcett, George Gee, Marjorie Sandford, and Barrie and Toni Lupino. The book was written on this occasion by Frank Eyton and Barrie Lupino.

## Chapter Six – Billy and the Airwaves

Billy Mayerl grew up with broadcasting in this country, and maintained a close association with it from the outset. He assisted the Marconi Company with their experimental broadcasts from Marconi House, next door to the Savoy Hotel, in the two years or so before they became part of the BBC and started the Public Broadcasting System in 1923. Billy said of those early days that he broadcast on his own and was known as Uncle Ragtime. ‘I was on the air at 4.00 pm jazzing up nursery rhymes’, he said.

His first broadcast on the BBC public network was on 13th April 1923, when he played with the Savoy Havana Band in their inaugural programme. Thereafter, his name was to become a familiar one in radio programme schedules, and particularly in the Radio Times. Billy became a seasoned broadcaster, in every sense of the word, very early in his career, and in 1946 he was even to become a staff member of the BBC, but more of that later.

His early association with the Public Broadcasting Service taught him the immense advertising power of the new medium, and he was quick to press home the advantage of those early exposures with the Savoy Havana Band whenever the opportunity presented itself. The initial broadcast of the Savoy Havana Band on 13th April was followed by a further one on 25th April, both of which were made from the BBC’s newly-established Savoy Hill Studio. They went out at 10.00 pm on each occasion and were of thirty minutes duration.

After these inaugural programmes by the Savoy Havana Band, they did not broadcast again until some five months later. Then, on Wednesday, 3rd October 1923, they made the first broadcast direct from the Savoy Hotel itself. This 45-minute programme, featuring both the Savoy’s Havana and Orpheans bands, obviated the problems of physically accommodating all the musicians in the cramped confines of the studios. The live atmosphere conveyed by the Savoy Hotel broadcasts also added a new dimension to the dance band relays. It was now possible for the listeners to imagine that they too were part of that luxurious ambience in the Savoy Hotel Ballroom, an aspect that undoubtedly played a major part in the popularity of the transmissions.

Another joint broadcast took place on the 18th October, this time lasting one hour, but then the Havana Band were not heard again until 20th November. In the meantime, the Orpheans made five broadcasts on their own. It would appear that the BBC was trying to gauge audience reaction to the respective bands before committing itself to more permanent arrangements.

However, from 20th November 1923 onwards, a pattern emerged which gave more or less equal exposure to the two bands, by featuring both on the same bill. They were normally broadcast three nights a week, usually on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, but sometimes on Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday. Each programme on average lasted one hour, although occasionally to suit the schedules they could be as short as 15-minutes or as long as two hours. This was the broadcasting routine that Billy was to follow for the rest of his time at the Savoy, i.e. until spring 1926.

It is interesting to look at a typical broadcast programme. Here is the one for Saturday, 1st March 1924:

### SAVOY ORPHEANS

Swinging Down the Lane  
Stop Flirting  
Wonderful One  
Drigo’s Serenade  
Night Time in Italy  
Who Cares?  
Welsh Medley  
The Beauty Prize.

### SAVOY HAVANA BAND

In Love with Love  
Shy  
Somebody’s Wrong  
Sleep  
Greenwich Witch  
Love’s Last Day

The programmes for both bands featured popular songs of the day, supplemented, in the case of the Orpheans, by three ‘orchestral’ items. Billy was allowed one solo, on this occasion Zez Confrey’s ‘Greenwich Witch’. A piano solo was still the exception at this time and many programmes by the Havana Band consisted solely of popular songs. It should also be remembered that Billy and his piano would be more or less inaudible in a band ensemble, given the primitive microphones of the day; a solo therefore, would be the only means of letting the listening public hear what he could do.

On 1st September 1925 the Savoy Havana Band's programme was:

Florida	Poor Little Rich Girl
Who Takes Care of the Caretaker's Daughter?	Madeira
I'm in Love with You	The Jazz Master
Where is that Girl who was Stolen from Me?	The Toy Drum Major
Show me the Way to go Home.	

The pattern has not really changed very much, except that Billy could now substitute one of his own new compositions as the piano solo. In this case it is 'The Jazz Master'.

In 1925, during his spell with the Savoy Havana Band, Billy made three appearances with Cyril Ramon Newton, playing piano and violin duets as part of variety programmes featuring other well-known artists. Newton was, of course, the leader of the Havana Band at the time, having taken over from Bert Ralton when he left the Savoy in 1923. These programmes probably helped to give Billy a taste for the solo variety act, where he could enjoy the spotlight rather than languish in the relative anonymity of the band ensemble.

Before we move on from Billy's period with the Savoy Havana Band, we should perhaps clear up a controversial point regarding the first performance of Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue' in Britain. The facts are as follows: the first broadcast performance of 'Rhapsody in Blue' took place on Monday, 15th June 1925 direct from the Savoy Hotel. This was during a 30-minute broadcast of Syncopated Symphonic Music at 8.30 pm and featured the Savoy Orpheans Augmented Symphonic Orchestra and the Savoy Havana Band. The important point here is that it was a two-piano version, with the composer George Gershwin at one piano and Billy Thorburn, the resident pianist with the Savoy Orpheans, at the other. The first public performance of 'Rhapsody in Blue' has always been attributed to Billy Mayerl but, in fact, this refers to the first public concert, which took place at the Queen's Hall on 28th October 1925. A fine distinction perhaps, but important nevertheless.

Just before Billy left the Savoy Hotel, the Savoy Havana Band – together with the Savoy Orpheans, the Olympia band and the bands of Sidney Firman and Jack Hylton – were involved in a national radio event billed as 'The World's Biggest Dance' on 15th December 1925 from 9 pm. to 2 am. This event involved the simultaneous transmission of the music to 20 Palais de Danse across the country, including Scotland and Northern Ireland. It was a bold experiment, but typical of the pioneering spirit of those days.

