

## The Avons – Popular Music Group of the 1950s and 1960s

VALERIE MURTAGH and CHRISTOPHER JOHN HOGGER

*In the second half of the 1950s two young sisters-in-law living in London began singing together and entering local talent contests. Their abilities were quickly recognised and they began performing as The Avon Sisters. When joined by a young male singer the trio became The Avons and were soon established as one of the nation's most accomplished popular vocal music groups. During the early 1960s they lived in Effingham. Their music careers continued for many decades.*

### Family background

The popular trio of singers who performed as The Avons from 1959 evolved from a duo known as The Avon Sisters. These two were registered at birth as Patricia Valerie (née) Jenkins and Ellien Patricia Mary (née) Murtagh. They were not sisters but in later life would become sisters-in-law. They are of interest in the history of Effingham because they came to live in the village in the early 1960s.

#### *Ellien's origins*

Ellien's origins lay in Ireland. Her mother Elizabeth Emily Frances (née Gordon) was born in Ballinacourte, Co Tipperary on 2 January 1908 to parents Henry Edward Gordon, at that time a farmer, and his wife Elizabeth Emily (née Lord).

|     |                |                         |        |                     |                        |        |                      |            |                 |
|-----|----------------|-------------------------|--------|---------------------|------------------------|--------|----------------------|------------|-----------------|
| 171 | 19 08          | Elizabeth Emily Frances | Female | Henry Edward Gordon | Elizabeth Emily Gordon | Farmer | Henry E. Gordon      | Birth date | Elizabeth Emily |
|     | second January | Ballinacourte           |        | Ballinacourte       | formerly Lord          |        | Father Ballinacourte | 19 08      | Registrar       |

Figure 1 Birth registration of Ellien's mother Elizabeth Emily Frances Gordon; 1908.

The 1911 Census finds the Gordon family living there but with Henry now occupied as a carpenter. Ellien's father William Patrick Murtagh was born at 16, Arklow Street, north Dublin on 17 February 1903 to parents John Murtagh, at that time a railway porter, and his wife Agnes (née Kerrigan).

|     |             |                 |    |              |                   |                |                     |            |              |
|-----|-------------|-----------------|----|--------------|-------------------|----------------|---------------------|------------|--------------|
| 453 | 19 03       | William Patrick | M. | John Murtagh | Agnes Murtagh     | Railway Porter | Agnes Murtagh       | Birth date | John Murtagh |
|     | 17 February | 16 Arklow St    |    | 16 Arklow St | formerly Kerrigan |                | mother 16 Arklow St | 19 03      | Registrar    |

Figure 2 Birth registration of Ellien's father William Patrick Murtagh; 1903.

The 1911 Census finds John and Agnes with their nine children, including William Patrick aged 8, at this same address and John still working as a railway porter. On 4 February 1919, when aged just two weeks short of 16, William Patrick became employed as a porter with the Great Southern and Western Railway, being appointed to the Kingsbridge (Coaching) station in Dublin on 7 March 1921 with staff number 3283 [*Ancestry's Railway Employment Records, Ireland*].

Both William Patrick and Elizabeth Emily Frances came from Catholic families. They married at the Church of the Holy Family, Aughrim Street in Dublin on 11 August 1935. William Patrick's occupation was entered as traveller in the marriage register and his father John was described as a deceased railway employee. The address of both William Patrick and Elizabeth Emily Frances was given as 51, Annamoe Road, off the North Circular Road in Dublin's Stoneybatter neighbourhood.



Figure 3 The Aughrim Street church.

| 19.3.35 Pópaí do ceiteadháin 25<br>Marriage solemnized at the Roman Catholic } <i>Church of Dublin</i> of <i>Dublin</i> } { i sCOANNAN in the Registrar's District of } <i>No 3 n.e. city</i><br>i sCOANNAN AN COINN CLÉPADÓRA in the Superintendent Registrar's District of } <i>Dublin</i> } { i sCOANNAN in the County of } <i>city of Dublin</i>                                     |                                 |                                         |               |                      |                                    |                                                       |                                                          |                                                       |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Uim. No. (1)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Dáta an Pópaí When Married. (2) | Ainm agus Stainne Name and Surname. (3) | Áoir Age. (4) | Stáid Condition. (5) | Gráim Deata Rank or Profession (6) | Áit Cónaíochta Residence at the Time of Marriage. (7) | Ainm agus Stainne an Átaí Father's Name and Surname. (8) | Gráim Deata an Átaí Rank or Profession of Father. (9) |
| 1st                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | 1/10 August 1935                | William Murtagh                         | 25            | Bachelor             | Traveler                           | 57 Annamol Rd. N.C.R.                                 | John Murtagh (deceased)                                  | Railway Employee                                      |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                 | Elizabeth Gordon                        | 25            | Spinster             | —                                  | 57 Annamol Rd. N.C.R.                                 | Henry Gordon                                             | Carpenter                                             |
| Do Pópaí an tAnamaí na h-Eaglaise } <i>Church of Dublin</i> } { Do péir áirí agus tnaí na h-Eaglaise Caeilicéise, according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church by me,<br>Ceiteadháin an Pópaí } <i>William Murtagh</i> } <i>Michael J. MacLennan</i><br>ro Caeilicéise } <i>Elizabeth Gordon</i> } <i>in the presence of us, B. J. O'Leary &amp; W. J. Murtagh</i> |                                 |                                         |               |                      |                                    |                                                       |                                                          |                                                       |

Figure 4 Marriage registration of Ellien's parents William P Murtagh and Elizabeth E F Gordon; 1935.



Figure 5 View of the rather impoverished area in which Ellien's parents were living when they married; 1930s.

Their daughter Ellien Patricia Mary was born in Cork five years later [Ireland Births Register 5 133, 1940 (Q1); FHL 101235]. Although her first forename was registered as 'Ellien' she was raised as 'Eileen', a name she disliked; from her late teens she preferred to be known as Elaine, although all three variants of her forename appeared in newspapers for many years afterwards. Her mother's Will refers to her as Ellien throughout. Henceforth in this article we shall refer to her as Elaine.

Elaine had several siblings, including an older brother William ('Bill') Gordon Murtagh. He was born in Kilkenny in 1931 [Ireland Births Register 3 296, 1931 (Q3); FHL 101231], a few years before his parents decided (or were able) to marry.

At some point the Murtagh family migrated from Ireland, first appearing in the Electoral Registers for England in 1947, when they were living at 139, Lavender Road in Battersea. By the time of the 1950 register they had moved to 5, Avenue Mansions in Sisters Avenue. Avenue Mansions is a large and attractive block of flats standing on the southern side of Sisters Avenue at the point where it curls



eastwards around Marjorie Grove before opening onto Clapham Common Long Road. They were still there in the 1956 register, the household's listing including Bill now aged 21; Elaine, although presumably present, was not listed, being still under 21.



Figure 6 Avenue Mansions in Sisters Avenue, image source: The London Archives (City of London Corporation); photographed in 1978.

#### *Patricia's origins*

Patricia's origins lay in Essex, London and Middlesex. Her mother Rosaline Violet (née Fletcher) was born in Manor Park, Essex on 2 November 1905 to parents Thomas Frederick Fletcher (born in Hoxton, London) and his wife Rosaline (née Fraser) (born in Salford) who had married in 1904 [GRO Ref: West Ham 4a 145, 1904 (Q3)]. Rosaline Violet was baptised at Little Ilford parish church on 28 February 1906, the register giving the family address as 37, Bessborough Road and the occupation of Thomas as decorator.

By 1911 the Fletcher family had moved to 20, Selbourne Avenue in Manor Park, their census entry describing Thomas Frederick as a painter and paper hanger. Besides their daughter Rosaline Violet there were two sons Thomas and Edward. The 1921 Census finds the family at 32, Plashet Grove in East Ham, Thomas Frederick still working as a painter. There were now two more daughters, Ivy and Florence Ellen.

On 27 December 1925 Rosaline Violet married at the church of St Michael and All Angels in Manor Park to Maurice Jenkins [GRO Ref: West Ham 4a 241, 1925 (Q4)]. They produced four children:

- Sidney Maurice Jenkins, born in Essex, 1927
- David Thomas Jenkins, born in London, 1929
- Patricia Valerie Jenkins, born in Middlesex, 1936
- Garry A Jenkins, born in Middlesex, 1940

Patricia preferred to go by her second forename and henceforth in this article she is referred to as Valerie.

The National Register of 1939 finds Valerie's grandfather Thomas Frederick Fletcher living at 45, Church Street in Edmonton and working on his own account as a house decorator. Living with him was his still unmarried daughter Florence Ellen, born in 1914 and working as a cashier in a cinema.

At this same address was a second household, namely Rosaline Violet and her husband Maurice, he working as a 'cinema film operator' (ie a projectionist); with them, but his register entry redacted, was one of their sons, either Sidney or David. Meanwhile, Rosaline Violet's mother Rosaline was residing with a Collar family at Fir Tree Cottage in Braintree and described as an evacuee, together with one of her (redacted) grandsons, either Sidney or David, and her grand-daughter Valerie; Valerie's register entry gives her birth year inaccurately as 1937.



Figure 7 St Michael and All Angels Church in Manor Park where Valerie's parents married in 1925.

The coming of the war put an end to the hopes of Valerie's mother Rosaline Violet – known familiarly as 'Babs' – to a singing career. After the bombing began in August 1940 the home of Maurice and Babs was demolished by a direct hit, through which they lost everything. In Edmonton Maurice had been working in a Granada cinema, but he now transferred to a different Granada cinema in Battersea. However, this area also suffered from bombs being aimed at Clapham Junction, and so Valerie was evacuated to Wales.

