

Chris Ellis - Got My Mind On Music

As told to Mark Berresford

Chris Ellis has been one of the driving forces in making classic jazz and dance band recordings of the 1920s and 1930s available to new audiences, first through his many years of producing LPs for EMI, and latterly via his CD reissues, initially for Timeless, and then for Retrieval, a company that he co-founded. However, that is the tip of a very large iceberg; add to that his years of performing as a singer with some of the best musicians in the business, and his work with legendary performers such as Elisabeth Welch, Adelaide Hall and Ginger Rogers, and there emerges a picture of a man with a lifetime spent in making and sharing the music he loves. Just a few minutes in Chris's company opens into a world where he rubbed shoulders with such diverse performers as Eva Taylor, Lew Stone, Josephine Baker, The Beatles and Jessie Matthews.

I've known Chris for the best part of 40 years and his enthusiasm is undiminished, despite being in his 87th year. We've spent many hours together, talking, playing records, digging in boxes of 78s at the Waterlooplein antiques market in Amsterdam, but most of all talking about music and the personalities he's encountered in his long career. It seemed only right and proper to share some of those stories (at least the ones we can safely print!) with the readers of VJM, so in April 2014 I sat Chris down after a good meal and pressed the 'record' button... MB

I was born on Christmas Day in 1928 in Shrewsbury, Shropshire and got into liking jazz when I was about 13 or 14. I lived with my mother and grandmother – my father lived in New York - but in about 1937 Gran moved to London. It meant that I went to live with my mother and stepfather in Shrewsbury. With Gran went the family gramophone and collection of records. There were two distinct piles of records – the 'good' records, which included people like Caruso, which I was not allowed to touch, and the old Jack Hyltons, Layton and Johnstones etcetera which had been bought by my younger uncles and aunts in the late 1920s and early 1930s, which I was allowed to play. In fact I was encouraged, because my youngest uncle was born crippled, but one of his great joys – and he didn't have many in his life – was that he loved his music. You couldn't play him anything sad – he'd cry – and he had his favourites. One of his and my favourites was **Hi-Diddle-Didde** by George Olsen. The reverse had no words and no catchy tune, so we never played it. Not until I was about 16 and played it out of belated curiosity did I find out I'd been living with the great Coon-Sanders version of **Deep Henderson!**

When Gran went to London the gramophone and the records went with her. In 1940 she had to come back from London because of the impossibility of her carrying uncle Doug to the air raid shelters during the Blitz. The gramophone and, for some strange reason, the 'good' records didn't come back but the others did. And the weird thing was there was one record which quite definitely wasn't there before – the Red Nichols Five Pennies of **Original Dixieland One-Step** and **Imagination**. At that point I had no idea that there was more music like this or if it was a one-off. A year later an uncle in the Air Force was killed and aunt Lou gave me a pile of his records, most of which were

immediately pre-war pop songs by Ambrose and the like but in among them was the Bob Crosby Bob Cats of **Jazz Me Blues** and **Washington and Lee Swing**, and I thought 'Wait a minute, this is the same sort of thing as the Red Nichols – what is this about?' Shortly after I came home from school and the radio was on – Radio Rhythm Club, weekly programme of jazz records. I persuaded my mum to let me listen this each week, complete with pencil and paper, and this is where I first heard the names of Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, the ODJB etc.

As far as records were concerned they were expensive – 5/4 1/2d (27 p) for a Parlophone Rhythm Style 78 - if you could find them. You have to remember that none of the record companies were pressing items from the back catalogue – there was a severe shellac shortage. The catalogues were full of the most mouthwatering records – there were still Parlophone E- series of Clarence Williams in the catalogue, but anything older than last week might as well have not been there. Our local record shop was buying in 78s for scrap and the old dragon who owned it had a young girl named Ailsa working behind the counter. A man came in with a pile of records to sell for scrap, put them down on the counter, Ailsa counted them – it was 1 1/2d each for 10 inch and 2 1/2d for 12 inch, but laminates – no use whatsoever.



Chris Ellis, aged 21. This and all other photos (unless stated) courtesy of Chris Ellis.



Chris singing with the Magnolia Jazz Band, Shrewsbury, early 1950s.

I was standing there looking as she paid him and I nearly dropped dead – the top record was a Victor by the ODJB **Royal Garden Blues**. I'd never even seen a Victor, let alone an ODJB, so I picked out a shilling's worth – 8 records. Ailsa says "Here, give me that shilling back and go before the old dragon comes back – if she finds out I'm doing this I've lost my job." Among the eight was the Victor of **Who's Sorry Now** and **Snake's Hips** by the OM5, Thomas Waller and Morris Hot Babies **Savannah Blues** and **Won't You Take Me Home** on HMV, the Victor Benson Orchestra of **House of David Blues**, a purple Parlophone of Boyd Senter's **Bluin' the Blues** and **Clarinet Tickle** with wonderful Eddie Lang – but I'd no idea who Eddie Lang was at that point! They are all still on my shelf to this day. This gave me the idea that maybe I should be looking in second-hand stores – and that's how I started junkshopping!

MB – Did you have any collector friends at this time?