After leaving the Savoy Havana Band in January 1926, we understand on medical advice, Billy busied himself initially with setting up and establishing his School of Modern Syncopation and making some solo variety appearances. It was in this latter capacity that he made his first radio broadcast of 1926. He appeared in a 60-minute variety show broadcast on Saturday, 27th February 1926. His only other broadcasts that year were on Friday, 13th August and Tuesday, 21st December when he and Gwen Farrar performed excerpts from their repertoire during radio variety shows.

Billy Mayerl made four radio appearances in 1927, in each case as a solo variety turn during programmes with other featured artists. They were all in the latter part of the year on 20th September, 15th October, 17th November and 19th December, respectively. This was Billy making sure that he retained his individual 'star' artist image with the listener in spite of the fact that since 1926 he had been touring the Halls as half of the Mayerl–Farrar double act. More importantly, these appearances also gave Billy an opportunity to promote his latest syncopated compositions, including 'Marigold', which as we all know became a best seller. The radio programmes nearly always featured his own compositions and, from 1930, included not only his syncopated novelty numbers but his show tunes as well. Very little air time was 'wasted' on playing other people's compositions; Billy was nothing if not commercial.

In 1928, his appearances were restricted to three: one as a soloist on 18th April and two broadcasts with Gwen Farrar in variety shows on 17th July and 17th December. In what can only be regarded as a revolutionary innovation, Billy gave a half-hour lecture and demonstration on how to play syncopated music in a broadcast from 2L0 on Tuesday, 8th January 1929 at 8.30 pm. This was illustrated by himself at the piano and by the BBC Dance Orchestra. In the programme he dealt with the transcribing of an ordinary piano song copy into a version suitable for dancing. A follow-up programme entitled 'Can You Syncopate?' was broadcast on 1st May. It was advertised in the Radio Times as a 'further chat on an increasingly popular topic', such was the craze for syncopation at the time.

Piano instruction by radio! Whatever next? We don't know, of course, just how much useful know-how Billy was able to impart by means of the radio to all the eager listeners, but of one thing we can be sure: the applications for his postal course in modern syncopation must have gone through the roof at this time.

One would assume that Billy, who had grown up and matured with the medium of radio as a means of mass communication and enjoyment, would have been completely at home with it when broadcasting. Curiously, as Jill Mayerl was later to reveal, Billy's piano broadcasts 'made him worried out of his life at times. On these occasions he always liked to have the music in front of him, although he knew every note, and I had to be there to turn it over for him. He was often under terrible strain in these assignments and I could never understand why . . .' She then went on to say that in her own broadcasting experience during the war, she felt something of the same panic setting in when that little red light came on.

Broadcasting in the Twenties was not without its humorous moments, however, as Billy recalled in 1930. He turned up one night to do a broadcast from 2LO and was confronted by a new announcer who seemed to be more than a little flustered. When Billy reported his arrival, the announcer consulted his programme list and remarked: 'Oh yes! Mayerl, Billy, 8.47 pm. Now Mr. Mayerl, would you like someone to accompany you on the piano?'

Billy made one more broadcast with Gwen Farrar, before they split up, on the 28th February 1929 (sandwiched between the talks on syncopation), and then returned to what became a more or less standard pattern of broadcasts for the remainder of the Thirties. It is significant that he did not participate in any long-running series. An analysis of the programme schedules shows that he continued to make four or five broadcasts a year, sometimes with his own 15-minute programme or a spot in a variety show, and sometimes within a programme of light orchestral music. The latter type of programme seemed to predominate from 1931 onwards.

In every programme, however, Billy invariably played his own compositions, making a concession only to Grieg when he was the soloist in the first movement of that composer's piano concerto with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, in a transmission on New Year's Day, 1931. The orchestra followed this with Mayerl's 'Three Pastoral Sketches' conducted by him, and the programme concluded with a piano selection from 'Nippy', played and arranged by Billy. The broadcast, as one critic wrote, 'for sheer versatility, would be hard to beat, and those who heard it may well think that the last word rests now with the dance musicians'.

Billy played the Grieg Concerto again in a broadcast with the BBC Dance Orchestra on 21st September 1936. It was obviously a firm favourite with him, no doubt stemming from his early days when he allegedly gave his first performance of it at the age of twelve (some authorities say 11) in the Queen's Hall, London. He broadcast with various orchestras including, curiously, the Wireless Military Band on three occasions in the autumn of 1931 and the early part of 1932. Whether these programmes resulted from a new found interest in Military Bands, or were just a whim of a particular BBC producer at the time is not known. However, Billy did make a recording of his own composition 'The Empire Parade' with himself conducting The National Military Band, for Columbia in July 1930. Maybe this instrumentation had a certain appeal for him at that time. Other orchestras he appeared with included the BBC Theatre Orchestra, the Sydney Baynes Orchestra, the Reginald King Orchestra, the BBC Dance Orchestra, the BBC Variety Orchestra and the Orchestre Raymonde.

One other innovation he experimented with was a radio revue. In 1932, Billy, together with Frank Eyton, wrote a revue for broadcasting called 'Hil-air-ity'. Described as a 'Cabaradio', it was produced by Bobbie Comber and Martyn C. Webster and starred Billy Mayerl, of course, together with Billie Hill, Lena Chisholm, Jane Carr, Ivan Samsom, and Bobbie Comber. The Show was accompanied by Sydney Baynes and his Band and also featured The Revue Chorus. It received major billing in the Radio Times and was thought to be important enough to be repeated five days later. The original programme went out on 2nd September, ran for one hour and was well received by the critics.

The critic for one prominent London evening paper described 'Hil-air-ity' as 'easily the best of its class. Chief credit for this goes to Billy Mayerl for his music, which is refreshingly new in style, delightfully melodious and ideally microphonic . . .' However, in spite of its apparent success, the experiment seems never to have been repeated. Presumably, Billy thought that it involved too much work to be 'blued' in a single transmission, the same problem that established music-hall artists were forced to face in later years with the advent of television.

An interesting broadcast took place on 13th December 1936 during which Billy played the Ray Noble arrangement of 'The Four Aces Suite' with the Orchestre Raymonde. Record collectors will know that this is the arrangement used by Raie Da Costa for her historic recording with Ray Noble and the New Mayfair Orchestra in 1934. It was the first time this arrangement had been played in a public broadcast by Billy.