With the end of the war, electoral registration resumed and the 1946 Electoral Register for Battersea finds Maurice and Babs living at 72, Battersea Rise. Valerie recalls that they moved there when she was aged 8, so in about 1944-45. They were still there in the 1950 Electoral Register, Sidney also listed with them having just turned 21. It was in this year on 11 January that Babs died from acute nephritis and cystitis at St Ebba's Hospital in Epsom, aged only 44 [GRO Ref: Surrey Mid-E, 1950 (Q1)]. Up to that time she had been working as a millinery saleswoman and Maurice as an electrical engineer. Valerie was therefore aged only 13 when she lost her Mum.

### Formation of The Avon Sisters

Like her mother, Valerie had always wanted to be a singer or entertainer, but suffered badly from nerves. She began her stage career by miming to some Danny Kaye records at the Caius Club, a youth club operating in Caius House, Holman Road. This building, originally established as a mission church, had been rented in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Cambridge undergraduates and fellows, some from Caius College, and used to accommodate various clubs for residents. It continued to serve as a youth club building for well over a century, until eventually being demolished a little over a decade ago. Its site is now occupied by a huge new building, a significant part of which continues to provide youth club facilities.

It was at one of these occasions at the Caius Club that Valerie met her future husband, William ('Bill') Murtagh. Her home in Battersea Rise and his in Sisters Avenue were only a few hundred yards apart, whilst the Caius Club was about two thirds of a mile away. They married in August 1956 [GRO Ref: Battersea 5c 98, 1956 (Q3)] and moved initially into a couple of rooms in Bill's parents' flat.



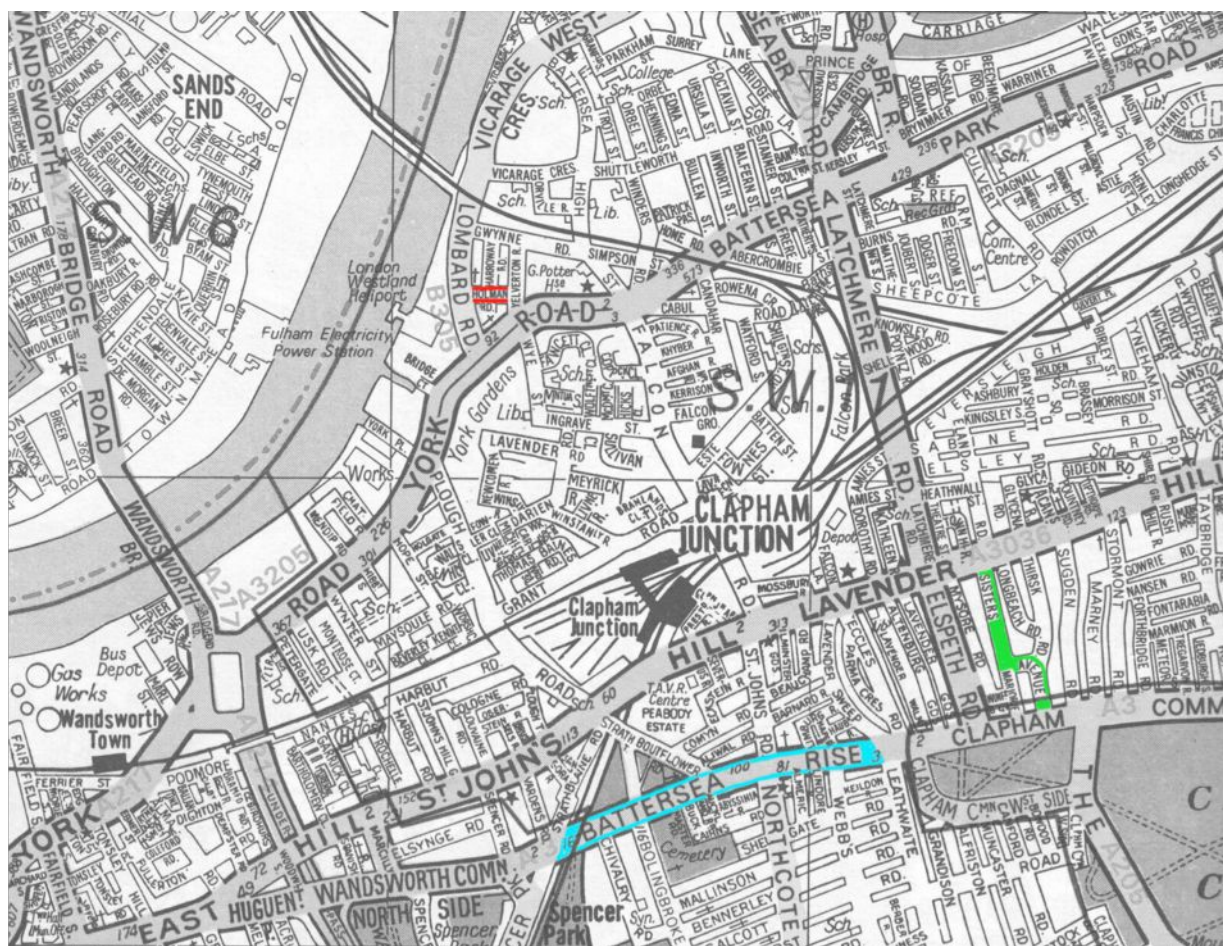


Figure 8 Street map of Battersea highlighting Holman Road (red), Battersea Rise (blue) and Sisters Avenue (green).



Figure 9 Battersea Rise, where Valerie lived before marrying; seen here in about 1925.





Figure 10 Caius House, Holman Road, in which the Caius Club operated (now demolished); probably early 2000s.

Valerie and Elaine had therefore now become sisters-in-law. They began singing together in 1956-57, practising in Valerie's and Bill's flat, and appearing in local Town Hall singing competitions. Valerie's nerves were somewhat ameliorated by having Elaine on stage with her. Elaine never showed any sign of nerves.

The street name 'Sisters Avenue' had suggested a possible title for themselves, 'The Aven Sisters', but they preferred 'Avon' to 'Aven'. Their musical partnership got underway in 1958 and the first mention of it in the Press appears to be the article of Friday 21 February shown in Figure 11.

**THE Avon Sisters.** Remember the name. For it hides the identity of two Battersea girls who have formed a singing act about which you may hear a lot more in the not too distant future.

They are Ellien Murtagh, an 18-year-old blonde, and brunette Valerie Murtagh, 21, both secretaries, who live at Avenue Mansions, Sisters Road.

Of them, Mr. John Flood, Battersea entertainments officer said, "They're most promising. They are the best local act I've ever come across."

They are soon to make their first public appearance at Bermondsey Town Hall. After that there are talent competitions at Poplar and Battersea lined up.

Were the sisters nervous about their forthcoming debut? "I'm not," said Ellien. "I've always liked singing and felt I would like to go into show business. I more or less talked Valerie into it."

**Johnny Flood turns coach**

"WE decided to have a try to get somewhere in November. We contacted Mr. Flood and since then he has been coaching us."

Since then the girls "have come on a bundle," to quote Mr. Flood. "We sing most types of numbers except rock and roll. We find that a bit jerky for close harmony singing," says Ellien.

The girls do a lot of their practising around the house, while doing the washing up for instance. Have the neighbours complained yet, I asked? "No, not yet," said Ellien. "One even said she liked it."

Another point in favour of the Avon Sisters. They're very nearly sisters. Sisters-in-law to be precise.

**South West Whispers**

**WATCH FOR THE NAME AVON SISTERS**

*By The Editor*



**ELLIEN & VALERIE**

**Awaiting that break**

Figure 11 The Avon Sisters in the *South Western Star*, 21 February 1958.



The article notes that they were both secretaries, living together at Avenue Mansions. They had been coached for some time by John Flood, Battersea Town Hall's Entertainments Officer. It was noted that they were soon to make their first public appearance at Bermondsey Town Hall, this to be followed by talent competitions at Poplar and Battersea.

The Battersea talent competition staged its first round at Battersea Town Hall on 14 March and The Avon Sisters appeared in advertisements for it, as seen in Figure 12. Valerie recalls that she nearly ruined their show business career, before it got started:

'Bill's mother had made us matching outfits and we had rehearsed endlessly, but once I was in front of the audience, I froze. The music played, Elaine sang the harmony, the whole way through, and I opened my mouth but nothing came out.'

In this initial round they came 2<sup>nd</sup> as reported a week later (Figure 13).



Figure 12 *South Western Star*, 7 March 1958.



Figure 13 *South Western Star*, 21 March 1958.



Figure 14 Battersea Town Hall, old postcard view.  
A Grade II listed building, it is today the Battersea Arts Centre.

The final of this competition was to take place on 28 April, again at Battersea Town Hall. The judges would be Carroll Lewis – a nationally well-known spotter of amateur talent – and Associated Television presenter Fred Wilby. There would be 14 acts including that of The Avon Sisters (since the finalists were those who had come 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> in the first round). A newspaper article [*South Western Star*, 18 April 1958] anticipating the event stated that:

'The immediate future for the Avon Sisters promises to be both busy and bright. In addition to being finalists at Battersea on April 28, they are also in the semi-finals in Bermondsey and Camberwell, and they have another engagement soon in Walthamstow.'

At the final they came 4<sup>th</sup> and were commended warmly by Fred Wilby, as seen in Figure 15.