No. The first fellow traveller I met was when I went to work – I was 15 and I worked for the Great Western Railway as an enquiry clerk at Shrewsbury station. Also working there was a rather snooty older guy named Len Page and I came in one day with a new 'find' and he made some sneering remark about it probably being the latest pop hit. I said "No, I don't buy that sort of music – this is jazz". "Oh" he said, and it turned out that he was a jazz fan too. He'd been evacuated from Westcliff-on-Sea in Essex. A year or so later Len was called up to do his National Service and his parents moved back to Essex and shortly after – in 1947 - I was called up myself. I found myself stationed in London, which meant that it was easy to get down to Westcliff on Sea, and on Saturdays I would go over to Len's and we go junkshopping and playing records together. I remember on one of those trips finding the Margaret Johnson of E **Flat Blues** in Southend, and I

bought new over the counter the Erskine Tate **Static Strut** and **Stomp Off Let's Go**. Len went crazy when he heard it so he went out to buy a copy too and that's when we discovered that two takes of **Stomp Off Let's Go** had been dubbed on the Brunswick issue – no one believed us for years! Len was lucky enough to get the rare take and I didn't find one of my own until a couple of years ago.

During my National Service, I had spent many happy evenings at places like the Humphrey Lyttleton Club, and heard a lot of live Trad jazz – people like Freddy Randall, Humph and the like, and Len Page had by then become the banjoist of the Crane River Jazz Band – I don't think John R.T. (Davies) was with them at that point – he was still doing his National Service. I returned to Shrewsbury, and went back to singing with a local dance band, which I'd been doing since I was 16, but I wanted something more, so when a trumpeter called Mike Farren moved to town we started a Trad band. Sadly he died a couple of years later of a rare blood condition. I also met a guy called Dave Lambert – Dave was in the Army based locally, and when he was demobbed would cycle from Stoke Newington in London up to Shrewsbury and I in turn would go down to stay in London and we'd go out junkshopping. We'd come back tottering under the weight of 78s and from then on the collection grew.

In 1960 or '61 I was working as an ice cream supervisor for Lyons in Shrewsbury and bored out of my head. It was a good job but it was so boring; I wanted something to do with music but I had no training – I still can't read music. I wrote to all the major record companies but only EMI had the politeness to reply – 'nothing at the moment but we'll keep your details.' Amazingly a few weeks later I got a letter to say they had a vacancy and would I like to go down and see them. The vacancy they had was basically the office boy – a very overage office boy! The wages were less than I was earning in Shrewsbury, plus I was earning a tidy sum on the side singing with the Magnolia Jazz Band, and all that had to go. No, it wasn't the THE Magnolia Jazz Band – that was Mick Mulligan, but they were good – once we were billed as the Mongolian Jazz Band – I wish I still had the poster! So I moved to London for £11 gross a week, which after tax and insurance came down to £8, out of which I had to pay rent, food, everything else. All my friends thought I was mad.

At EMI I met Neville Skrimshire – 'Skrim' - he did all the EMI sponsored radio promotions on Radio Luxemburg – he was introduced to me as "He's our jazz expert." Considering his involvement with George Webb and others I was quite prepared to believe that. He was not prepared to believe that I was anything but an impostor, and for the next few weeks I got catechised whilst he found out if I knew anything about jazz. Once he found out I did he was my 'open Sesame'. A great guy – wonderful rhythm guitarist, not a soloist, but when you'd got Skrim behind you, you could lean safely right back on that beat and he was there, safe as houses. Quite apart from which he knew everybody- for example every Monday he would have lunch with Brian Rust, and he introduced me. Through him I met John R.T. Davies, Ron Jewson, Norman Stevens, Laurie Wright and Pete Seago, the inner circle of London collectors.

When I first arrived in London the last thing I was thinking about doing was trying to sing. I love singing – I'd rather sing than eat – but I didn't think I stood a cat in hell's chance of getting work singing in the 'Big City.' It was Skrim again who got me my first chance – he was still playing guitar on all sorts of sessions here and there and one evening he said he doing a little session that night at a club in the Old Brompton Road run by a guy called Alan Leat. Alan was a very bad guitar player but he had a good ear for musicians and got very good people down there, and



John Altman, Digby Fairweather and Chris Ellis at Hamburger Heaven, Old Brompton Road. Photo courtesy John Altman

Skrim said "Why don't you come down and listen?" There was Fred Hunt on piano – a beautiful player – Dave Shepherd on clarinet and Al Wynette on trumpet. It was a great night and so I started going down regularly and often took some friends, and there came a point when it was going to be a birthday of one of my friends and she was living in a great big old flat in a near-empty block, because the leases were running out and it was going to be redeveloped. She said 'Do you think the boys will come over to play for my birthday?' So I said "you'd better ask them yourself!" So these top musicians came to her birthday party as did a couple of old friends who knew me from Shrewsbury who knew I could sing. One of them said "Oh, come on, do a number." I can't remember what I sang but at the end of it one of the band said 'Why didn't you tell us you sang? You're singing with us next week.'

One thing I'm proud of is I never ever looked for a job singing – it was always some who said "Would you...?" One of the regular jobs I landed, basically thanks to Skrim, was working for Peter Boizot, who founded Pizza Express but also ran a chain called Hamburger Heaven, including one in the Old Brompton Road. He put me in there with Skrim, Alan Leat and A.N. Other musician, which could be variable – you never knew, and we did that gig for years. My favourite musician among the people there was John Altman, who is a master of all the reeds, but his baritone playing is out of this world, as is his breadth of knowledge of popular songs. To give you an example - I'd be singing 'September in the Rain' and John would be behind me on baritone, quoting different numbers with a wicked grin on his

face, and every number he was quoting from was by Harry Warren who wrote 'September in the Rain.' There aren't many people who could do that!