In a programme entitled 'Savoy Memories', the 25th anniversary of broadcasts of dance music from the Savoy Hotel was celebrated on Tuesday, 13th July 1937 in a 45-minute transmission at 8.10 pm. Billy, of course, was a prominent participant, as were his former colleagues Carroll Gibbons and Debroy (Bill) Somers. Happily, a recording of this broadcast still exists and it makes fascinating listening. Billy's own account of how he was discovered in Southampton and the dates quoted by him on this broadcast don't seem to agree with the facts. This resulted in a lot of controversy with subsequent researchers but perhaps Billy's statements were intended as broad approximations and have been interpreted too literally.

Other broadcasts of note include the first performance of a new orchestral arrangement of 'The Four Aces Suite' by Arthur Wood, given by the BBC Theatre Orchestra under Stanford Robinson with Billy at the piano on Sunday, 2nd June 1935. Billy also broadcast with his own orchestra from the Saville Theatre playing a selection from his favourite musical, 'Over She Goes', on Friday, 5th February 1937.

Another notable first was the broadcast performance of 'The Aquarium Suite' on Tuesday, 20th July 1937 given by Billy with the Reginald King Orchestra. This performance formed part of a programme of light music by British composers, and was played in the piano solo version. Demand for the sheet music was so great following this broadcast that the publishers, Keith Prowse, brought forward its release date by a month, and immediately put in hand a second print run.

Billy's broadcasting activities were not by any means confined to the BBC, and he made many recorded programmes for Radio Luxembourg in the early days of commercial radio in this country. Regular programmes commenced in February 1937, but he may have made some experimental programmes earlier. They were of 15-minutes duration, and went out on Wednesday evenings at 7.00 pm, but from April were switched to Tuesday afternoons at 3.30 pm. It appears that the programmes were discontinued in August of that year. They were solo piano request programmes that enjoyed the title 'Lightning Fingers', and Billy actively encouraged his students, through the medium of the School Magazine, to write in with requests. In particular, he suggested that they ask him to play his current transcription from the Magazine. This was a wonderful opportunity for him to demonstrate just how the transcription should sound. The programmes proved to be very popular among pianists in general, but not too many of the students seem to have taken advantage of Billy's offer to play his latest transcription.

Billy commented that, judging by the number of requests received by Radio Luxembourg, 'nearly every pianist in England must be listening to these broadcasts. The number of requests from Club Members, however, is much smaller than I anticipated in view of my announcement that I would include magazine transcriptions in these programmes.' For the technically minded, the programmes were recorded as sound-on-film, and Billy had to go to the Gainsborough Film Studios in London to make the recordings. None are known to have survived.

Also in 1937, Billy made his television debut. He was featured in three five-minute cameos transmitted direct from Radiolympia on 26th August. This was soon after the start of the public television service. His only other TV appearance that year was from the foyer of the Palace Theatre, London on 24th November. The occasion was the first night of a new musical called 'Under Your Hat', which starred Cicely Courtneidge and Jack Hulbert.

During 1938, Billy made only three 15-minute solo piano broadcasts for the BBC: on 8th January, 17th March and 8th August, the latter programme being the first in a series entitled 'Kings of the Keyboard'. From April until August Billy was touring the country with his Claviers, which would have provided few opportunities for broadcasts during that period. 1938 was also the year in which he made his first overseas broadcast. The occasion was during a visit he made to Sweden in February to meet and play for the members of the very successful branch of his School in Stockholm. He broadcast on Sweden's Radiojanst with Sune Waldimir's Dance Orchestra on 19th February, which gave him a splendid opportunity to introduce his compositions to the Swedish public.

During the wartime years, Billy was a regular broadcaster with his band on 'Music While You Work' and for general dance music programmes from June 1941 onwards. He also recorded special programmes for ENSA that were broadcast to H.M. Forces overseas. For most programmes Billy used his regular 10-piece band, and normally they would broadcast direct from the underground ballroom at Grosvenor House. However, for a two-week period in August 1941 Billy augmented his band to a 15-piece and took them on tour to make a series of broadcasts from different locations. They remained regular broadcasters until he was forced to rest through ill health in March, 1944. He was also an occasional guest on variety shows, such as Worker's Playtime, which were aimed at boosting the war effort, and he was always ready to do his bit for his country as he saw it. This would sometimes mean stepping into the breach at short notice if one of his fellow artists had been taken ill.

Billy suffered a major breakdown in March 1944 which effectively kept him 'off the air' for two years. He was advised to rest in the country away from the nightly stresses and tensions of working in the heart of London's West End. He rented an attractive house at Branksome in Bournemouth and spent a year or so recuperating there. On his return to London he and Jill took up residence in Hampstead again. There was no way, however, that he could return to his former way of life, but he still needed a fulfilling job.

He was delighted, therefore, when the BBC offered him a post, for which he was to be based at the Maida Vale Studios. He joined the BBC on 13th January 1946 as part of their pool of musical talent known as the London Studio Players. His principal duties were to produce arrangements of his own works and others for the various BBC light music orchestras, as well as to write specially commissioned works for orchestra. Interspersed with this 'bread and butter' work were broadcasts he made both as a solo artist and with his Rhythm Ensemble.

He seemed quite happy there and appeared to get on well with everyone, especially his old friend and colleague Fred Hartley, who was then Head of Light Music. Billy was a perfectionist and a very hard taskmaster, very much like Fred Hartley himself. And although he wasn't arrogant he nonetheless always had very firm views on how a particular piece should be played, and woe betide any Producer who tried to dictate otherwise.

During this time, Billy was obviously very relaxed and getting more time for contemplation, gardening and composing. Significantly, he composed his four 'In My Garden' suites and 'Evening Primrose' in 1946-47. He also enjoyed considerable success with the appropriately titled 'Resting', a wistful and rather charming ballad with lyrics by Howard Alexander, when it was recorded by Richard Tauber. Besides this, he produced a minor masterpiece, in my opinion, in the form of his suite 'The Big Top' in 1948 just, as it were, to prove that he was by no means a spent force.