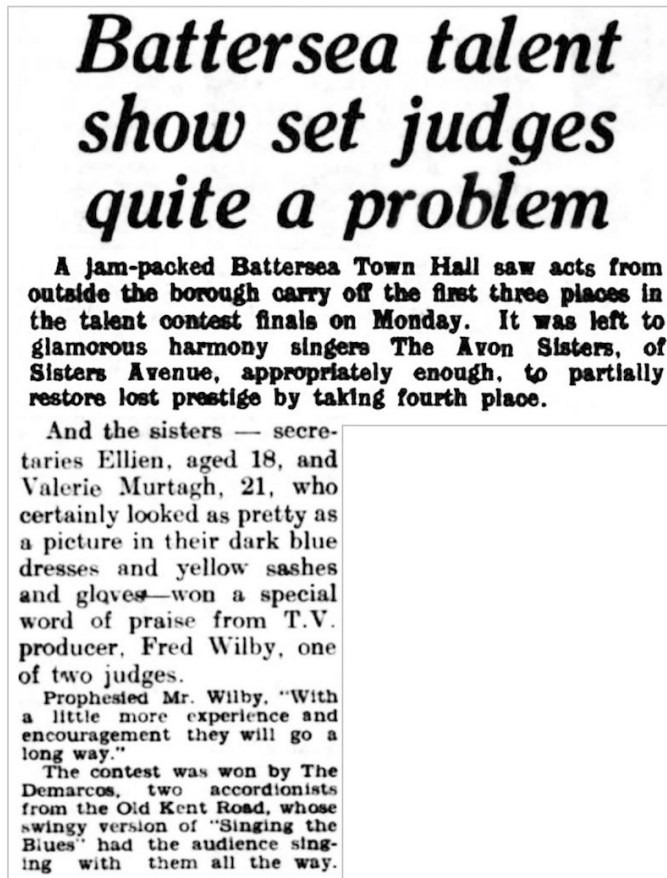


Figure 15 *South Western Star*, 2 May 1958.



Figure 16 Fred Wilby; January 1957.

During this period Valerie and Elaine also took part in Camberwell Council's talent contest. This consisted of 7 heats designed to select 16 candidates for a final on 9 June at which they would compete for the 'Observer Challenge Cup'. Those who came 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> in any of these 7 heats would get a second chance to be a finalist by competing in an additional 8<sup>th</sup> 'hard luck' heat. The finalists would be those who came 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> in any one of the 8 heats.

The 7<sup>th</sup> heat, in which The Avon Sisters would take part, was advertised on 10 April in the *South London Observer* which noted that this would take place on the following day at the Havil Hall in Havil Street, just behind Southwark Town Hall. The article briefly described some of the contestants, including Valerie and Elaine.

The **AVON SISTERS** are in fact sisters-in-law, but they live in Sisters - avenue, Battersea. They are Elleen Murtagh (18) and Mrs. Valerie Murtagh (21) — their speciality is close harmony singing.

Figure 17 *South London Observer*, 17 April 1958.



Figure 18 The Havil Hall (foreground, town hall in background); 2009; image credit: Mike Faherty / Theatre Peckham / CC BY-SA 2.0.



In this heat The Avon Sisters came 3<sup>rd</sup>, as reported a week later (Figure 19). Accordingly they became eligible for the 'second chance' heat to be held on 2 May, again at the Havil Hall. Fifteen acts were due to appear in this heat. The event was advertised on 1 May in the *South London Observer* which gave a brief synopsis of each of the contestants, including this:

'Among others taking part will be Anna Barran, a soprano from British Guiana; the Avon Sisters, a close harmony act from Battersea; Reg and Bernie Ayres, two comedy impressionists from Wandsworth, and Stan Richards, a light comedian from Blackheath.'

In this heat The Avons Sisters again came 3<sup>rd</sup> and so just missed the opportunity to become finalists. On 8 May the *South London Observer*, reporting the outcome of the heat, noted that:

'Third were the Avon Sisters, a close harmony act whose sense of rhythm is good.'

These early appearances had caught the eye of various talent spotters and during the summer of 1958 the pace of activity hotted up for The Avon Sisters, as evidenced by the report in Figure 20 from the *South Western Star*, like most previous mentions of the duo in this publication, this one appeared in the 'South West Whispers' column written each week under the pseudonym 'The Falcon'. As the article observes, they had indeed 'been getting around quite a bit'. Their appearances at the Brighton Hippodrome had probably been on the 'Carroll Lewis Sunday Show'; throughout the summer of 1958 Lewis would stage this show there every Sunday evening from 13 July at 6.15 and at 8.30, on each occasion presenting '20 big acts, many of whom have won acclaim on his own television show' [*Sussex Express*, 27 June 1958]. The most important fact in the article, in relation to the future development of The Avon Sisters, came at the end where it was remarked that they were due to appear 'at the Radio Exhibition'.

The latter event was the 25<sup>th</sup> National Radio and Television Exhibition, sponsored by the Radio Industry Council. It mainly featured equipment intended for home use but also served to showcase the electronics industry as a whole. It was staged at Olympia, Earl's Court during 27 August to 6 September.

**NATIONAL RADIO EXHIBITION**  
(Earls Court, Aug. 27th—Sept. 6th, 11 a.m.—10 p.m.)

**WIRELESS WORLD SHOW NUMBERS**

**September:** Show Guide (publication date August 26th). Plan of the stands with stand-to-stand guide to the exhibits.

**October:** Show Review (publication date September 23rd). An assessment of trends in the design of television and sound receivers.

Figure 21 Advertisement in *Wireless World*, August 1958.

## Tenor wins contest

Camberwell Council had a big bill at the last talent contest for this season, on Friday, at Havil Hall—there is just the second chance show and the final to be held now the winners receiving the OBSERVER Challenge Cup.

Straight into the final went a very fine tenor, 23-years-old **JOHNNY JOHNSON**, who, I understand, has been winning a number of talent contests in South London. He may well take the trophy at the final, which is going to be one of the best shows of talent ever seen in Camberwell—if not the best.

**The AVON SISTERS**—Eileen Murtagh (18) and Mrs. Valerie Murtagh (21)—they are really sisters-in-law and live in Sisters-avenue, Battersea were placed third with their close harmony singing act, and go into the second chance final with 26-years-old **ANNA BARRAN**, a soprano.

Figure 19 *South London Observer*, 17 April 1958.

It was back in February, before their first public appearance, that I advised "Watch for the Avon Sisters." Since then the two girls, Eileen and Valerie Murtagh, of Avenue Mansions, Sisters Avenue, Battersea, have been getting around quite a bit, and successfully at that.

Coached by Battersea's Entertainment Officer, Johnny Flood, the girls—they are sisters-in-law—started by entering a number of amateur talent contests at borough level. At the end of last month they gave two performances on the Sunday Night Show at the Brighton Hippodrome, and four days later won the Mecca "Singers in Harmony" contest at the Royal, Tottenham.

To-morrow they record a broadcast for the BBC Light programme and on Tuesday are due to appear on the ITV stand at the Radio Exhibition.

Nice going, girls.

Figure 20 *South Western Star*, 29 August 1958.

The show attracted about 30,000 people each day and was ‘essentially a broadcasting exhibition intended to interest the public in everything that comes to them from the BBC, from commercial television and from radio stations abroad’ [‘Supplement on the 1958 Radio Show’, *The Times*, 28 August 1958].

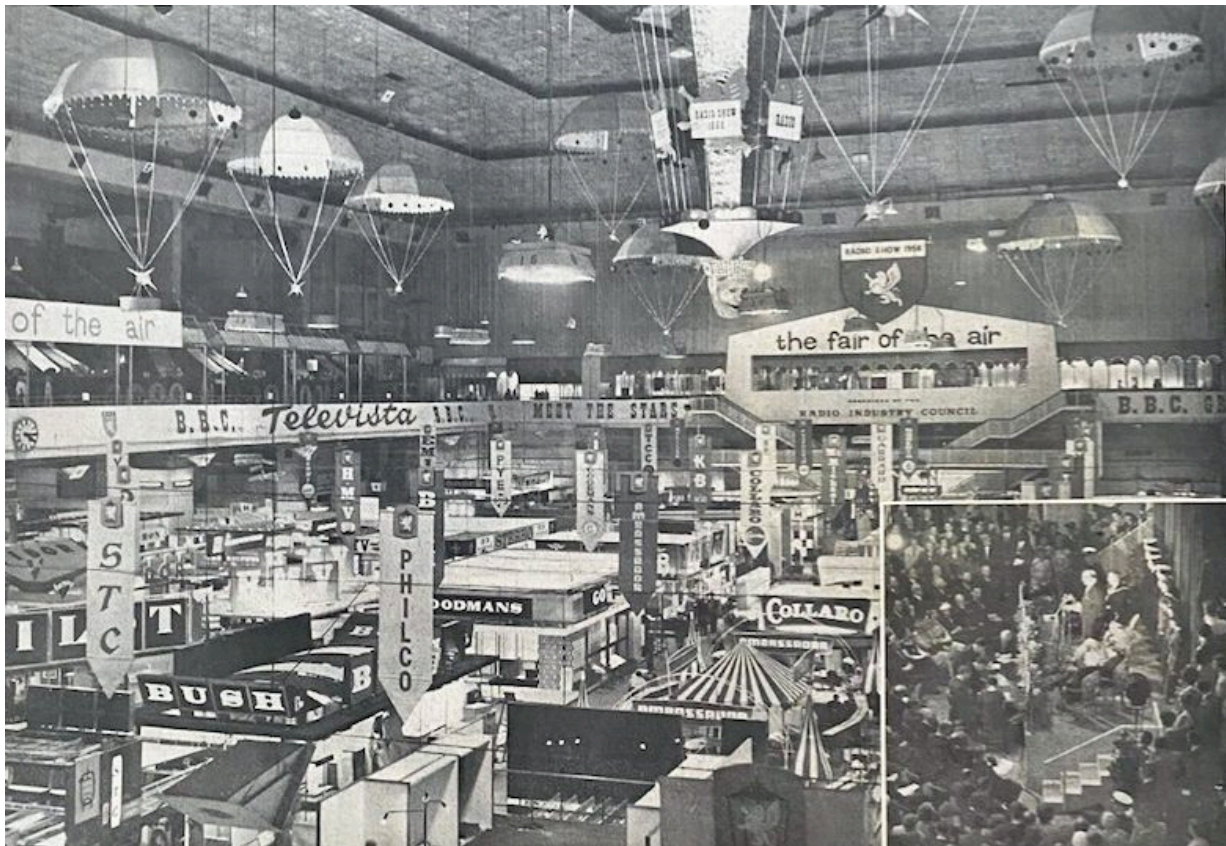


Figure 22 The Radio Show underway; bottom-right, its opening on 27 August; *The Times*, 28 August 1958.

