

Mary O'Rourke: Master Joe

Written by Donald Fullarton - Last Updated Thursday, 22 April 2010 07:26



ONE of the most popular songs sung by a well known Helensburgh singer was "It's a sin to live a lie". But 'boy singer' Master Joe Petersen did just that for most of her life.

Master Joe, as he was known, was in fact burgh girl Mary O'Rourke, who also appeared under the names of Master Wilfred Eaton and Michael Dawnay.

Mary was born at 6 Maitland Street on July 26 1913, the 12th of 14 children of Hannah O'Rourke and her Irish mason's labourer husband Joseph, who were married in the town on September 16 1892.

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Singing was very much a family pastime, and at an early age both Mary and her brother Joe — the ninth child, born on May 6 1909 — were considered experts in nostalgic songs before they reached the age of ten, perhaps because of their Irish family background.

In 1915 the family moved to Glasgow and James had risen to become a joiner.

In the hard times during and following the First World War, people made their own entertainment, the diminutive Mary and Joe sang at home, in school concerts, at parties, at talent shows, and on other special occasions. They appeared together regularly, mostly separately but sometimes as a double act.

Mary left school in 1927 and took a job. By 1932 she was making a name for herself in Scotland as a music hall singer, and her ambition was to be a dance band singer in London.

So she moved to the capital at the age of 17 to live with her Cockney uncle, entertainer and impresario Ted Stebbings, and his second wife Minnie Irvine, who was Hannah O'Rourke's sister, in Islington.

At this time boy singers had become the rage, but their voices had the bad habit of breaking. Ted had the brainwave that the now 18 year-old Mary could pass off as a boy and so could take the place of his other boy singers.

She was not keen, but her uncle was persuasive and she learned how to sing songs in a higher pitch than her normal alto voice.

She joined the famous Harry Bidgood's Dance Band as a good singer who could impersonate a boy singer to perfection, and was soon making records with the band.

By 1935 she was being publicised by Rex Records as Joe Petersen, The Phenomenal Boy Singer, and she recorded 59 Master Joe 78 rpm discs for the Rex label between 1934 and

1942.

She was also recording as Wilfred Eaton and Michael Dawnay, and for ten months the public bought gramophone records on two different labels by two different named boys singers — when in fact they were all Mary, now aged 20.

By 1937-8 Master Joe — her chest tightly bandaged to flatten it — was top of the bill in top British theatres with her electrifying stage presence, and her records were being broadcast on continental radio stations. This was to be the height of her fame.

She was now an international star, but was banned from broadcasting on the BBC because the powers that be considered her improper for dressing as a boy, although they did not explain how this affected her radio performances.

In 1939 she was recording the hit songs of the day, but World War Two badly hit the gramophone record industry, and in 1942 the last Master Joe record was issued. She was not heard of again south of the border until the late 1950s, and for the rest of her life was only a star in Scotland.

On May 17 1933 she had married advertising clerk George Lethbridge from Islington, a semi-professional violinist, after becoming pregnant. But it was not a happy marriage, despite the birth of their daughter Margaret, known as Margo, in 1934, and she developed a serious drink problem.

In 1942, with her daughter at a Convent boarding school, she returned briefly home to Scotland, and for the next three years alternated between London and Glasgow.

After the war, in which her husband reached the rank of Major, their marriage continued to have problems and she left him several times. She was also badly affected by the death of her father in 1944 and her beloved brother Joe the following year.

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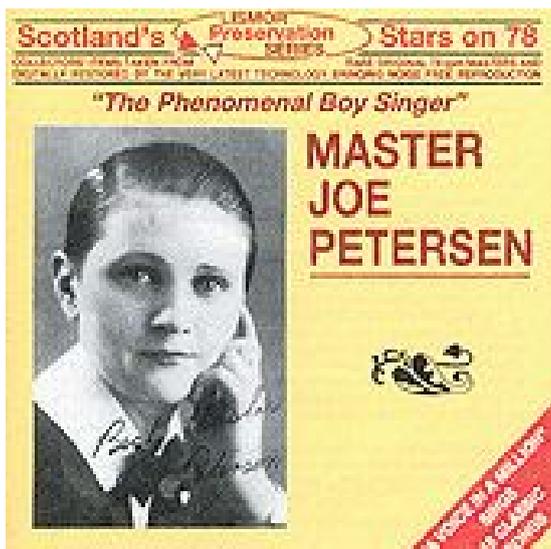
In 1952 she finally parted from her husband, home and Margo, and returned to live alone at Hamilton Street in Polmadie, Glasgow.

She was still much in demand as a performer, appearing with artists such as Jimmy Logan, later to become president of Helensburgh Heritage Trust, Tommy Morgan and Chic Murray.

Writer Jim Friel saw many of her appearances in the Logan Family shows, and with Tommy Morgan at the Pavilion.

He said: "She always brought the house down and got several encores and was one of the finest singers I have heard. She sang sentimental songs with such a superb voice. The spotlight would be on her, and you would just see her wee white collar and face."

By now she was an alcoholic, and she developed chronic bronchitis and a heart condition. But as late as 1963 she was still appearing as Master Joe with stars such as the Alexander Brothers, Johnny Beattie, Andy Stewart and Robert Wilson. She took part in the final show at Glasgow's Empire Theatre on Sunday March 31 1963.



She died of bronchitis at her home on Christmas Eve 1964 at the age of 51. She was interred in the same grave in St Peter's Cemetery, Dalbeth, as her father, brother Joe and sister Sara.

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A Glasgow evening paper, in a brief report, said of her: "Her death is a great loss to the theatre world. She was a great entertainer."

Well known Scottish actress Fletcher Mathers, whose TV credits include 'Taggart' and 'Dr Finlay', wrote a play, her first, about Mary. She described her as "an incredibly talented and tragic figure".

Her rendition of 'My Ain Folk' is considered by many to be one of the all-time top twenty Scottish songs.

It is included on a cd from the Lismor Recordings Preservation Series, which is available from MusicScotland.com at £8.95. The owner of Lismor Records paid for a headstone to be erected on her grave.

- Some of the detail in this article comes from the 1994 book 'Master Joe Petersen', written by BBC North radio presenter and music historian Frank Wappat and published by FWM Publishing of North Shields. The main photo is copyright Herald and Times, Glasgow, and is reproduced here by kind permission of editor-in-chief Donald Martin.