However, Billy was now getting restless again, not to say bored, and when he was approached 'out of the blue' by his old colleague and friend from The Co-Optimists days, Stanley Holloway, who suggested that he might like to consider joining him for a one-year tour of Australia and New Zealand, he jumped at the chance. Not only was the proposition exciting in itself, but it would also give Billy a chance to visit the branches of the Billy Mayerl School in Sydney, Melbourne and Christchurch which were, somewhat surprisingly, still operating along pre-war lines. Therefore, on 12th March 1949, Billy resigned from the BBC and a few days later, on the 23rd, sailed with his wife Jill on the SS 'Orcades' bound for Australia.

After a fairly gruelling twelve months 'down under', which also involved a three-month whistle-stop tour of 'one night stands' in New Zealand, and the amicable break-up of the partnership with Stanley Holloway after about six months, Billy and Jill had had enough and were very homesick. This was in spite of the fact that Billy had been a great success as a solo act, and had been offered an extension of his contract for a further two years. They sailed again on the 'SS Orcades' for London, arriving back in June 1950 after an absence of fifteen months or so.

Billy was soon back 'on the air' on his return. He was featured with Ivor Dennis at two pianos in 'Follies of the Air', a weekly show in concert party format that commenced its run on 24th July 1950. It must have brought memories of 'The Co-Optimists' rushing back! Also on the very same day, Billy and his Rhythm Players were featured in a new series on the Light Programme called 'Hello There', which was transmitted at noon on weekdays.

This was a programme aimed at young people and ran for several weeks during school holidays. The Billy Mayerl Players appeared on several subsequent series of this programme, and in one series, in March 1951, were billed as Billy Mayerl and his Piemen in a spot called 'Peacock Pie'. During the early Fifties, he had several series on the Light Programme with his Players and the Rhythm Ensemble, including 'Out of the Mayerl Bag' (a request programme), and spots on the long-running 'Bright and Early' programme which went out at 6.30 am every morning, ostensibly to help people get ready for work with pleasant, lighthearted music ringing in their ears. Another programme which was very popular was his Sunday morning show 'Look Lively'.

When Billy and Jill returned from Australia they lived at 407a, Edgware Road, London, W2, just a few doors away from the premises of the post-war Billy Mayerl School at 395a, Edgware Road. This was a convenient location for Billy, close to his School but also near to the hub of things in London, music publishers, etc. and, of course, the BBC. However, it was a far cry from Hampstead and, writing in 1973, Irene Ashton said that Billy absolutely hated that part of London.

One surmises that Billy hankered after the type of existence he enjoyed with the BBC before he went to Australia, because he rejoined the BBC Light Music Department on 24th June 1951, basically taking on again his former role.

This time Billy was to stay with the BBC for five-and-a-half years. During this period he produced a string of compositions and transcriptions in various styles, and many orchestrations for the BBC Light Music Orchestras, whilst continuing to broadcast and record with his sextet. Important compositions from this period include: 'Beguine Impromptu', 'Look Lively', 'Balearic Episode', 'Blue Shadows', 'Crystal Clear', 'The Errant Errand Boy', 'Filigree', 'Jill All Alone' and 'Minuet by Candlelight'. Unfortunately, Billy's health started to deteriorate again and he resigned from the BBC on grounds of ill health on 3rd November 1956.

One of Billy's last broadcasts was his Desert Island Discs appearance with Roy Plomley on 21st April 1958. He seemed to be in a relaxed mood, but sounded tired, and unsurprisingly requested his drinks cabinet as his one luxury. His choice of music for the Desert Island makes interesting reading:

Laideronette, from Mother Goose Suite (Ravel) played by the Philharmonia Orchestra  
Vanity Fair (Collins) played by the London Promenade Orchestra  
Le Chant du Rossignol (Stravinsky) played by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra  
A Children's Overture (Quilter) played by the London Philharmonic Orchestra  
Sea Fever (Ireland) sung by Frederick Harvey  
State Occasion (Farnon) played by the Queen's Hall Light Orchestra  
Sumare, from Saudades do Brasil (Milhaud) played by Jascha Heifetz  
Mein Herr Marquis from Die Fledermaus (Strauss) sung by Sari Barabas

Tragically, Billy died eleven months later at the premature age of fifty-six.

## Chapter Seven – Billy the Bandleader

Billy's first big break came, as we have seen, when he was discovered playing in a dance band. Having gained the necessary commercial experience and reputation, it was natural that he should want to form one of his own at the earliest opportunity. In fact, intent on exploiting his newfound fame, Billy decided that a good commercial opportunity existed for him to act as a Band Provider. The idea was that he would set up a dance band hire business, so that if any organisation or person wanted to hire a dance band which carried the Billy Mayerl Seal of Approval for a special event or, indeed, for a season, they would come to him, safe in the knowledge that all bands supplied would have been trained by him and be of the requisite high standard. Implicit in the Hire Agreement was the suggestion that Billy Mayerl would front the band personally whenever his other engagements permitted. In reality, of course, this was rarely possible and most of the time these 'name' bands operated without him.

The Dance Band Hire Agency, in fact, was run as an offshoot of his School, and operated from the same premises, under the control of Ron Gray, a first-class pianist and ex-student of Billy's, who also directed one of the bands personally: the Billy Mayerl Syncopators. The new band hire business was inaugurated in October 1926, and one of its first assignments was to supply a top-class band, the Billy Mayerl Syncopators, for the opening on 16th October, and then for a season, of the new luxury Dance Hall in Haringey, London, and the Salon Bal. Billy Mayerl was present on opening night and played some of his 'party pieces' for the occasion. Band hire remained a part of the Mayerl Organisation allied to the School until the outbreak of war in 1939.