The experience of performing at the Radio Show (as it was commonly – but not entirely accurately – referred to by the public) was not without its ordeals for Valerie and Elaine. Valerie relates it here in her own words:

‘The occasion which made the biggest impact on our future career was the Radio Show. It was in its final week at Earl’s Court, and the BBC was giving amateur singers a chance to appear on its stand, so we went to try our luck. On arriving, having been driven there by my husband Bill who then waited for us in the car park, we realised that we were at the back of a crowd of at least 200-300 people, all waiting their turn.

I had a problem which would not let me stand for any length of time without fainting, but I was determined to make it to the front and get on stage. The hall was very hot and, true to form, I kept having to sit down on the floor, where a very nice man kept fanning me. Finally, we were at the front, looking up at the presenter, just as he announced that that was all they had time for. I think that we must have looked near to tears, and the crowd began saying “give ‘em a chance”, so the presenter gave in and invited us on stage.

Now whether it was the result of waiting so long and the relief of being picked, or whatever, I forgot about my nerves and we sang The Everly Brothers’ song, *All I Have To Do is Dream* and received massive applause. The announcer said he had been approached by the producer who asked that we come back the following day (the last day of the exhibition) and sing for them again.

The following day, we went back to the Radio Show. When we arrived the organiser didn’t know quite what to do with us, so we were put on two high stalls in an alcove, which all the celebrities had to pass. We looked like two bookends, I said, and we could see people wondering who we were.

Finally someone remembered us and came to take us to the stage to sing. I was nervous but the relief at being asked to perform, after waiting hours, took away the worst nerves. After we had performed, the presenter announced that David Jacobs, a top DJ of the time who would soon present *Juke Box Jury*, had said he would recommend us to his manager, Bunny Lewis, who represented many top-notch entertainers. He kept his word and we were subsequently signed up to the Bunny Lewis stable.’



David Jacobs, born in 1926, was a very popular, personable and accomplished broadcaster, chiefly with the BBC. After serving in the Royal Navy during the second world war he became an announcer for the British Forces Broadcasting Service and by 1950 was a BBC staff announcer. By 1958 he had been working on the BBC Light Programme's *Pick of the Pops* (which began in 1955), had been a commentator for the *European Song Contests* and had been a film narrator. In 1959 he would begin presenting the panel show *Juke Box Jury*.



Figure 23 David Jacobs photographed in 1958.

'Bunny' Lewis – formally Major Bridges George McGibbon Lewis MC, born in 1918 – made his career as a composer, songwriter, manager and record producer, following military service with The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) in the second world war, in the course of which he had been awarded the Military Cross on 24 August 1944 for exemplary gallantry during operations in Italy. He had been fighting with the partisans after escaping in Italy, to which he been transported in an Italian submarine as a POW. In September 1944 he had transferred to the SAS and served in that until 1 January 1946.



Figure 24 Bunny Lewis (at left) on *Juke Box Jury*; Series 1, Episode 253, 6 June 1964.

On 19 September the *South Western Star* reported that a new season would open on 3 October at Battersea Town Hall and that 'Battersea's Avon Sisters who were a terrific success in their first stage appearance last year will top the bill and there are 12 other acts.'

### Turning professional

In October it was reported (Figure 25) that The Avon Sisters were to become professional, with engagements lined up for television appearances with both BBC and ITV.



Figure 25 Valerie (at left) and Elaine, soon to turn professional; *The Evening News (London)*, 13 October 1958.

The BBC's show *Six-Five Special*, a major development in televised music, had been launched in February 1957, airing at 6.05 on Saturday evenings, and would continue until December 1958. The episodes had to be televised 'live' owing to the limited capability in that period for pre-recording material. Valerie and Elaine were scheduled to appear on 22 November, when the show would be televised from the USAF Base in Croughton, Northamptonshire and compered by pop singer Jim Dale in front of an exclusive invitation-only American audience. Appearing also would be The Mudlarks, Joan Regan, Lita Roza, Malcolm Vaughan, Ronnie Carroll, Don Rennie, Des O'Connor, Sheila Clarke and Jerry Angelo [*The Banbury Guardian*, 6 November 1958].

Meanwhile, 'The Falcon' was keeping track of The Avon Sisters in the *South Western Star*. In its issue of Saturday 7 November the column reported that on Friday the duo had

'... made their first television broadcast in the North and they have just made their first recording – with The Mudlarks – which will be released at the end of the month. Starting this Sunday, they have five more television dates in eight days. They will be seen and heard on the *Vera Lynn Show*, *Music Shop*, *Cool for Cats*, *6-5 Special* and the *Jack Jackson Show*.'

The Mudlarks were a trio of siblings Fred, Jeffrey and Mary sharing surname Mudd, all born in the 1930s. They had been spotted by David Jacobs who secured for them a place on the *Six-Five Show* and a recording



contract with EMI's *Columbia* label. 'At the end of 1958, The Mudlarks were voted top British vocal group by readers of *New Musical Express*' [from *Wikipedia*].



Figure 26 *Sunday Pictorial*,  
9 November 1958.



Figure 27 The first record by The Avon Sisters; November 1958.



Figure 28 *Daily Mirror*,  
13 November 1958.



Figure 29 The Mudlarks; 1958.

A slightly muted review of the disc was given in *The Liverpool Echo and Evening Express* on 22 November:

'The Avon Sisters make their disc debut with The Mudlarks, in "Which Witch Doctor," yet another sequel to the recent novelty. I would not suggest that this material is worthy either of the sisters' talents or of a place in the Top Twenty, but the flip-side makes up for this: it is a red-hot arrangement of "My Grandfather's Clock." The Muds and the Avons team up admirably, and the result is a lively well-contrived track which rates plenty of spins.'

1959 would prove to be an extremely busy and varied year for these two young singers, as they fulfilled many engagements and travelled wide distances between venues.

The year began with the release of their own record, in which they sang David Clowney's song *Jerri-Lee (I Love Him So)* coupled with *Baby-O*, on the *Columbia* label. On 21 January they appeared on Granada TV's *Jack Jackson Show* at 11pm, together with The King Brothers, Jerry Dene and Roy Castle. They had also performed at the Samson and Hercules ballroom in Norwich and then done a 'late spot' at Lowestoft South Pier [*The Stage*, 22 January 1959].

An unexpected opportunity came their way in February when the jazz singer Maxine Daniels was unable, owing to illness, to appear in a nationwide variety tour featuring The King Brothers, The John Barry Seven and pianist Russ Conway and others. The Avon Sisters took her place, performing on the 23<sup>rd</sup> at London's Finsbury Park Empire, on the 26<sup>th</sup> at the Palace Theatre in Newark and on the 27<sup>th</sup> at the Palace Theatre in Burnley.

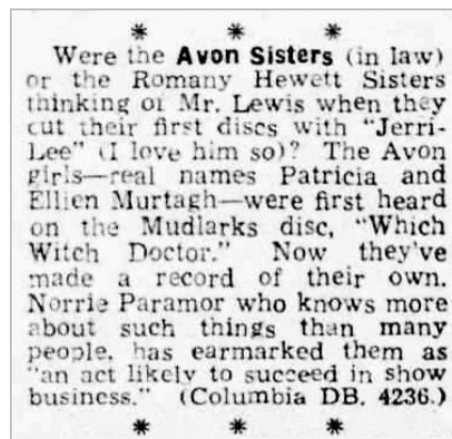
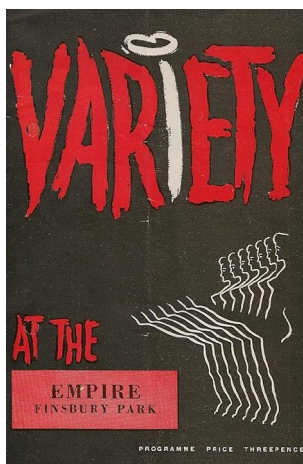


Figure 30 *Nottingham Evening News*, 16 January 1959.

Figure 31 Finsbury Park Programme.

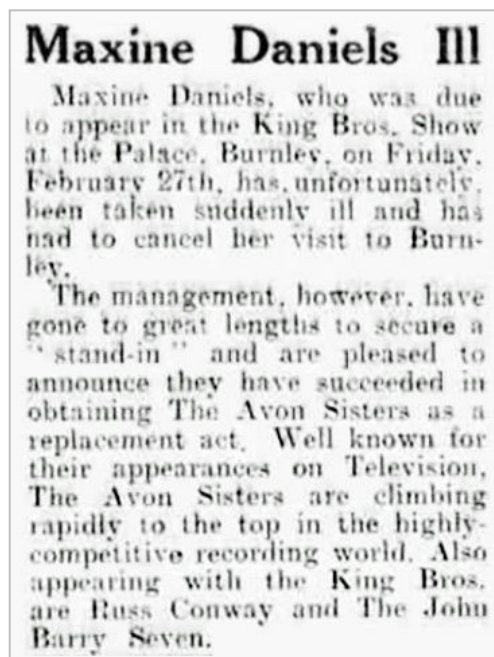


Figure 32 *The Nelson Leader*, 13 February 1959.