In the meantime I moved from general dogsbody to EMI's Complaints Department, which was terrible, so I talked my way into the role of Assistant Manager, British Pop Promotion, just before the Beatles arrived. I was promoting Cliff Richard, The Shadows, and eventually The Beatles. If I had kept a fraction of what went through my hands I would be incredibly rich. Every white label test pressing of every single and LP came through my hands and I could have kept them all. One of my jobs to place the first pressing orders with Hayes and to apply for gold discs to the New Musical Express, who organized them in those days. George Martin's office would ring down to say they had a new Beatles coming and I immediately apply for a gold disc because we'd have a million sold before anything went into the shops. In the meantime I discovered that we had joint rights with CBS on the old Okeh catalogue up to mid-1931, I think. The one proviso was that if they were used they had to be sold at full price, but at that stage nobody was doing anything. So I asked if I could have a go, but was told that anyone who had touched it in the last few years had lost money, but if I wanted to do it in my own time, OK, but if it loses money then they'll stop it. So in 1962 or 1963 I started the Parlophone Jazz Classic series. The first one was called 'Jazz in the Making' and I got into trouble because I used the 12" Columbia of **Tiger Rag** by the ODJB, and this was a Parlophone issue.

At that point the transfers were done at Abbey Road, and they were done by a very nice man called Lawrie Bamber, and he had been an engineer for years – he told me he had been the engineer on the 1934 Joe Venuti London sessions, and he was very close to retirement and was working out his time in Room 13, the Transfer Room. When Lawrie retired they gave the work to a man called Gadbsy-Toni, highly respected in classical circles for his transfer work, but he hated anything not classical. By then I was landed with Music for Pleasure as well, and the first album he had to do for me was an MFP of Paul Robeson, and I wasn't happy – it was obvious he hadn't paid any attention to it at all. I went to see Ken Townsend, who was in charge of the studios and told him I wasn't happy with his work and that he had a guy there working as a cutter but I knew that he could do transfer work and loved the music and that was Johnny Wadley. I got Johnny to do the transfers but I soon realized that the top range of his hearing had gone completely, so it ended up with me setting all the equalisations. Johnny just pushed the buttons – I wasn't allowed to! We were told to roll everything off at 4000 kHz but I disregarded that and recall that Lew Stone's *Caranga* peaked at 17k – I told them that we couldn't do these heavy top cuts because they sounded as if the music was coming through heavy blankets. The guy who designed the equipment at Abbey Road was a genius, but he left without telling anybody how to fully use it! So I was mucking around one day and thought "I wonder what this does?" I discovered that there was a notch filter, but I didn't know what it was at the time and nobody had used it. I realized that I could hone in on certain areas and take out noise and hiss

and leave the top open. I'd already discovered that if you use different-sized styli you got rid of needle chatter. I'd also had installed a turntable that played in reverse on the theory that maybe the groove wall on one side wouldn't be as worn as the other, so slowly I took charge. I was halfway through the Louis Armstrong Hot Fives and Sevens when Johnny Wadley decided to leave and go it alone; luckily there was a guy called Peter Bown who had been one of the top 'pop' engineers but whose tastes were a little passé by then but he was a nice guy and was prepared to do the button-pushing.

When I first started at EMI there were still a lot of people there who had been there pre-EMI, like lovely Bob Dockerill, who had started as an office boy at 14 years old at Columbia's City Road office in about 1916, and went on until he was 80. When they left City Road and moved to Hayes because of the war (WW2) they were told to leave everything where it was. Bob disobeyed this and brought two tea chests containing Regal and Columbia catalogues; if he hadn't brought those we wouldn't have a single catalogue! And they told him off for bringing them! There was still a lot of old rivalries when I started – "Oh, he's a Columbia man" or "Oh, he's an HMV man" – that still went on. George Port, who was in charge of the archives in those days was definitely an HMV man, and for the first few years after the merger, nothing went into the archive from Columbia or Parlophone, even post-EMI material; this went on for ages until somebody realised what was happening and said "Hey! This is the EMI Library, not the HMV Library!" So I'd go to pull



Chris and John Wadley in Room 13 at EMI's Abbey Road studios.

something out from pre-1933 on Columbia or Parlophone only to be told "We haven't got it." I personally rescued the only surviving Columbia recording day books from Abbey Road – they were about to be dumped in the furnace! There was an unfinished one from about 1924 to the beginning of 1926, then there was one from 1926 which went right on through into the 1940s. For years I had them in my office. Up until finding them we couldn't date any Columbia sessions accurately, and it's through them I can state categorically, despite what the books say – that the 1930 Columbia Noble Sissles are all dubs. The ledgers give the date that the transfers were done, because the recording level was too high and by then the band had gone back to America.

One day I got a phone call from Laurie Wright, who I already knew through Storyville magazine – I was one of the original 'Storyville Team' but I had to drop out very quickly because of my work at EMI; I was often working on Sundays and couldn't spare the time to spend running around the table collating pages of the magazine. Laurie said 'I've been in touch for some time with this American guy called Dick Sudhalter who's been working for UPI in Germany, but he plays trumpet and he's rather like Bix. He's been posted to London, and by coincidence there's another American guy Dick knows called Henry Francis and he's coming to England and he plays rather Waller-ish piano.' "Can you put together a band for a one night stand at the Lord Rookwood in the East End as a 'welcome to Britain for them?' So inevitably I got Skrim, John R.T. Davies and Alan Cooper and Keith Nichols on trombone, and everybody had a ball; so much so that at the end of the evening someone said "We've got to keep this together." This became what Laurie called 'The Anglo-American All Stars', which I objected to very strongly because we were not stars and eventually I got it changed to 'The Anglo-American Alliance.' We did a few radio things and not very many gigs and a couple of albums with Eva Taylor and Bill Rank, then

Dick went back to the States to work on the Bix book.