The dance band business was already very competitive by 1926. Dance band competitions were very popular because the winners could use the associated publicity to secure work. Billy was in great demand to judge these competitions, and this also provided him with the opportunity to size up the competing bands and decide whether to offer them his patronage. Ironically, the last time that Billy and his old boss, Bert Ralton, worked together was when they were asked to judge a dance band contest at the Tottenham Palais de Danse on 16th June 1926. Bert had recently returned to this country from his Australian tour, and would shortly be setting out on the South African tour during which he died tragically in a shooting accident.

It was normal by this time for Billy to perform at these contests his popular party trick of playing two pianos simultaneously, a feat that he had also incorporated into his stage act. On 29th April 1927 Billy attended Belle Vue, Manchester to judge the North of England Dance Band Contest with Horatio Nicholls, the popular songwriter and publisher. These are just two examples of the more important contests at which Billy was asked to adjudicate, but there were many many more.

Billy first put a band together to record four sides for the Vocalion Record Company in May 1926, and in the next four months they cut a further 16 sides. They called themselves Billy Mayerl and his Orchestra, and the records were made for dancing. One record reviewer, writing in a popular music publication, was ecstatic in his praise of these first sides, and commented that they were the best in the Vocalion List. 'There are numerous pianistic touches and solos, which once more show what a fine artist young Billy is.' Their next recording session for Vocalion was in October or November 1926, but this time they were known as Billy Mayerl and his 'Vocalion' Orchestra. Whether both bands featured precisely the same personnel is not known but it is likely that most of the musicians were unchanged. This Vocalion Orchestra made a total of 28 sides, spread over seven sessions, the last of which took place in April 1927. The absence of further recordings from this dance band is likely to be mainly a reflection of Billy's unavailability for rehearsals and recording due to his other commitments.

It is believed that the Billy's Vocalion Orchestra was actually a group originally formed by Drayson Marsh, an excellent pianist, who directed it. Billy was very impressed by them to the extent that he was prepared to lend them his name. They went on to win the Kew Dance Band Contest on 19th November 1926. He took a personal interest in their development, and managed to get them into a touring revue. They proved to be so successful that he was able to secure for them subsequently a long contract at the prestigious Astoria Ballroom in London's Charing Cross Road, which commenced on 6th February 1927. He also used them for a special concert at the Queen's Hall on 4th November 1926, when they appeared together with many other famous concert and variety artists.

Billy more or less distanced himself from the dance band business (apart from 'guest appearances') from 1927 onwards. He was at this time intent on furthering his variety act with Gwen Farrar, and with his composing activities, plus the School of Syncopation, he just couldn't have fitted any more in to his already sorely-stretched day (and night). Equally, it must be said, one gets the impression that he'd had his fill of dance band work and was slightly bored with it all.

He stayed away from band work until 1934, when he formed his own 26-strong orchestra for the show 'Sporting Love' at the Gaiety Theatre. He conducted the orchestra personally, and, since the show ran for 302 performances, it took up a lot of his time. For the Show 'Twenty to One' in 1935, Billy again provided the orchestra, but this time he delegated the conducting to George Windeatt because of his other commitments.

'Over She Goes' at the Saville Theatre in 1936 saw Billy once again conduct his own orchestra for 248 performances. This was followed by 'Crazy Days' in 1937 at the Shaftesbury Theatre, again with his own orchestra in the pit under his direction. During the run of 'Crazy Days' he took the Shaftesbury Theatre Orchestra into the HMV recording studio and made four sides of the show's hit tunes, including 'Love was Born' and 'Stranger in a Cup of Tea'.

1938 provided a change for Billy when he went on tour around the British Isles with his Claviers, starting in April of that year, and touring until August. The Claviers were a quartet and consisted initially of Billy Mayerl at a Challen grand piano with George Myddleton, Kathleen Heppell and Marian Payne playing Challen Multitone pianos. Miss Heppell was replaced by the very popular pianist and vocalist Dorothy Carless when they went on tour. Miss Payne became extremely well-known in later years as Marian McPartland, the jazz pianist. Billy led the group and therefore, in a sense, was back in the bandleading business once more. The debut performance by the Claviers was actually at Pagani's Restaurant in Great Portland Street, London, on the occasion of the first Annual Dinner and Cabaret of the Billy Mayerl School. This took place on Saturday, 26th March 1938, and the act received a rapturous reception on this first airing.

This type of combination was also used by Billy to accompany his last West End show, 'Runaway Love', but this time Billy played a Novachord, and was again assisted by pianists playing special Challen Multitone pianos. The musicians on this occasion were Irene Ashton, Mary McEwan, Christina Nelson and Christine Grosvenor. This combination recorded two selections from 'Runaway Love' for Decca in January 1940, but disbanded when the show at the Saville Theatre closed later in the year.

Billy returned to the London West End dance band scene after an absence of 13 years in 1941. When Sydney Lipton, whose band had been resident at Grosvenor House in Park Lane, was 'called up' for service in the RAF, the management invited Billy Mayerl to form a new band and take over as Musical Director. Billy was happy to accept this new appointment, since he himself had been turned down by the RAF, and was becoming restive. His activities for the musical theatre had been severely curtailed by the war, which by that time had entered a critical and dangerous phase, and he was anxious to get back to work.

The new Billy Mayerl Orchestra, which 'struck up' for the first time on 5th May 1941, consisted of a ten-piece combination of two pianos, three saxophones, three brass, string bass and drums. Once again, his long-time colleague George Myddleton was on the second piano, which enabled Billy to make a feature of their duet playing. Many special duet arrangements were written by him at this time and their performances became extremely popular with patrons. Billy and his Grosvenor House Orchestra recorded four sides for Decca on 24th July 1941, including 'Marigold', 'Nola' and 'Kitten on the Keys'. It seems that Billy couldn't forget his roots in syncopated piano music.

During Billy's residence at Grosvenor House he made a number of broadcasts with his orchestra direct from the underground ballroom, as well as a number of solo piano recitals from the studio. In addition, he recorded 12 sides for Decca, under the name of Billy Mayerl and his Forte Fingers, in their 'Music While You Work' series. The Forte Fingers was a quartet that comprised Billy on piano, George Elliott (guitar), Wally Morris (string bass) and Reggie Mills (drums).

