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Al Bowlly: The Jazzy, Hellenic Prince of 'M

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TORY

Modern Style Singing' Conquered U.K.

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

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

In July 1928, Fred Elizalde invited Bowlly to join his band at the Savoy Hotel in London. Soon after his arrival, Bowlly on August 18, 1928, recorded his first solo vocal performance, a cover of Irving Berlin's, "Blue Skies". John Bush underscores, in his online biography of Al Bowlly, the sheer speed at which Bowlly's career took off, "Just one year after his 1927 debut recording date in Berlin, Bowlly arrived in London for the first time... That year, "If I Had You" became one of the first popular songs by an English jazz band to become renowned in America as well... During the mid-'30s, such songs as "Blue Moon," "Easy to Love," "I've Got You Under My Skin" and "My Melancholy Baby" were sizable American successes — so much so that Bowlly gained his own radio series on NBC."

While the Fred Elizalde Orchestra disbanded in 1930, the Bowlly's popularity seemed unlimited. In November 1930, Bowlly signed a recording contract with Ray Noble, who was musical director at His Master's Voice (HMV) studios, which led to his recording some

500 songs over the next four years. Bowlly was no one's puppet. In May 1931, he signed another contract and joined a new band put together by Roy Fox at the Monseigneur Restaurant located in Piccadilly, London. Bowlly would spend much of his day with the Noble in the HMV studios rehearsing and recording while at night he performed live on the plush Monseigneur stage. Through record sales and radio performances, Al Bowlly was inundated with offers to tour Great Britain and elsewhere.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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