

DANCE BAND PERSONALITIES

Jay Wilbur

By Barry McCanna

When the discography of British Dance Bands On Record, by Brian Rust and Sandy Forbes, was published in 1987 one benefit was that collectors, including me, were able to appreciate properly the enormous contribution which had been made by hitherto neglected figures as Jay Wilbur. By rights, he should have been just as familiar as Ambrose, Jack Hylton and Jack Payne, all household names in the thirties. His recorded output was equally prolific, his choice of material just as discriminating and the results were issued on cut-price labels such as the 7-inch Victory and its successors the 8-inch Eclipse and the 9-inch Crown. Since these could be bought only in Woolworths, initially for sixpence a record (the equivalent of four for 10p in today's currency!), it might have been reasonable to assume that they would be lacking in quality. Nothing could be further from the truth, as witness those who bought them then and those who search for them now.

His neglect is ironic because as a studio director he was able to call on the cream of London's dance band musicians. Ambrose was one society bandleader who disliked his highly-paid personnel moonlighting (or more appropriately daylighting!) in this way, although there was nothing he could do to stop them. But because Wilbur's personnel assembled for recording purposes only, and most of the sides appeared under a bewildering variety of pseudonyms, he did not establish himself as a competing force in his own right until the mid-thirties, by which time the pecking order was well established.

James Edward Wilbur was born in Bournemouth, the year being given as 1898. Both parents worked for Carl Rosa, Britain's oldest opera company, which held a Royal Warrant from Queen Victoria. His father was a member of the orchestra and his mother was the wardrobe mistress. In his formative years Jay took singing lessons, became a soloist in the local church choir when he was 11, and began studying the piano. In his early teens he featured in Bluebell in Fairyland, a stage musical written by Sir Seymour Hicks in 1901 and revived regularly at Christmas. He was also involved in a vaudeville act called Casey's Court, part of which required him to be wheeled on stage. It has been claimed that the lad pushing the soap box was none other than Charlie Chaplin. If so, this could not have been later than 1910, the year Chaplin went to America with Fred Karno's company.

Young Jay Wilbur was stagestruck, and his seaside location presented a wide range of opportunities, from straight theatre to variety. He was much in demand as a boy soprano, particularly since he could accompany himself. When he was 16 and his voice broke he decided to concentrate on the piano. This was a fortuitous decision, because the movie business was developing rapidly, and silent films needed a separate musical accompaniment. According to one account, by 1912 Jay had been chosen to play the piano in some of London's early cinemas, went on to form one of the first cinema orchestras and developed a system of cue sheets to ensure the music was consistent with the action. However, this seems inconsistent with his prior history, and raises the question whether his year of birth should be earlier than that normally quoted.

Whatever the truth of the matter, the need to concentrate from close range and for prolonged periods on the poor quality images projected on-screen by the early "flicks" was not beneficial to the eyesight. As a result, when conscription was introduced in 1916 to replace the volunteers who had been slaughtered in the trenches during the early part of the First World War, Jay was classified C3 and given the job of a coppersmith. The purpose of this eluded me, but my wife suggested that it involved making bullet casings, and that would seem an inspired guess. Although forced to abandon a burgeoning career in the cinema, he was still able to continue playing, albeit at fashionable parties and in restaurants after he'd finished work for the day.

In 1919, the year the Original Dixieland Jazz Band toured England, Jay formed his own small dance band, and worked on the Continent for a couple of years. When he came back to England he became the musical director for the Ashton & Mitchell's Agency, and supplied dance orchestras for society venues. This led to a chance meeting with Edward, Prince of Wales, who was an active socialite and always keen to try his hand on the drum kit, often to the despair of the regular percussionist, to say nothing of the band. That encounter resulted in Jay playing at Buckingham Palace on several occasions.

After he left the agency he joined Emlyn Thomas' London Band, and in September 1923 he participated in their first recording session, although the three titles cut that day were not issued. He then reformed his own band, and after various London venues including the Piccadilly and Savoy Hotels, he returned to the Continent and played at the Hotel Bristol in Oslo and the casino in Spa, Belgium. Following that, he was asked to provide

the ship's orchestra for a luxury cruise to the West Indies. When the liner berthed at New York he took the opportunity to meet as many of that city's bandleaders and musicians as possible. They included Paul Whiteman and André Kostelanetz, and the experience brought home to him the growing importance of orchestration to successful dance band performance.

The next firm date is March 1926, when he recorded two sides with Van's Ten, a numerically correct tag for Leon Van Straten's Orchestra. He was involved in further recording sessions with them but only those for the cardboard-based Duophone label were productive. He was replaced during February 1927, and this was probably when he again assembled his own band, this time to play at the Tricity Restaurant in the Strand, where he took over from Ben Blue and his Band. He left in the autumn of 1928, and was succeeded by Joe Kosky (who later, as Joe Kaye, played violin in Nat Star's band). The reason for his departure was to take up the post of musical director with Dominion Gramophone Records Ltd., a newly-formed company with a share capital of £150,000. This is perhaps a good point at which to mention the persistent rumour that Jay's surname was actually Blinco, because whether or not that was the case, it is the name James Edward Wilbur that appeared in the list of the board of directors of the company.

The studio orchestra which he put together for Dominion featured a highly sought-after first trumpet in the person of Max Goldberg, with whom he had played previously, and who at that time was recording with Arthur Rosebery's Kit-Cat Dance Band, Jay Whidden's Band and Bert Firman's various ensembles. Tony Thorpe who, like Max, later joined Ambrose's band, was on trombone and the pianist was Billy Thorburn. Most of their recordings were issued under pseudonyms, no doubt to make it appear that Dominion was a larger enterprise than was the case. They also provided the musical accompaniment to various singers (including a risqué Elsie Carlisle, discreetly masquerading under the nom-du-disque of Amy Brunton). Unfortunately the label barely had time to establish itself before the Wall Street crash, and it was an early victim of the Great Depression. Having begun with high hopes, by mid-1930 the Dominion Company had ceased trading.