Figure 33 *The Nelson Leader*, 20 February 1959.

The Avon Sisters had also performed with The King Brothers *et al* at the Wombwell Plaza. 'Deputising for vocalist Maxine Daniels, who was ill, the Avon Sisters excellently filled the bill' [*South Yorkshire Times*, 28 February 1959]. *The Newark Advertiser* observed on 4 March that in their performance at Newark on 26 February they and the others 'all combined to give a first-rate show'.



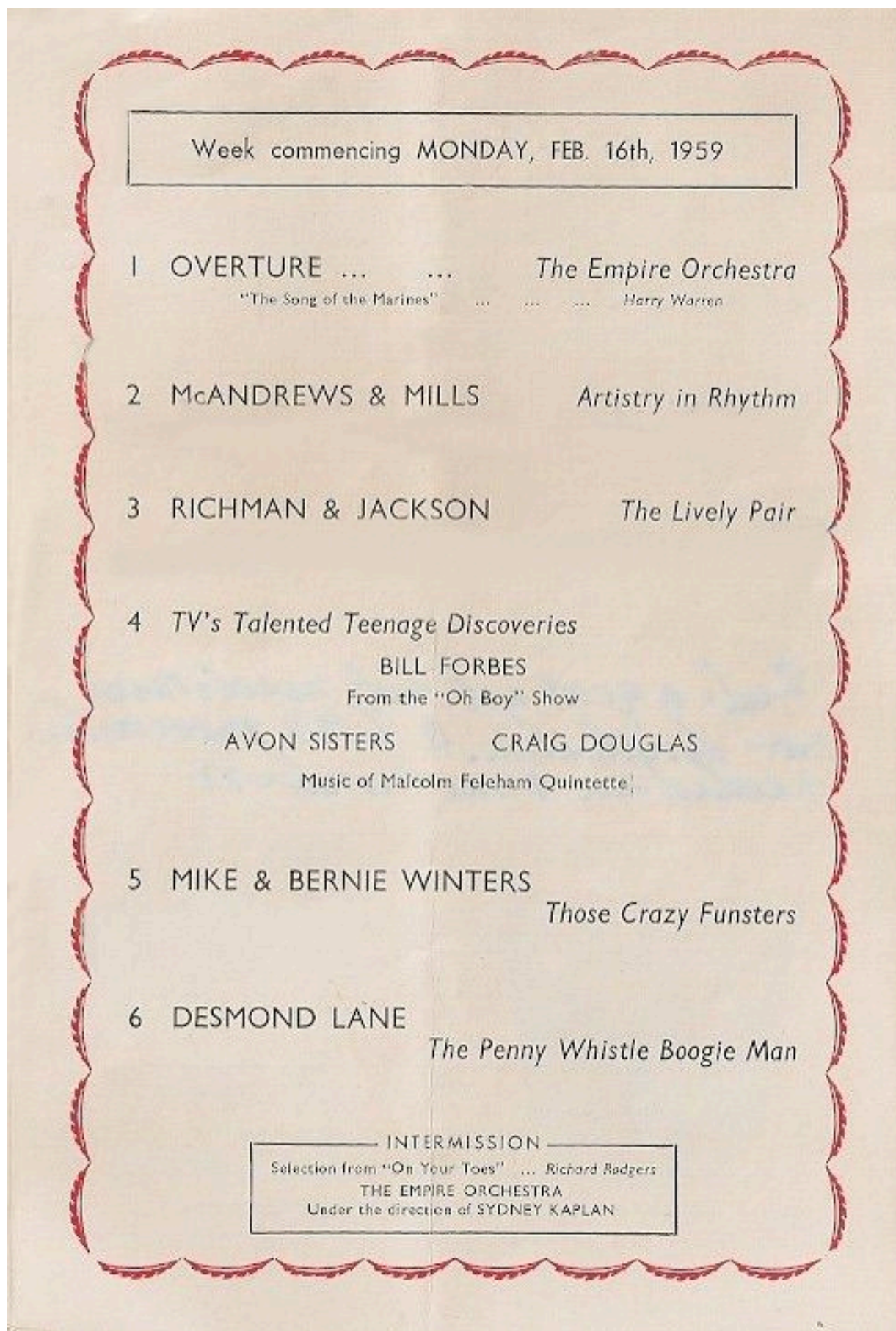


Figure 34 Before appearing with The King Brothers at the Finsbury Park Empire on 23 February, The Avon Sisters had already performed there with Bill Forbes of the *Oh Boy!* show a week earlier as seen in this Programme for 16 February. Figure 31 shows this Programme's front cover.

In early March the girls were back in London where, on the 6<sup>th</sup>, they were guest stars at the Mayoress of Camberwell's charity ball, held at Dulwich Baths [*South London Observer*, 12 March 1959]. Before long they were travelling again to the north of the country, where on 29 March they would appear at the Birmingham Hippodrome with Lord Rockingham's XI, the house band supporting ABC Television's all-teenage *Oh Boy!* show. On 3 April they would perform in *The Marty Wilde Show* at Manchester's Free Trade Hall.



Figure 35 *The Stage*, 19 February 1959.

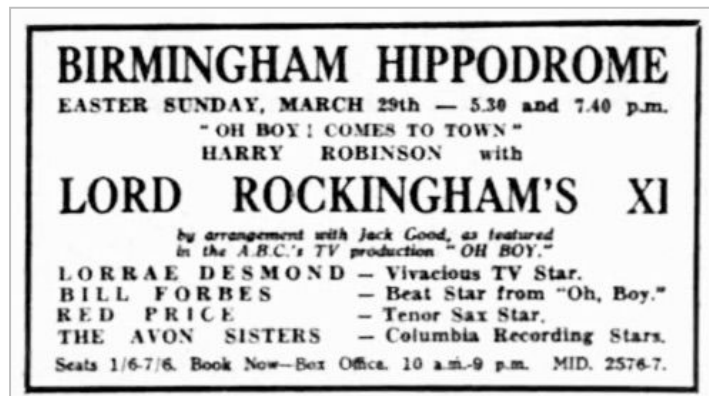


Figure 36 *The Birmingham Mail*, 23 March 1959.



Figure 37 *Manchester Evening News*, 21 March 1959.

After Manchester they moved on with Lord Rockingham's XI to Hull, appearing there at the Cecil Cinema on 12 April, then continued to Liverpool where they performed at the Empire Theatre on 19 April.

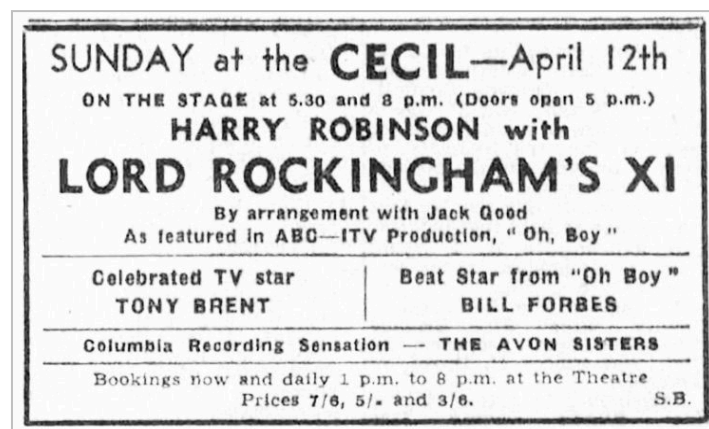


Figure 38 *The Daily Mail (Hull)*, 4 April 1959.

After this spell in the North they would leave England for a while on a summer seasons engagement, a step that would have a major impact upon both of them, personally and professionally.



### A summer season in Jersey

In the spring of 1959 articles appeared in *The Stage* and other publications about the intentions of Nat (Nathaniel Charles) Gonella, a renowned jazz instrumentalist, vocalist and band leader. In 1934-35 he had formed a very successful band The Georgians. After serving in the Army during the second world war he reconstituted the band and toured extensively with it during the 1950s in variety shows.

By March it was known (Figure 39) that Nat's band, renamed The New Georgians, would go to Jersey for a 14-week summer season, this being confirmed a month later (Figure 40). These two articles do not clearly establish the performing start date, but Saturday 6 June appears the more likely.

## NAT GONELLA RETURNS THIS MONTH

**"NAT'S BACK"** and the deep throated gurgle of "Georgia", teamed with the haunting-quality of trumpeting in the mainstream-cum-modern-cum-dixie idiom of Nat Gonella, is the re-echo once again in the top ballrooms and theatres, with the backing of the re-formed Georgians, as it did until the break-



**Nat Gonella**

happy—keep playing that music from the heart", is classed in the same grouping as Jack Payne, Henry Hall, Roy Fox, Lew Stone, Bert Ambrose.

Older obviously—but not showing it—more experienced, more forceful and "blowing better than ever" Nat is now in the final build-up stage of his new Georgians, with a line-up of trumpet, tenor sax, piano, electric guitar and bass, with an accent on youth. Already booked-in are drummer Kenny Harrison, who last year won the individual award in the Southern Championships, and guitarist Gerry Hart, and final auditions to complete the group are now in process.

March 28, marks the come-back date, when the residents of Herne Bay take in Nat's first "one-nighter" at the local King's Hall Ballroom; from then it is ballrooms and guestings, with a possible whirlwind trip to Holland and Ireland, until May 1, when he takes in the Central Pier, Morecambe. On June 6, the new Georgians move in to the Rainbow Room, New Era Ballroom, Jersey, for a 14-week period of residency, taking in cabaret and Sunday concert appearances in addition to playing for general dance sessions.