A short while later I got a call from Dick saying "You'll never guess what I've found! Williams College in Massachusetts have got the entire Paul Whiteman archive – the original music and arrangements, some of them have hand written annotations from people like Bix on them. There's stuff there they never recorded. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could put an orchestra together and play some of them?" I said "Yes, sure, a 30-piece orchestra. Where are you going to get the money, and who's going to be interested – Whiteman isn't exactly flavor of the month." A couple of weeks later I got another call: "We're going to do the Whiteman stuff. Camden council is starting a jazz festival at the Roundhouse and we've got the opening concert. John R.T. will be Trumbauer, I'll be Bix, Keith Nichols can do Bill Rank. Now, who else do we get? You know the British musicians, I don't." I said "Wait a minute, every attempt I've heard – even the ones by Whiteman himself on Coral have been awful, mainly because they got the rhythm section completely wrong." The only thing I could think was to get someone in each section who could still play and whose career went back far enough that they know how this stuff was played, and they can show the rest of the section how the phrasing should sound. Well I got hold of Laurie Gold, Harry's brother – a brilliant tenor sax player who never got his due – he was Britain's Eddie Miller. He was EMI's band booker at that time, so I told him what I needed – his brother almost selected himself as we needed him on bass sax for *San* apart from anything else. George Hurley, who had been violinist with Fred Elizalde at the Savoy and was a great friend of Matty Malneck, so he really knew how this stuff sounded. Alongside him on violin we had Reg Leopold, on piano Pat Dodd, Jock Cummings on drums, Tommy McQuater on trumpet; Al Baum who'd been on the Bond Street Swingers session led the saxes. The rest was filled with the absolute best young guys who could sight read – most of them thought they were going to have an easy ride and when



The Anglo-American Alliance, Burnham, 1968. L-R: Laurie Wright, Henry Francis, Dick Sudhalter, Bill Rank, John R.T. Davies, Neville Skrimshire. Mark Berresford Collection.

they looked at those arrangements they went 'Huh?' But they all loved it and they were the ones who wanted to keep the band going. They'd been led to believe that all this old stuff was rubbish and they were absolutely knocked out by the arrangements.

Now, this was to be a one-off concert. The night before Dick rang me to say that the printer had let them down and they needed a compere – we were going to have printed programmes. I said "It's your band, you do it," but he said "I'm way up in the trumpet section, you're the only one near a mike." Now, I had not talked before on a microphone in public – singing, yes, but not introducing the numbers. I was already worried about the keys I was going to have to sing in – the parts were written for Bing, who was a lightish baritone with an extension into tenor; I'm a lowish baritone with an extension into bass. Dick said "Put you tightest pants on – nobody else knows how this should be sung." The only number I got to sing in my own key was **Mary** which has a two-bar modulation in and out of the vocal and is only accompanied by the rhythm section, so that was easy. In the end I thought "Oh well, who's going to come and see it anyway."

So comes the day we go along and there's a queue down the street, but I thought that must be for people buying tickets for the other acts on later dates – we expected a half-empty house. As it was you couldn't have got anyone else in with a greased shoehorn – I think we broke every fire regulation in sight! I thought it was all going to be grey beards and grey heads – no! It was beads, beads and medallions, I couldn't believe it.

Anyway, we got through it and by the end of that one-off concert we'd been booked for the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Fairfield Halls, the BBC Jazz Club, a BBC special TV show and we'd been booked to do an LP. They wanted to book us for a tour of the Continent until they discovered how much it would cost. In the end the whole thing was too expensive to carry on, but I'm very proud of it. One day shortly after I got a call from Alan Dell, who presented 'The Big Band Sound' on the BBC asking if I was doing anything that evening. I lived just around the corner from Broadcasting House, so I went over to see him present his programme. After two or three numbers he played Whiteman's **From Monday On** and at the point where the vocal comes in it opened into stereo there was me singing instead of Bing. He said "That was one straight cut – the tempo is absolutely exact!" That tells you how good that band was. When they tried to do the same thing the following year in America with some of the original Whiteman musicians it didn't work.



Chris sings, Spencer Clark blows, Hamburger Heaven. With apologies for the poor quality of the Polaroid image.