Billy and Jill left their house in the country when he accepted the Grosvenor appointment, and moved into a suite on the premises provided for them by the hotel Management. It was necessary, of course, for Billy to live in, but being on the spot all the time gave him very little opportunity for relaxation. This, coupled with his heavy workload, being in the public eye all the time and the stress of frequent air raids, meant that after a time Billy's health started to suffer. He experienced a number of minor nervous breakdowns during 1942-43 that culminated in a complete collapse and total breakdown in July 1944.

It was decided, therefore, on medical advice, that the only remedy would be a complete rest, which was quite impossible in London at that time. Billy resigned his post at the Grosvenor, and he and Jill moved into a rented house in Bournemouth, located at 'Challow Dene', Beccleugh, Luish Road, Branksome. Thus, Billy's renaissance as a big-time bandleader was tragically brought to a halt, and the West End was deprived of one of its most gifted musicians.

Happily, the house in Branksome had a lovely garden, which it was felt would help to speed Billy's recovery. His health gradually improved and he started composing again. 'The Forgotten Forest' was composed in Branksome, possibly inspired by the extensive woodlands of the area or even by the relatively close New Forest.

The Mayerls stayed in Bournemouth until a good recovery had been made, by which time the war had ended. It is believed that they moved back to their house in Hampstead early in 1945, where Billy continued his recuperation by gardening and a little composing, before joining the BBC in 1946. During this period he composed 'Resting', 'Evening Primrose' and the 'Autumn' and 'Winter' parts of his 'In My Garden' suites.

Billy returned to bandleading to a limited extent in the late Forties after his period of recuperation, but only for broadcasting purposes. The instrumentation was confined to small groups, i.e. trios and quartets. It was only after he returned from his Australian tour in 1950 that he increased his bandleading activities, but these were still confined to small groups for broadcast purposes (see Chapter 6). This continued until he retired from the BBC in 1956.

## Chapter Eight – Billy the Man

‘He was a lovely man who made lovely music.’ These were the words used by Steve Race to close the BBC’s 90th Birthday Tribute to Billy Mayerl in 1992. Was it as simple as that? What kind of man was Billy Mayerl?

There is no doubt in my mind that Billy Mayerl was some kind of a genius who could produce beautiful music almost literally ‘at the drop of a hat’. Music just seemed to flow from his fingertips, and the end result was mostly a pure delight. His piano compositions are indeed difficult to play, which may explain why they are not more universally popular, but the sense of achievement after having mastered the playing of one of them is difficult to describe. There is no doubt that he was a pianist’s pianist, but is that such a bad accolade? His music is not easy to classify, which is another good reason for its failure to find a greater recognition with the listening public. It is not jazz in the sense in which that word is used today. It is not classical, and there are still many musical snobs who would reject it without a fair hearing on that score alone. It does, however, contain elements of both these genres. Billy Mayerl’s music is, with a few exceptions, light music of a quite unique style. It grew out of ragtime music, but developed later into a much more complex and unique style, almost defying classification.

What about Billy Mayerl the man? Jill Mayerl, who should have known Billy better than anyone, wrote in 1974 that he was very even-tempered, ‘although it was easy to know when he was displeased. He was a perfectionist and a disciplinarian in his work, and he expected the people who worked for him to have the same principles. Music was his world and chief hobby and he liked nothing better than to have a schedule of music to write, for musical shows, preparing his various broadcasts, sometimes four programmes a week. When we first met, so many years ago, I realised that he was very ambitious and determined to reach the very top of his profession. His great charm was that he was very unassuming, kind and thoughtful ... he never changed his ways right to the end.’

He clearly enjoyed hard work and, having risen from humble beginnings to the very top, obviously appreciated what it could achieve. He loved to spend his spare time in the garden, and found it a very stimulating environment for his creative powers: hence, one assumes, the preponderance of flower titles for his compositions.

‘Short, dapper and alert’ was how a journalist once described Billy Mayerl in a 1938 edition of Radio Times. It must also be said that in later years the adjective ‘plump’ should be added to the above description. I confess this is not the image of Billy that I had carried in my mind’s eye for so many years: I thought, surely, this couldn’t be the man with a film star’s good looks who gazed at me from so many sheet music covers, and I admit to a slight feeling of disappointment when I first saw my idol of so many years in a 1950’s film clip.

Admittedly, he was not then in the best of health and showing signs of premature ageing. One suspects that the physical decline that ended with his untimely death in 1959 had already started. Yet everyone who knew him or met him speaks of a man with an electric personality, with boundless energy, and with an engaging twinkle in his eye. ‘The first impression I had of Billy Mayerl was of a very active man. He spoke quickly and moved even more quickly.’ This was the comment of a reasonably keen observer who met Billy in 1936. ‘He was a gregarious man who liked to be among people and was very good company.’ A comment from a dresser who attended Billy at the Theatre Royal, Birmingham in 1939 reads as follows: ‘Billy Mayerl was small and dapper, always jolly and good-natured. He was a perfect gentleman and a pleasure to work with.’

A pupil of Billy’s in 1953–4 found him to be ‘a most kind and considerate man who demonstrated patience in every aspect of his teaching, for I think he knew that, to the average pupil, his work and compositions would prove somewhat difficult.’ These comments, and many others like them, seem to be borne out not only by the written accounts in the School Magazines of Branch Meetings that he attended (which could be said to be biased or specially selected), but by countless independent reports from observers and ex-colleagues. There seems to be little doubt that he was a well-liked and respected man. He was also seen as part of the theatrical establishment and was a respected member of the Savage Club. Billy enjoyed a game of golf as well, but was an infrequent player because of his work commitments.

He had a dry sense of humour, beautifully illustrated by a comment he made to a pupil one day that he always played ‘Fireside Fusiliers’ with his slippers on! Billy, or Binkie, as Jill was apt to call him, appeared to be in love with his wife, but one gets the impression that she always came second to his love for music. This was probably not even a conscious decision on his part, but such was his all-embracing love for his music that he never ever seriously thought about it. Jill, for her part, seems to have worshipped the very ground he walked on, and reading posthumously her writings about Billy, one feels she could quite easily have been talking about some kind of demigod. They certainly appear to have been a well-matched pair who complemented each other happily. Clearly, Jill’s own musical background must have been of immense help in this respect.