"Sweet Georgia Brown," "Star-dust", "Basin Street Blues", "Nagasaki" and "Georgia" are all ready for a new lease of life, because "Nat's Back"...and back determined to stay.

up of the original line-up in 1953. This man Gonella, of whom his friend Louis Armstrong said, "God bless you, Nat, and carry on with that horn—we have got to stay around to keep these youngsters

Figure 39 *The Stage*, 19 March 1959.

**UNDER** the auspices of the local council, the Kings Ballroom, Herne Bay, was packed with patrons to give a good send-off to Nat Gonella and His New Georgians on Saturday, when they took in their first feature ballroom date. Bringing back all the old favourite "Gonella" tunes, with "Georgia" and "Sweet Georgia Brown" taking pride of place. Nat's trumpeting and "gravel-voiced" vocals left the jiving teenagers clamouring for more, especially when backed by feature guitarist Gerry Hart and youthful drumming artist Kenny Harrison, and a quick return date to this venue is scheduled.

On arrival at Herne Bay a special telegram awaited Nat Gonella, having been sent from France by his friend and armirer, Louis Armstrong, who was directly responsible for the re-formation of the Georgians . . . the text reading. "Send them cats, Nat, the same as you've always done me. You are my favourite horn man. Always your boy. — Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong."

With the new Georgians launched, a series of one-nighters follow prior to the 14-week season at the Rainbow Room, Jersey, opening June 16, and on Monday last Nat took in a feature solo spot on Southern ITV.

Figure 40 *The Stage*, 9 April 1959.

The significance of this is that The Avons Sisters were signed up to appear on Nat's shows in Jersey, and advertisements for them in that role began appearing in *The Stage* from 11 June onwards.

## JOHNNIE & HARVEY RISCOE AGENCY LTD.

JERSEY RAINBOW ROOM. — Nat Gonella and his New Georgians, Trio Botonds, Avon Sisters, Terry Lomas, Jumpin Jax.

Figure 41 *The Stage*, 11 June 1959.



Figure 42 The New Era Cinema in Jersey with its upstairs Rainbow Room.

The New Era Cinema had opened in 1954 and was located on the Grève D'Azette in Georgetown, St Clement parish in the south-eastern outskirts of St Helier. Its upstairs held a large ballroom named the Rainbow Room, in which Nat Gonella staged his shows. The earliest mention we have found in the Press of The Avon Sisters performing there is that shown in Figure 44.

**ROUND ABOUT**

**N**AT GONELLA and His New Georgians, have now established themselves as a top resident attraction in Jersey. With their season's residency at the Rainbow Room, New Era, St. Helier taking in both cabaret and dancing session, Nat Gonella himself is host to the local Jazz Club outing thrice weekly, and he has been invited to make a guest appearance at the Beaulieu Jazz Festival on August 2.

Figure 43 *The Stage*, 23 July 1959.



Figure 45 Gonella; 22 February 1960.

**RAINBOW ROOM**

**A**T the Rainbow Room, St. Clements, the stars not only of the cabaret but of each entire evening are the musicians, headed by Nat Gonella. Under the name the New Georgians they have brought first class music to the Rainbow Room.

Another act in the cabaret finding great success is the Trio Botonds. The members, Hungarians, thrill and delight their audiences with their balancing, tumbling and general good-natured fun.

Important ingredients in the Jumpin' Jax's act are a trampoline and a handful of unsuspecting people. After a solo turn by one of the act who demonstrates the delights of the trampoline, volunteers are called for. This gives those of the audience who are safely sitting at their tables considerable amusement, and it is not until later that they realise that one of the volunteers is part of the act.

The Avon Sisters are two singers in the modern style, who blend well together.

Figure 44 *The Stage*, 27 August 1959.





Figure 46 The Avon Sisters on stage.

As the season in Jersey progressed, the duo made a new acquaintance. In Valerie's words:

'While we were on summer season in Jersey with Nat Gonella's band we decided we wanted a boy to join the group. On Sundays Nat Gonella would invite local boys to come up on stage and sing a song. We decided to go to a Sunday show, and were impressed by a local boy called Ray Adams, so we approached him about joining us, and he agreed.

Ray used to work for a butcher, delivering meat to all the local farms etc., so we girls used to sit in the front of the van with him, rehearsing harmonies and songs, as he delivered his meat, which resulted in a lot of surprised looks as we drove around. We were rehearsing for Bunny Lewis who was due to come over at the end of the season, to show him the new line-up with Ray.

On the last day of the season, Bunny came over and gave the go-ahead to "The Avons". Poor Ray had just one week to pack up, leave his job, say goodbye to his Mum and come to England, where he also stayed in the flat in Sisters Avenue. THE AVONS had arrived.'



Raymond Stanley Adams had been born on 19 July 1938 in Jersey's capital, St Helier. Details of his ancestry are given in Appendix I but, in brief, his parents were Walter Joseph and Olivia Matilda; he was the youngest of their several children.

The 1959 engagement in Jersey came to its end in about mid-September. Bunny Lewis wasted no time in arranging to have a 45rpm recording made of the new trio, The Avons, as Valerie recalls:

'Bunny rushed us into the studio with Norrie Paramor and we recorded *Seven Little Girls Sitting in the Back Seat* on Columbia Records, which became a hit.'

The song had been composed by American songwriters Lee Pockriss and Bob Hilliard. 'Norrie' was Norman William Paramor, an accomplished all-round British musician – pianist, composer, conductor, bandmaster and record producer. He had become the Recording Director for EMI's Columbia Records in 1952 and had produced records for many well-known artistes including Cliff Richard, Michael Holliday, Helen Shapiro, Frankie Vaughan and The Mudlarks. In 1959 he was living at 37, Menelik Road in Hampstead with his wife Joan.

On the disc's flip-side The Avons sang *Alone at Eight*, composed by Valerie.

The record quickly entered the 'Top Ten'. In the UK Singles Chart it reached No 3 and remained in that position for three months. It would turn out to be their greatest hit, earning them a Silver Disc after more than a quarter of a million copies had been sold.

The earliest Press mention of the *Seven Little Girls* hit found by us so far is that appearing in the *Daily Mirror* on 29 October, which simply commented 'Song to get you by the ears: "Seven Little Girls Sitting in the Back Seat" ... Here the Avons have a go.'

Meanwhile, The Avons had been performing at various venues, for instance on 5 October at the Birmingham Hippodrome, on 26 October with The Mudlarks at the Royalty Theatre in Chester and on 29 October at a charity concert staged by the National Hospital Broadcasting Committee of Great Britain, held at the Granada Theatre in Woolwich.

During a week in mid-November they performed at the Cabaret Club in Manchester's Oxford Street. On 15 December they were guests on *The Melody Dances* with Cyril Stapleton and his band televised by ITA London from the Majestic Ballroom in Finsbury Park.

The article of 23 December shown in Figure 48 notes their record and their being due to appear on ITV's *Bandstand* programme. It mistakenly assigns to Ray the surname 'Palmer', possibly arising from an anomaly in his family history, as explained in Appendix I.



Figure 47 Norrie Paramor; 1960.



Figure 48 *Daily Mirror*, 23 December 1959.



The group made several ITV appearances during the Christmas period of 1959, rounding off the year by performing on 31 December at the *Daily Mirror's* Teenage Ball held at London's Waldorf Hotel.



Figure 49 Guests at the Teenage Ball; Waldorf Hotel 1959.



Figure 50 An early copy of the *Seven Little Girls* disc; 1959.



Figure 51 Sheet music for the *Seven Little Girls* song; 1959.

In this period sheet music for contemporary compositions sold well, being sought by performers at small local venues as well as by many teenagers keen to make music in their homes. The music sheet whose cover is shown in Figure 50 was printed in 1959, very soon after the record had been made. This image of the group became an iconic one, being used in many subsequent publications.

The record continued selling well after the Silver Disc award in 1960, its sales climbing to well over 350,000. Although The Avons produced further songs and performed widely to warm acclaim, their other records did not attain the same heights as this one had.



## 1960 – on tour and on the road

The 'Swinging Sixties' had just begun. The Avons' past few months had been busy but by comparison the new year unfolding would be, for them, almost manic. A generation of young people was hungry for change and especially for entertainment, as the gloomy and impoverished years in the aftermath of the war evaporated away and innovations in electronics and broadcasting made entertainment, whether in the home or out of it, widely accessible and affordable. Teenagers in particular asserted their own tastes in modern music and budding artistes like The Avons would readily meet the demand.

Early in the new year of 1960 they appeared on the *Bandstand* episode aired on ITA London television. *Bandstand* was a weekly variety show that had been launched a few months earlier; it would run until March 1960. The staple feature of the show was the prominent trombonist Ted Heath with his orchestra, other artistes such as Donna Hightower, Sylvia Sands and Maureen Evans appearing in various episodes. The Avons certainly performed on the show on 6, 13 and 20 January.

On 23 January they were on *The 1960 Discstar Show* at Birmingham Town Hall and again on the next day at Newcastle City Hall, giving two performances on each night.

They appeared with Adam Faith, Emile Ford and The Checkmates on 6 February at the City Hall in Sheffield, on 11 February at the Odeon Cinema in Halifax and on 17 February (also with Mike Preston and John Barry) at the Palace Theatre in Burnley. The *Halifax Daily Courier and Guardian* commented on 12 February that The Avons 'demonstrated their versatility in a pleasing range of songs'.

By now they had produced a new Columbia record with two songs, *We Fell in Love* and *Pickin' Petals*, the latter offered to the British Sectional Competition of the Eurovision Song Contest. Reviews of the disc were mostly favourable, some very much so, whilst a few were less enthusiastic. In any case, 'their participation was cancelled due to a European Broadcasting Union rule that stated that trios could not compete' [*Wikipedia*].