In the meantime, Capitol Records started to play up because the huge success of The Beatles had meant that they had suddenly lost their premier position as *the* pop record label in Britain, and they still had enormous clout even though we owned them. EMI therefore did what EMI did best – they merged the two departments so they didn't get two sets of figures. I was called into the Managing Director's office and was told that my job had disappeared. He said 'I've two hot potatoes here – you can have these or I'm sorry, we'll have to say goodbye. I'll tell you now, nobody wants them – one is World Record Club'. Everybody hated World Record Club – the people who ran it were demanding and very difficult to deal with. To make matters worse, the old agency system was still in operation – the idea of EMI having anything to do with mail order was anathema the dealers would have gone mad if they knew that EMI owned half of World Record Club! Then along came our Chairman, Sir Joseph Lockwood, who had recently been to America and had seen the first 'rack job' labels – they put them in anywhere that had room for a rack of 100 LPs. He came back and said we had to have a 'rack job' label, which caused great consternation – the fact we would be selling LPs at half the price of the cheapest record on the market. We went into partnership with Paul Hamlyn, the publisher, who would provide all the sleeves from Italy for about a tenth of what we were paying and we would provide the music. We had a bottomless pit of source material but nobody had even thought of going back even beyond the LP period, saying that nobody would be interested in old records and, besides, you'd never get a good enough sound out of 78s. We couldn't have anything from the last 3 years, nothing that was remotely near the charts, nothing by artists still with EMI, no stereo recordings, absolutely nothing where they thought they could get some life out of in the main catalogue. Once you cut all that the bottomless pit was turning into a very small well! So I had got to supply them and also World Records. I was piggy in the middle – if I gave something to MFP, World Records would hate me and vice versa. Either way our own sales staff hated me as World Records and MFP had their own sales teams using our repertoire, so they weren't getting any money. So I was the most unpopular man in EMI!

It was nigh impossible to get hold of material that met the criteria I'd been given, so in sheer desperation I sat down one night and thought "Who is buying this stuff? World Records, well it's not youngsters buying mail order, so it's probably older generation. MFP, not kids – it's mums in the supermarket thinking that they used to like this." So I decided to take a chance – we did a special month's promotion on MFP doing 12 vintage albums from 78s – Harry Roy, Sophie Tucker, Evelyn Laye, a real mixture. We also ran a competition, the first prize being a 'bull-nose' Morris car. When it was over we discovered to everyone's amazement that the Harry Roy had sold 40,000 copies. But it wasn't enough – with MFP and the way it was structured you needed to sell at least 100,000, preferably more. And they only stayed in catalogue for a couple months, then they were dumped. It did make it clear though that there was a market out there for this sort of stuff, which nobody had believed. So, I switched tactics – MFP got the Russ Conways and what have you, and World Records got the vintage material – because it was a subscription club there wasn't the rush to delete stuff quickly from the catalogue – it could stay in for a long time. I had to do things like the odd Frank Sinatra but mainly they got the Golden Age of the British Dance Bands. So between MFP, World Records and the odd Parlophone I was turning out about 25 records per month – I don't know how I did it! Bear in mind that I was allowed one eight-hour day to do the transfers for an entire LP – scissors, paste, the whole bit – no digital.

MFP sales went berserk and we finally got the 'no stereo' band lifted – they also said that I could have £1000 to make an album – even then that was stingy, but I'd already worked out that it wasn't artists that mattered but certain categories of music – for example we had no Hawaiian music that I could get my hands on, but one day I discovered that our Press Officer, Sid Gillingham played Hawaiian guitar and had an Hawaiian band as a hobby. We went into the studio one Sunday with his band and knocked off 12 titles. You could hardly issue them as 'Sid Gillingham's Band' but the Beach Boys were then in the charts, so I just added 'Waikiki' in front and the Waikiki Beach Boys gave MFP their first million seller. The film *Zorba the Greek* was really popular and everybody wanted bouzouki music, so I went down to the Greek restaurant in Charlotte Street in Soho where they had a bouzouki player – he became 'Tacticos and the Music From the Greek Islands' – another million seller, no royalty! Sid had a threepenny royalty, so he did quite well – I also told him that if the material was out of copyright he could put in a copyright arrangement and get royalties on that too. I did well out of that as Sid said he wouldn't have known about that and cut me in, so I've got one or two Hawaiian copyrights to my name!

I realised that you couldn't sell MFP records by listening to them – it had to be visual; luckily we had a brilliant sleeve designer called Felix Brenner and he had some great designs. We also got the 'takeover' cast of *My Fair Lady* to record the music on flat fees and that was the first time an all-gold record sleeve was issued. And it was another million seller. I was still being allowed to make the odd Parlophone LP provided I kept quiet and I didn't

lose money, but I still wasn't allowed to stray from the CBS/EMI agreement. That was until one day I spotted a CBS cheap label LP which included several Louis Armstrong tracks from Okeh; so I went triumphantly into the office waving the LP saying that they had broken the agreement, and if they had, so could I. So I started to use that material on World Records rather than having to do it on full-price Parlophone, so the Bixes and Louis' went to World Records, and that broke that barrier.

I also managed to record my dear friend Adelaide Hall – but not officially. Denis Preston, who recorded a lot of Caribbean material in London in the 1950s, ran Lansdowne Studios in the Lansdowne Road in Notting Hill. He also recorded a lot of Trad jazz bands and quite a lot of modern jazz that went out on Columbia in the 'Lansdowne Series.' One of the things he did was an album by Adelaide and I was there for the session. Having done Adelaide, the obvious one to do next was Elisabeth Welch – officially I wasn't supposed to be involved as it was outside EMI. We wanted to do a third one of the other great black singer from the 1920s that made their home in Europe – Josephine Baker. She came over to appear at the Palladium for a week as a last-minute fill in. Debbie Reynolds was due to appear but she'd broken her ankle and they were stuck for a headliner. There wasn't anybody they could get from Hollywood in time and there wasn't anyone available at such short notice in England, and someone came up with the idea of getting Josephine Baker, who at that time was regarded as finished. Besides, she'd never been well known in Britain anyway. They'd already had a go with Mistinguett and it was dreadful – I saw her when she came over in 1948 – oh dear, she was way past it. She couldn't even