One door had shut but, true to the old saying, another one opened almost immediately. In July 1930 Jay Wilbur announced in *The Melody Maker* that he had accepted the position of musical director to the Crystalate Gramophone Manufacturing Co. Ltd. of Tonbridge, Kent. As established producers of the cut-price Imperial and Victory labels they were far better placed than Dominion had been to weather the economic storm. Furthermore they were keen to expand their British dance band output, rather than continuing to be dependent on American masters, and had just opened their new recording studios in Broadhurst Gardens, West Hampstead for that purpose. The colour of the Imperial label was changed from mauve to red to mark the new era, and Jay began an association that was to last for thirteen years.

One of his first credited sides, Adeline on Imperial 2355, is interesting, because two takes were issued. The first take employed the vocal trio of Al Bowlly, Les Allen and Jack Plant, but a later take 4 is purely instrumental, and both are well worth looking out for.

At the end of January 1931 the last Victory side was cut, and that label was superseded by Eclipse, together with a proliferation of the pseudonyms under which Jay's recordings were sold in Woolworths. The Hottentots and The Biltmore Players were joined by The Ambassadors Twelve, The Connecticut Collegians and The Radio Serenaders to name but a few. As mentioned already, he appeared under his own name on Imperial, but towards the end of 1932 that practice ceased and the label became dedicated solely to Jack Payne before being phased out altogether at the beginning of 1934. His recordings continued to be released on Eclipse, still mainly under aliases, and were featured also on some Broadcast 4-in-1 sides but in mid-1933 he reappeared under his own name on the new Rex label (which was styled "The King Of Records").

The final stage of this revamp took place in mid-1935, just as the Eclipse label passed its one-thousandth issue, after which it was discontinued and replaced by Crown. This new entry (out of the same stable as Imperial and Rex) maintained the practice of cloaking Jay Wilbur's identity. Even more pseudonyms were generated for the purpose, of which perhaps Manuel Espinosa and his Rumba Band was the most exotic! In 1937 Crystalate was acquired by Decca, at which point the Crown label was discontinued.

In the meantime Jay had secured his own radio programme on the strength of his recording success. Radio was not an entirely new medium to him, because he had begun broadcasting with small string orchestras in 1927, the year the BBC became a public corporation. Then however light music had been seen as a necessary evil, now it was de rigueur. As a result of the popularity of *Melody From The Sky*, which began in April 1936, Jay continued to broadcast - most memorably in the series *Music While You Work* and the wartime comedy series *Hi Gang*, which was broadcast from Bristol, whence the BBC Variety Department had

been evacuated on the outbreak of hostilities.

The latter programme featured the American couple Ben Lyon and Bebe Daniels, who had settled in England, as well as Vic Oliver, the son of an Austrian baron, who had begun his career as a conductor and classical violinist. It was when the latter turned his talents to comedy that he met and married a young chorus girl, thereby becoming Winston Churchill's son-in-law! The fast pace of the show was exemplified by its theme tune I'm Just Wild About Harry, and Wilbur was assisted by vocalists Sam Browne and The Greene Sisters. One measure of its success was that the cast starred in a 1941 film adaptation also entitled Hi Gang.

In May 1942 the series finished, after which he and his band toured extensively as part of the war effort. In consequence recording sessions, now with his Hi Gang Orchestra, became far less frequent, finishing in September 1943. The war was not without its tribulations; his son, an aerial photographer for the RAF, had been killed in 1940 at the age of 21. It seems probable that it was this loss, coupled with an unremitting work schedule, which led to a deterioration in his health and eventually he was ordered to take it easy.

That was the end of an era, not just for Jay Wilbur, but for dance bands generally. On his return he faced a very different scene, to which he adapted with typical resilience by carving out a new career in light orchestral music. He left England in 1946 for New Zealand, resettled in Australia in 1948, and broadcast regularly with his 18-piece orchestra in a programme called Music Hath Charms. But his wanderlust continued, and in 1958 he moved to Capetown, where he broadcast on Springbok Radio with his Firestone Strings. He died in Capetown in 1970.

Unlike some other band leaders, Jay Wilbur was very highly regarded by those who had the pleasure of recording under his direction. One of them recalled his efficiency; there were none of the usual tests or changing position for balance. He knew what he wanted and he knew how to get it. The musicians, whose studio work was sandwiched in between live evening appearances, knew that they could get on with the job in hand and not have to hang about unnecessarily. There were many band leaders who insisted that their own name had to be carried on the label. Jay Wilbur knew that what mattered above all else was the music, and that is what he provided in abundance.

I know of only one LP devoted to Jay Wilbur, which was Hi! Gang on Decca Recollections RFL 21. Since the advent of CDs Vocalion has issued three volumes, namely Sing, Baby, Sing (CDEA 6016), We'll Meet Again (CDEA 6071) which was centred on the Rex recordings and from my liner notes for which this article has been adapted, and Round About Regent Street (CDEA 6090) which concentrated on the Crown era. Timeless mine the same seam on CBC 1-047, which compilation comprises recordings by the Rhythm Rascals and The Swing Rhythm Boys, plus Sid Phillips. It's also worth bearing in mind that Jay Wilbur directed the studio orchestra accompanying singers on the Rex roster, including Bebe Daniels and Elsie Carlisle. That is but a fraction of the enormous legacy of his recordings, yet they stand as testimony to his work as a true professional.

Barry McCanna © August 2005