The Avons appeared again with Emile Ford and The Checkmates on 25 February at the Granada in Greenford and the next night at the Granada in Grantham. Reviewing the former show, *The Stage* described The Avons as 'a well-balanced threesome [who] sang with pep'.

They now embarked upon a much heavier performance schedule, having signed up to be a fixture in a new whirlwind tour of Britain promoted by Bunny Lewis, the show given the title *Top Twenty Hit Parade*. Its central star was the extremely popular and accomplished singer Craig Douglas (real name Trevor Perkins), and so it was often referred to as simply 'the Craig Douglas Show'. Besides him and The Avons the artistes included The Mudlarks, The Trebletones, Roy Young and Bill Forbes, with Alan Freeman as compère. Over the course of March and April, in each of at least thirty different towns and cities, there would be two evening performances. Other than when the



Figure 52 Bandmaster Ted Heath.

**THE DISCSTAR SHOW, 1960**  
**BIRMINGHAM TOWN HALL,**  
**SATURDAY, 23rd JANUARY, at 6.30 and 8.35 p.m.**  
 "What do you want to make those eyes at me for?"  
**IN PERSON FABULOUS**  
**EMILE FORD EMILE FORD**  
**and the CHECKMATES.**  
 "Seven little girls sitting in the back seat."  
**IN PERSON — RECORDING SENSATIONS**  
**THE AVONS THE AVONS**  
 plus  
**WEE WILLIE HARRIS. THE BACHELORS. THE ROCKETS.**  
 Tickets available — 7/6, 6/6, 4/6, 3/6  
 from TOWN HALL BOX OFFICE — Telephone: CENTRAL 2392.

Figure 53 *The Birmingham Post*, 8 January 1960.

AN ABC THEATRE  
 Telephone 75274 **SAVOY-EXETER** Manager: R. W. Parker  
**ON THE STAGE**  
**ONE DAY ONLY—SUNDAY, March 13th, 5.15 & 7.45**  
 ★  
**CRAIG DOUGLAS**  
**THE MUDLARKS THE AVONS**  
**BILL FORBES ALAN FREEMAN**  
 Compère  
 (Disc jockey for Radio Luxembourg)  
**JOHNNY WILTSHIRE AND THE TREBLETONES**  
 This great "ALL-STAR SHOW" is proving to be extremely popular. May we therefore respectfully suggest that you book your seat as soon as possible and avoid the disappointment that so many patrons suffered at the last show when they found that all seats had been sold?  
 Circle seats, 6/6, 5/6, 4/6, 3/6, 2/6, 1/6, 1/2  
 Stalls, 6/6, 5/6, 4/6, 3/6, 2/6, 1/6, 1/2  
 Booking Office open daily from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.  
 Don't delay — Book today

Figure 54 *Express & Echo*, 20 January 1960.

performers were on stage they would be covering hundreds of miles in travel. It must have been punishingly difficult to have coped with everything involved – planning, rehearsing, costume work, make-up, hair-dressing and all the rest – in trying to give of their best in front of audiences of thousands night after night. Here are the dates and venues of the show's performances:

## MARCH

2 - Tunbridge Wells (Essoldo)  
 3 - Loughborough (Essoldo)  
 4 - Scunthorpe (Essoldo)  
 5 - Norwich (Theatre Royal)  
 6 - St. Albans (Odeon)  
 8 - Canterbury (Odeon)  
 9 - Southend (Odeon)  
 10 - Guildford (Odeon)  
 11 - Salisbury (Gaumont)  
 12 - Trowbridge (Gaumont)  
 13 - Exeter (Savoy)  
 22 - Banbury (Essoldo)  
 23 - Quinton (Essoldo)  
 24 - Cannock (Danilo)  
 25 - Barrow (Coliseum)  
 26 - Stoke (Essoldo)  
 27 - Stockport (Essoldo)

## APRIL

3 - Coventry (Gaumont)  
 7 - Taunton (Odeon)  
 9 - Worcester (Gaumont)  
 10 - Eastbourne (Winter Garden)  
 16 - Morecambe (Alhambra)  
 21 - Chester (Gaumont)  
 22 - Halifax (Odeon)  
 23 - Portsmouth (Guildhall)  
 24 - Colchester (Regal)  
 27 - Lincoln (Savoy)  
 28 - Cambridge (Regal)  
 29 - Bristol (Colston Hall)  
 30 - Plymouth (Odeon)



Figure 55 Programme and ticket for the show on 9 April at Worcester.

The Silver Disc award for *Seven Little Girls* was reported in early March (Figure 56). The Craig Douglas shows were meanwhile doing well. Figure 57 shows a review of the one given at Exeter, noting that the two performances there had been attended by 4,000 fans. During this period The Avons also managed to find time to perform at an All Star Charity Concert staged on 20 March at the Granada in Tooting.

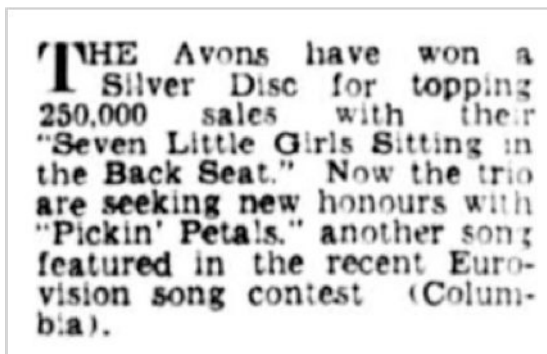


Figure 56 *Evening Express (Aberdeen)*, 5 March 1960.

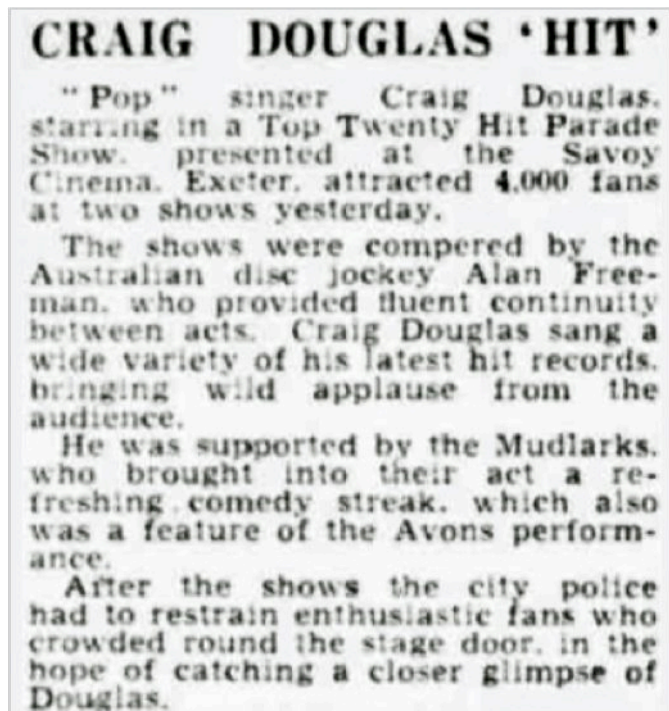


Figure 57 *Express & Echo*, 14 March 1960.

A review of the performance at Southend commented that 'The Avons, neatly dressed and freshfaced, also have comedy with melody, in "Home on the Range", "7 Little Girls" and "Pickin' Petals"' [The Stage,



17 March 1960], whilst a review of the one at Trowbridge noted that they 'gave a lively and exhilarating performance' [*The Wiltshire Times*, 18 March 1960].

16

## BOY MET GIRLS... AND IT WAS CUE FOR A SONG



"Seven Little Girls Sitting In The Back Seat" put The Avons right on top

**T**WO'S company... three's good business. That's the maxim of three of the newest stars in show business. Three youngsters who, under the group title of The Avons, have battled their way to the top of the tree.

They are the only star trio in Britain to use the combination of two girls and a boy. The girls are Valerie, aged twenty-three, and Elaine, nineteen. A couple of years ago they were secretaries in two London West End advertising agencies.

Then they decided to try their luck singing. Last summer they were singing in a club in Jersey, and one evening heard local boy Ray Adams.

The girls offered him a place in their act. He accepted.

Their lucky break came quickly. They were asked to record a U.S. hit number, "Seven Little Girls Sitting In The Back Seat." The record went high into the hit parade, beating the American version.

Now they are on a country-wide tour of one-night stands. And negotiations are already under way for a summer season at one of the big holiday resorts.

What is it like being the odd man out?

"Marvellous," says Ray. "The girls look after me wonderfully. I have never enjoyed myself so much as I have since I joined the act."

The group has invested some of its earnings into a £1,000 car, to use for travelling. Ray does the driving while the girls curl up on the back seat.

"We get on fine," says Ray. "We had our teething problems when we first started, but now we all know our places."

"If there's any argument between the girls, I just keep quiet. Then, sometimes they ask me my opinion."

"When we started, I used to get edgy if we were late setting off for a date. We have never been late yet, though, and now I don't worry at all."

### Good Judgment

"The girls take such care with make-up, their clothes and their whole appearance. So now I have realized that if they are a bit late, there's a very good reason. The results are worth it. They often ask me what I think of their new clothes or hair styles. And they really do take notice of my opinion."

"On the other hand, I now rely on their good judgment with my clothes. After all, we are all dressing to please, so their opinions are very useful."

"The best thing we ever did was to ask Ray to join us," says Valerie.

"We didn't fancy becoming just another sister act. Invariably, they are too high-pitched to be really exciting. The addition of a male voice made all the difference to our harmony and tone."