Chris with Barbara Jay, Maxine Sullivan, Adelaide Hall and David Lund, May 1986. According to Chris the photo was taken by Beryl Bryden.

remember the words to her big hit 'Mon Homme!' Anyway it was suddenly announced that Josephine was coming to the Palladium and having been upset seeing Mistinguett and the wreckage of what had obviously been a fine artist I thought "Do I want to see this?" Dennis felt the same, so we went for the Monday afternoon matinee, the worst possible slot. This 'creature' came on to the stage in an ice blue catsuit slit down to the belly button, ostrich plumes that actually touched the top of the proscenium arch and came down the stage – they talk about a panther walk, well she's the only woman I've ever seen do it.

Unbelievable! She'd sequins stuck on the bags under her eyes that were bigger than the Duke's, but she looked amazing. Her figure was superb, she was singing far better than she had ever done in her youth – the voice had filled out – it was mellow, it was warm – and what a range she'd got! By the end of the first week she'd been held over for another week and had rave reviews in the papers – the Palladium wanted her to stay longer still but she was committed to appearances in Paris. So, Denis and I went to see her. She said yes, she'd be delighted to do an album for us, but she couldn't do it yet, because she was going to back on stage in Paris for the first time in 20 years to celebrate her 50th year since coming to Paris. She went to do a show at the Bobbino and she said that when the show was over she'd contact us to make arrangements. She opened at the Bobbino to the sorts of reviews that people would die for – and she actually died four days later. I know I decry her early records – she was terrible – but my God, she learned, and she became a really great artist – the finest as such in her mature years that I ever saw on the stage, second only to Marlene Dietrich.

One day I got a phone call from Kenith Trodd, who was a BBC producer, who I knew through Joyce Stone, Lew Stone's widow, who said there was this new six-part television series coming up called *Pennies From Heaven* set in the 1930s, and the main protagonist was in the music business, so lots of music was needed. Dennis Potter had written the script and had his own thoughts on the music, so my first question was "Who are you going to get to play the music?" "Oh no, we're going to use records" "What, people miming to records from that period?" I said. "Yes, and it might be a woman miming to a man's voice and vice versa" Ken said. Everything Dennis Potter wrote was going to attract attention, and this was obviously going to do so. It sounded mad, but Dennis loved that sort of music as did Ken and they'd already chosen a certain amount of material they wanted – now they needed a whole stack more. Ken explained that this was going on screen but we need background music as well and we need your help. I went down to see a couple episodes being filmed and thought it was so completely off the wall that it's either going to lay a gigantic egg or be an enormous success – I didn't know which. I thought that if I did an album to tie in with it using tracks that hadn't been used on my dance band series LPs, I could sell enough to my World Records dance band buyers to get us off the hook, and if by any chance this thing is a hit we'll maybe sell some extra. Well, it went to number 18 in the pop charts and stayed there for 15 weeks, and went on selling and selling. By then World Records had stopped being a mail order club and were available in catalogue, but not at full price.

Pennies From Heaven actually finished my career with EMI – because a year or so after that I got rid of MFP. I had been off



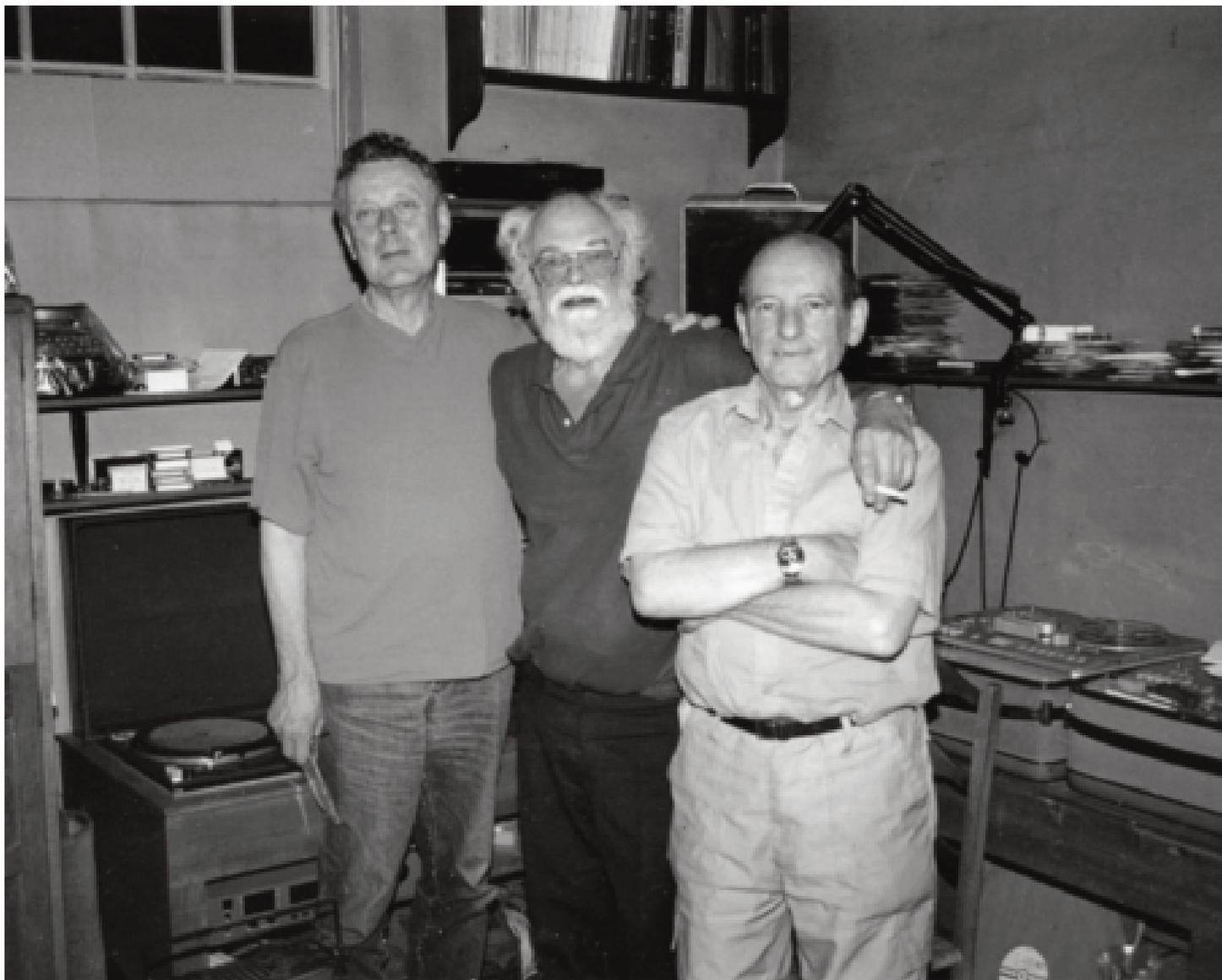
Chris (left) with Elisabeth Welch, Hubert Gregg, Vivian Ellis and Hermione Ellis, Cafe Royal, London, May 25, 1977.