My overall impression of Billy Mayerl, having by now looked in some detail at the pattern of his career, is that he was a mercurial character, with boundless nervous energy, who carried out all his plans and actions at breakneck speed. Even his piano playing was almost always fast and he took great pride in declaring, for instance, that he could play 'Kitten on the Keys' faster than anyone else. In fact, I consider that some of his renderings of his own compositions would have been improved if he had played them more slowly.

He seems to have become bored very easily, which probably accounts for his frequent changes of career pattern. Billy was born on 31st May 1902, under the star sign of Gemini, the sign of the twins. I am not well versed in astrology, but thought it could be interesting at least to consult a few tomes on the subject to see if he conformed to the accepted role model of a Gemini person. I gather that Gemini persons have two distinct sides to their changeable personality. This means that they can do two things at once with consistently less effort than it takes other people to do one. In other words, a Gemini is quite capable of juggling more balls in the air with less effort than any other person. I have to say that in this and a number of other ways Billy appears to be a classical fit for the Gemini personality. So good is the fit that I have begun to take astrology more seriously, practically overnight!

I am reminded also that Billy seems to have had a propensity for moving house. C. Corti Woodcock, writing in the School Magazine, commenting on this aspect of Billy, said: 'In the dozen years or so I've known him, I'm prepared to swear that Billy has had a like number of addresses. Moving house was practically a mania with him, and I often wondered just what his shareholding was in Pickfords.' That was in 1934! I shudder to think how many changes of residence he had after that! Incidentally, Billy called his first marital home 'Jazzaristrix', but all subsequent residences were known as 'Marigold Lodge', after his most successful composition, Marigold, of which he remarked: 'It's my bread, my butter and my jam!'

Jill Mayerl, reminiscing in the Billy Mayerl Circle Newsletter in 1978, said: 'Life with Billy seemed to become more and more difficult for me to adjust to, the pace got faster and faster all the time, in all sorts of ways, and day by day. However, I was not prepared when he came home from work one day and said that he had resigned from his job at the Savoy. I was surprised because I thought he was happy there, but when I asked why the decision, he said he was bored and wanted to try something different ... he didn't want to be an orchestral pianist all his life'.

She continued: 'Billy was always full of new ideas and ambitions and I felt he was doing far too much and everything was happening too quickly. [...] In later years I was surprised to hear that I was supposed to be the one who was ambitious and pushed Billy on. It certainly was not, and never had been true, and when I tried to stop him working, it was just a waste of time. He loved working and this seemed to be the reason for all his plans for the future to be fulfilled.'

For a person who, at least in the Twenties and Thirties, had such a relatively high public profile, it is amazing that so little information exists on Billy's life away from the limelight. I have interviewed several people who knew Billy in a professional capacity, who confessed that they knew little or nothing about Billy's private life. Obviously, this must have been the way Billy wanted it. There seems little doubt that behind the public persona lay a very private individual who was at some pains to keep it that way. Surprisingly, he has been reported as being an intensely shy and introverted man. He apparently found it very difficult to speak to a large audience and merely saying 'good night' at the end of a performance was an ordeal. Similarly, he would never participate in any publicity organised to promote his musical shows. It is perhaps difficult to understand how a person who has been in show business all his life could be introverted and shy at heart, and yet some of our most famous actors and actresses have also admitted to similar underlying personality traits off-stage. It seems that they possess the ability to take on the character of a totally different person for the time they are in the public eye.

In the above paragraphs we have just about come the closest that it seems possible to get, at this distance in time, to understanding the character and personality of Billy Mayerl. None of it detracts in any way from his undoubted genius for producing 'lovely music', a unique legacy to the world.

## Chapter Nine – Beyond the Hills

Billy Mayerl's health was failing seriously by the time he left the BBC in November 1956. The years of strain and overwork had caught up with him. He smoked very heavily and was tending to drink rather a lot. Both of these factors played an important part in his rapid deterioration and early death. It is interesting to reflect on why he seemed to be hell-bent on self-destruction. The generally held opinion is that Billy was suffering from frustration borne out of the knowledge that his particular brand of music had gone out of fashion. The war had changed everything: the big bands – with very few exceptions had died – rock and roll had arrived, and Elvis Presley was king. The general lowering of standards among musicians must also have been anathema to Billy. He didn't seem willing to change with the times, but instead kept firmly to his pre-war style of playing.

The titles of some of his compositions in the last three years of his life seem to indicate that he suspected he hadn't long to live. Titles such as 'Jill All Alone', 'Blue Shadows' and 'Waltz for a Lonely Heart' tell their own story, and indicate that he must have been acutely aware of the seriousness of his condition. However, although Billy went into semi-retirement when he left the BBC, he certainly didn't sit back and take it easy.

In characteristic fashion, he found a new cause to champion, that of British Light Music. Thus he was instrumental in setting up, with the aid of some of his many composer and musician friends, The Light Music Society in April 1957. This had Eric Coates as its first President, and its declared objectives were: 'To foster the interests of Light Music throughout the world and to obtain increased facilities for those interested in this form of culture by means of broadcasting, recording and general performances'. Billy himself was officially Vice-Chairman, but also acted as Editor of the Society's excellent quarterly magazine, a well-produced authoritative journal of some 24 pages about A5 in size. This gave him a convenient vehicle for expressing his opinions on various music issues of the day, as well as a soapbox for berating members who were not pulling their weight. His editorial in the first issue leaves us in no doubt as to what Billy thought of the contemporary music scene in 1957: 'In case you think I've missed something for those who like their music played on a dustbin lid, a washboard, or a canteen cabbage cauldron, there is also a wide choice'.