work ill for 6 weeks or so but I had been saying for some time that my role within MFP was unnecessary, and was in fact a block to it moving on. I came back to work and my desk was piled with work for MFP but it had still been going on without me. That left me vulnerable, though I didn't know it at the time. I was officially attached to the MoR division at Manchester Square and was doing work for them such as LPs by Ginger Rogers and the Midnight Follies Orchestra. My boss wanted me to work with the back catalogues of Engelbert Humperdinck, Tom Jones and Gilbert O'Sullivan – all three were considered over the hill at that time. I said no, and was promptly demoted to just handling World Records and sent out to Richmond, which I hated. Along came a guy called Richardson as the new MD – he'd been brought in to do all the necessary slashing so that the existing people wouldn't be seen with blood on their hands. He saw that World Records was a separate unit out at Richmond and was earning a reasonable profit but it could be chopped without anyone realising it. The final stick they beat us with was "Look what you did with *Pennies From Heaven* and look now what you're doing." We said that we didn't have a television series to climb on the back of, so that was the end of World Records and I was made redundant.

Shortly after I was dumped by EMI I popped in to see Joe Loss and his wife, Mildred, whose office on Upper Regent Street was just around the corner from my flat. I'd often call in for a coffee and a chat on the way home, and on this particular day Joe was

absolutely livid when I told him what had happened. He was furious – "How could they do that to you" he said. Anyhow, we had a coffee and I was about to go, when Joe called me into his inner office. "Are you all right for money? No silly pride, now. If you need any help you come to me and Mildred. We'll make sure you're all right." I left and walked down the corridor when Mildred comes up to me:- "Darling, are you OK for money? Because if you're not you come to me and Joe." And they meant it...

Harry Roy was another good friend. Unlike Joe he was a fool with money; he was stupidly generous, unlike his brother Syd. To give you an example, he had a penthouse in Park Lane, so his sister had to have one too, and his mother. I first met him when I did a MFP reissue of his band and I had to organise the threepenny royalty. He said "Come to lunch." I can't remember where it was but it was fairly swanky. So over the next few meetings he'd invite me to lunch, until I realised that he couldn't really afford any of this. So the next time I said "Harry, where do you go for lunch when I'm not with you?" He said "Well, there's a rather nice pub round the corner that does decent food." "Just the job for me" I said. "I haven't got the time to do all these big lunches." He still thought he had to live up to the famous bandleader image – he imagined people expected it of him – and some did. Harry never went into the big impresario thing like Hylton. He told me quite flatly it was seeing Larry Shields and the Original Dixieland Jazz Band at the Hammersmith Palais



Chris, John R.T. Davies and Jim Shepherd, in John R.T.'s 'den', Burnham. Photo courtesy Dave Bennett

that made him want to get into the music business. He idolised Larry Shields and later on had a huge hit with **Leicester Square Rag**, which is based on Shields' break on the English Columbia of **Sensation Rag**. Harry had no illusions about being a great musician - he was pure and simply an entertainer.

I spent six months on the dole, and having got no work because I was too old at 50, I thought sod it, I'll go freelance. Sleeve notes, compilations and the like, but I was lucky to have by then quite regular work on BBC Radio, which helped. I had my own radio show and was subbing for Alan Dell whenever he was on holiday.