Meetings of The Light Music Society were held monthly at the Alliance Hall in Westminster, London except in the summer months of May, June, July and August. It is believed that even in its heyday the total membership could be measured in hundreds rather than thousands, and there was always a constant struggle to recruit new members. However, the quality of the membership was impressive and the list of members read like a veritable Who's Who of the Light Music Establishment. The Society was still in existence well into the 1960s, so the crusading efforts of Billy, who died in 1959, were clearly not in vain. A fascinating postscript to the above account concerns an orchestral piece called 'Alliance Variations' written in celebration of The Light Music Society and intended to be performed on suitable occasions by one of the BBC orchestras. It seems to have been planned as a co-operative effort between at least two composers. Billy contributed the Prelude, which we understand was completed just two days before he died. His publishers, Inter Art Music, together with musician colleagues decided subsequently, as a tribute to Billy, to rename it 'Finale', which name it now carries. The work was first performed by the BBC Concert Orchestra in early April 1959 about two weeks after Billy's death. It was broadcast once more on the BBC Light Programme on 20th October 1965 in the series 'Music All The Way', again by the BBC Concert Orchestra under the baton of Robert Farnon. The billing in Radio Times referred to it as 'Alliance Variations' (based on a theme by Arthur Duckworth) in two movements: Jig (Robert Docker) and Finale (Billy Mayerl).

Billy Mayerl died on 25th March 1959 at 'Marigold Lodge', Pyebush Lane, Beaconsfield. The stated causes of death on his death certificate were coronary thrombosis and coronary arteriosclerosis. The following details of Billy's death are attributed to Jill Mayerl.

Towards the end Billy had been staying in a nursing home. His heart condition was now such that the slightest exertion was painful and would cause him breathing difficulties. In spite of his condition, he desperately wanted to spend his last days at home, at 'Marigold Lodge' where he could at least enjoy looking out onto his garden. His doctor reluctantly agreed, on the strict understanding that he would live completely on the ground floor, and on no account make any attempt to climb the stairs. About two weeks before he died, Billy arrived back home and during his waking hours pottered quietly about the house. However, he had still had thoughts about composing, and he was bothered by a tune running through his head that he was anxious to get down on paper. Normally, when he was composing, Billy didn't need the help of a piano keyboard, he could generally visualise all the notes and their sounds in his head. On the odd occasion when he was having difficulties he liked to sit at an old upright piano that was kept in his upstairs study, and work out the final details. Billy would far rather sit at this upright when composing than at his splendid Steinway grand that had always occupied pride of place in the Lounge.

Billy became preoccupied with trying out his latest composition on the upstairs piano, but Jill could not be prevailed upon to consider it, let alone allow it. On the day he died, Jill had left the house for a few minutes and when she returned Billy was nowhere to be found on the ground floor. With an ever-increasing sense of impending disaster, Jill rushed upstairs, and to her horror found Billy in a heap on the top landing, a few feet away from the upright piano. The master's restless and prodigious talent was finally stilled.

We shall never know what final melody might have flowed from the maestro's mind had he been allowed to commit it to manuscript paper. However, it wasn't to be, and we have to be content with the legacy of more than a thousand compositions and arrangements he left behind for posterity, many of them masterpieces of their genre. Billy was cremated at Golders Green Crematorium on Tuesday, 31st March 1959, the day immediately following the Easter holiday, and his ashes were scattered on the Cedar Lawn.

In May 1960 a variety of bush rose called 'Peace' was planted in Rose bed B, in his memory, together with a small bronze plaque bearing the inscription 'IN LOVING MEMORY OF BILLY MAYERL, 1902-1959.' Sadly, by 1969 the plaque had become broken and was eventually removed by the crematorium staff. It was never replaced. There is no entry for Billy Mayerl in the Book of Remembrance.

Obituary notices appeared in five national daily newspapers on 28th March 1959, but only The Times came close to doing him justice. Interestingly, they described him as 'one who could conjure up, at will, an elusive and catchy tune to set the foot a-tapping'. Not bad really! The definitive obituary notice, however, as one might expect, appeared in Melody Maker on 4th April 1959:

'Pianist Billy Mayerl, who made syncopation his trade mark, died of a heart attack at his home at Beaconsfield on March 25th. He was 56. Plump, affable with a ready smile, Billy built his reputation on the individuality of his sparkling rhythmic style. Advertising his postal course through the world, he taught many thousands of people of all nationalities during the 30 year existence of his school of syncopation, which closed two years ago. A Londoner trained at Trinity College, Billy gave classical recitals at leading concert halls in the Metropolis in 1918 and 1920. Turning to jazz, he joined the pioneering Savoy Havana Band where he became a featured artist, eventually going out on tours as a solo attraction. A composer of considerable merit in the lighter vein, his pieces included his breezy signature tune, Marigold. He wrote mood background music for many films. For 30 years he recorded and broadcast constantly as a soloist and bandleader. He was last on the air three months ago. Billy, who was cremated at Golders Green on Tuesday, leaves a widow'.

Jill Mayerl survived her husband by 25 years and died at Brighton General Hospital on 21st August 1984. It is understood that the royalties on all of Billy Mayerl's compositions were bequeathed by Jill to the Performing Rights Society Members' Fund (which assists needy and ex-members of the composing profession), and the copyrights to the PRS itself. In addition, in 1963 Jill created a Bursary at Trinity College in his memory, open to both girls and boys. The Bursary is awarded to instrumentalists of outstanding ability who might want to make music their profession. It allows for three years' study, with the possibility of a fourth year if it would be advantageous, at the discretion of the college.

Three months after Billy's death, his old colleagues at the BBC broadcast a tribute to him, which went out on Sunday, 14th June 1959. It was on the Home Service and featured the London Theatre Orchestra under Reginald Kilbey, with William Davies at the piano.

The programme was as follows:

Bats in the Belfry	Valse Caprice (Cyril Scott, arr. BM)
Clubs, Hearts and Spades (Four Aces Suite)	Song of the Fir Tree (arr. Hubert Bath)
Balearic Episode	Minuet by Candlelight
Fireside Fusiliers	Maids of Honour (arr. Robert Docker)

This was a very fair tribute, and I'm sure that Billy Mayerl would have been very pleased!