From there I went to work part time at Noel Gay Music, the music publishers, reviving his music, which involved putting his show *Me And My Girl* back in the West End, which was of course a huge hit both here and in America. At that point Ron White phoned me from EMI Music Publishing - he'd been very good to me, putting a lot of freelance work my way. He said he wanted me to join him as Standards Catalogue Manager. "Ron" I said, "There's no way I want to go back to EMI, not after what they did to me." He said "Don't be a fool - this is my company." It was then a piddling little company set up to pick up B-sides, but they didn't know Ron. He turned it into one of the biggest music publishers in the world - he acquired Francis Day and Hunter. He said the job was perfect for me and that I would be properly paid. EMI were renowned for being bad payers - second only to Decca - because they knew that there was a queue of people wanting to be in the record business who wanted the supposed glamour and would work for peanuts.

After a while freelance work started to dry up and to make matters worse I got dumped by EMI for the second time because there was a takeover of EMI Music and we were all out. I went on freelancing - I'd still got my own regular series but there was a change of management at Radio Two - a new broom. I was due for another thirteen-week series but that never materialised - they were turning Radio Two into a cheap imitation of Radio One and there was no room for me. I was then 64 and thought that I'd parlayed this on longer than I thought I would be able to and besides, I was going to have to get out of my flat, as it was insupportable to live in, so why not retire? It was then a question of where should I retire to? I couldn't stay in that flat as I was being harassed on a major scale by the Panamanian-registered owners, and the prices in central London were such that I couldn't afford a broom closet. I could have moved back to Shrewsbury - I love it but I'd have been bored out of my mind. Then one night I thought that Amsterdam would be a lovely place to live. Now, by that time the only freelance work I was still getting was from Timeless, where my contact was Anne De Jong. We got on extremely well, with similar ideas, and I had lots of friends such as Pim Gras and Harry Coster over in Holland and there was no language problem. It was only an hour by air from London, so I wouldn't have to lose touch with anybody. House prices were also very much lower than London. Eventually I found this (*it's a lovely 17th century house a few steps from the Prinsengracht - MB*) - it was literally falling down and it cost me more to repair than it did to buy. In Holland I went on working with Anne (*pronounced 'Ann-er' and it's a man's name in Holland - MB*) on Timeless's so-called 'Chris Barber Collection' series of jazz reissue CDs. In fact I did the first 50 issues and not a single track came from Chris Barber - they all came from John R.T. Davies or me!

Not long after I was having coffee with Anne and he said he was leaving Timeless. He had no idea what he was going to do and I, like an idiot, said "Why not start your own record company?" I said I was willing to help financially if he came up with a game plan, which he did, and that's how Challenge was

born. It's meant I've had another twenty-odd years being connected with some rather nice music.

On top of that came Retrieval. Anne and I were over in England and had gone to see John R.T., who was then doing transfers and restoration for Timeless, and out of the blue he offered us the Retrieval label and back catalogue. He'd started Retrieval with Ron Jewson and Norman Stevens, but they had both died and John was too busy with all his audio restoration work to run it alone. John gave Retrieval to us as long as he could do the transfers.

My own musical tastes are much wider than a lot of people think. People used to think that because I did the MFP and World Records dance band LPs that I loved the music of Victor Silvester and Maurice Winnick - they're very wrong. A lot of that stuff bored the hell out of me but I was having to sell records, and if I didn't do that then that was the end of the series. Jazz is still my main love. I do like a lot of pre-war dance music and was lucky enough to get to know many old-timers like Lew Stone, Syd Lipton, Joe Loss, Henry Hall and quite a few of more. The musicians from those days that I met were many - dear Harry Gold, Tiny Winters, Al Baum, George Elliott, Tommy McQuater, George Hurley - so many. I got a huge kick out of singing with such great musicians backing me!

I've always loved stage and film musicals - anything with Alice Faye makes me go weak at the knees - and I was lucky enough to make LPs with the likes of Ginger Rogers, Elaine Stritch, Jessie Matthews and Patricia Routledge, amongst many others.

One of my great friends is the wonderful pianist Keith Ingham. I made his first two solo albums. I went to see him one night and there was a tall, blonde, American girl who sang a couple of numbers. I nearly died of shock. Her name was Susannah McCorkle and she sounded like Billie Holiday in a white body. Over the next year or two I worked with her and Keith, teaching her to develop her own style. Eventually I produced two albums with her, using such like-minded musicians as Bruce Turner and Digby Fairweather. The first was *The Music of Harry Warren* and the second *The Quality of Mercer* - Peter Clayton, bless him, came up with that title. Both albums got issued in the USA to rave reviews and good sales - not so in Britain, alas! The upshot was that she went back to New York taking Keith with her, and had a long and successful career as a top-line cabaret and concert artist, with many albums for Concord. Sadly, she was bi-polar and she committed suicide in 2001.

Later I commissioned and executive produced several CDs on which Keith worked with the wonderful Barbara Lea - I'm very proud of them. I also did several albums with 'my other Keith' - Nichols. In Holland I've worked in the studios with excellent Dutch jazz singers such as Soesja Citroen and Denise Jannah, and I'm rather proud of the two CDs I produced with ex-Jean Goldkette trombonist Spiegel Wilcox and an excellent hand-picked Dutch band including Robert Veen on reeds and Menno Daams on trumpet. In America I've made CDs with the very underrated singer Donna Byrne and the equally underrated Lou Lanza along with musicians such as the superb saxophonist Harry Allen and the old master guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli.

I'm now 86 years old but I'm still working, collecting and listening, and every Sunday I go to Der Weergever in north Amsterdam, a great club for record collectors of every musical taste, from Caruso to Elvis. And if I'm lucky, you'll see me at the Birmingham Record Fair next spring!