"Also, Ray has a good effect on audiences. We had noticed that on one-night stands where the audience was mainly girls, our act didn't go all that well. With Ray to keep the girls interested, now we seem to go over great."

Their manager, star-maker Bunny Lewis, predicts a great future for this personality-packed trio. "The sky's the limit for them," he says.

This is definitely a case of two's company... three's business. There's no romantic attachment within the group. Valerie is married and Elaine recently became engaged. Ray doesn't even get time for any courting. "Looking after the girls keeps me much too busy," he says.

Figure 58 The Avons reviewed in *Picturegoer*, 2 April 1960.

## Gaumont Show Was a Hit — Teenagers Storm Stage Door

HAVING seen the two previous Gaumont 'package' shows, I thought it might be fairer to both public and artistes, if I heard the performers' point of view. So, after the first house of the 'Top Twenty Hit Parade,' at the Gaumont on Thursday evening, I went backstage.

All the artistes agreed that this Taunton audience was one of the kindest encountered during their tour. This was a better balanced show, and more likely to appeal to all ages, than the two previous ones.

Top-of-the-bill, Craig Douglas was extremely polished. Not for him the hip-wiggling and flamboyant dress. Wearing a dark dinner jacket, and appearing very relaxed, he still managed to extract ecstatic screams from his audience. Backed by The Hunters, who accompanied all the acts excellently, he sang no rock 'n' roll at all, but stuck to the more subdued 'pop' songs such as 'Only 16,' 'Pretty Blue Eyes,' 'Battle of Jericho' and 'Delaware,' which he sang with the whole company.

In the absence of the Mudlarks, who could not appear due to illness, The Avons, two girls and a boy, took 'second billing'. They have been in show business only a short time, but were quite competent. Their timing was brilliant, and renderings of 'Seven Little Girls,' 'Picking Petals' and 'Be My Guest,' drew tremendous applause from the audience.

### Had the Girls Screaming

Roy Young, the only 'beat' singer on the bill, had the girls screaming, shouting and clapping frenziedly to his presentations of 'Tutti Frutti,' 'Oh, My Soul' and 'Hey Little Girl.' Bill Forbes, from Ceylon, equally was well received for his ballads 'Apple Blossom Time,' 'What do you want to make those eyes at me for' and 'Woman from Liberia.'

Comedy was supplied by compere Alan Freeman, who handled the audience remarkably well and was obviously a great hit with them, and Smoothery and Layton, a crazy pair—who had the difficult chore of replacing the Mudlarks. They were marvellous, getting their act over with great success, and rounded off a very pleasing show.

### Noisy Teenagers

Though the frenzied receptions and agitating of late shows had gone, Thursday evening did not go without incident. After the start of the second performance, several groups of youths waited in the foyer demanding tickets. Some even got into the back stalls, stood there for some time before they were persuaded to leave. Others remained in the foyer for about half an hour before threats to call the police dispersed them. Teenagers once more stormed the stage door, waiting for autographs of their idols, and shouted and bumped the door almost incessantly throughout the last house.—E.C.

Figure 59 *Somerset County Herald*, 9 April 1959.

At the Eastbourne show The Avons were commended for giving the most professional performance of the night (Figure 60).

With such a long series of shows it is not surprising that occasionally things did not go well. The account in Figure 59 of the happenings in Taunton tells of the problems arising from unruliness among some of the teenagers. At many of the Craig Douglas shows the artistes leaving the venue at the end of the evening had to deal as well as they could with lingering fans clamouring for autographs or other kinds of engagement.

Other things could go wrong, as demonstrated by the article in Figure 61 concerning the Coventry event. Mary Mudd of the Mudlarks had to be rushed just before the show to hospital, suffering from acute appendicitis. Bunny's wife, who was managing the show, and The Avons had to make quick arrangements to deal with Mary's absence and 'keep the show on the road'.

Audiences could require careful handling too. The Lincoln show 'had teenage bobby-soxers swooning and screaming in their seats at the Savoy Cinema ...' [*Lincolnshire Echo*, 28 April 1960]. As a popular compère, Alan Freeman presided successfully over these challenges.

## Avons trio

The most professional performance came from The Avons trio, who rose to fame with their disc "Seven Little Girls Sitting in the Back Seat." They blended similar harmony with humour in their other numbers.

Figure 60 *Eastbourne Gazette*, 13 April 1959.

## Finale Saturday Debut Tuesday

JUST one hour before the curtain went up on the Top Twenty Hit Parade stage show at Coventry last Sunday, Mary Mudd of the Mudlarks collapsed and was rushed to hospital. Within an hour she was in the operating theatre for an emergency appendicitis operation.

The next performance of the show was at the Savoy, Hayes, on Tuesday evening and show manager, Mrs. Bunny Lewis began making arrangements for a replacement. She tried many artists but was unable to find any stars available. Eventually at 5 a.m. on Tuesday morning she contacted Tom Layton of the Smoothery and Layton comedy act in Leeds.

Mrs. Lewis told him that he must be in Hayes by mid-day so he grabbed some costumes and sped down the A1 and arrived there just in time for a rehearsal. Meanwhile his other half, Don Smoothery, of Richmond, had been contacted and he also arrived.

They then told Mrs. Lewis that on the previous Saturday they had decided to quit the business because they felt that there was not much of a future for their type of act as so many variety halls were closing down. They even refused a summer season at Pwllheli in Wales.

However, they agreed to assist and with the help of Ray Adams of the Avons vocal group, the act was put together. Smoothery and Layton will remain with the bill until the Mudlarks are fit and fighting again. When the series has finished the two will return to their home towns to start businesses of their own.

They have just returned from a six-week concert tour for troops in Nairobi, Kenya and Cyprus. The act which features Tom welcoming Don as a new recruit to the Army and "Prof" Layton giving a musical lecture to his student, Don, has played at all main theatres in the country and they have appeared with Craig Douglas, Bert Weedon and others in one-night package shows.

Figure 61 *The Stage*, 13 April 1959.



During Easter of 1960 The Avons made time to serve, with others from the Craig Douglas show, as judges in Morecambe's Easter Bonnet Parade. This took place on Easter Monday; two days previously they had given two evening performances at Morecambe's Alhambra Theatre.

By the end of April the two-month tour had concluded. The performers must all have been exhausted. There appear to be very few mentions of the Avons during May – they were probably glad to return home and recuperate. During that month, however, their next single record with Columbia was released, having *I Keep Dreaming* on one side and *We're Only Young Once* on the other. mixed.

**BOROUGH OF MORECAMBE AND HEYSHAM**  
**EASTER BONNET PARADE**  
**Easter Monday, April 18th, 1960**  
 at 11 a.m.  
 Judges :  
**CRAIG DOUGLAS, THE AVONS, MUDLARKS,**  
**BERT WEEDON**  
 Appearing in the Easter Show at the Alhambra Theatre,  
 Morecambe.

Figure 62 *The Morecambe Guardian*, 14 April 1960.

As so often the case in the arts world, reviews were

Other new E.M.I. singles which have been welcome around my turntables this week include **THE AVONS** singing their own composition "I Keep Dreaming" coupled with "We're Only Young Once" (Columbia).

Figure 63 *The Liverpool Echo*, 21 May 1960.

On 27 June The Avons appeared on the *Max Miller Show* at the Brighton Hippodrome (Figure 66). It ran there for a week, twice nightly.

**HIPPODROME**  
 Phone **BRIGHTON 23131**  
**ONE WEEK**  
 Comm. **MONDAY, JUNE 27th**  
**6.15 TWICE NIGHTLY 8.30**  
**MAX MILLER**  
**THE AVONS**  
**MORRIS & COWLEY**  
**BENSON DULAY & CO.**  
**JOSEPHINE ANNE**  
**REY OVERBURY &**  
**SUZETTE**  
**TOBERT TRIO**  
 July 4th—  
**FRANKIE VAUGHAN**  
 Tommy Cooper, Roy Castle,  
 Adele Leigh, King Brothers,  
 in "LET'S BE HAPPY."

**ON RECORDS**  
**WE THINK**  
**THAT—"We're Only Young Once" by The Avons tends to pall after a while. The girls in the background get rather monotonous. "I Keep Dreaming" on the flip is a very attractive beat number.**

Figure 64 *Leicester Mercury*, 1 June 1960.

★ ★ ★  
 The Avons latest "We're only young once" is a gay, catchy release which will perhaps make this group more than a one-hit team. This can be the kiss of death for any professional performer. "We're only young once" has, however, an excellent chance of becoming a really big hit.

Figure 65 *South Western Star*, 17 June 1960.

Figure 66 *Worthing Herald*, 24 June 1960.

They also featured on London ITV's programme *The Variety Show* on 13 July and on BBC Radio's Light Programme broadcast live from HMS Collingwood in Fareham on 29 July.

On 1 August The Avons appeared on BBC's television programme *Holiday Pops*. Almost a week later, on 7 August, they performed with Nicholas Parsons and others on Wellington Pier in Yarmouth.

The 1960 Radio Show at Earl's Court opened on 24 August. At 7pm each night BBC television presented from there the *Seven O'Clock Show* in which numerous high-profile guests were invited to appear on various nights, these including The Avons.

On 28 August The Avons were among several performers on a show given by Edna Savage and Mike Preston at the Odeon in Llandudno.

They were featured in *Saturday Club* on the radio Light Programme on 3 September and performed on *Workers' Playtime*, broadcast from the Kodak Factory in Harrow, in mid-September; at this latter event they sang *Be My Guest*.

In early October Craig Douglas gave another of his shows, this time with the highly talented guitarist 'Bert' (Herbert Maurice William) Weedon, together with singer 'Garry' (Gary) Mills, Alan Freeman and The Avons. Two performances were given on one day only, 2 October, at the Forum Cinema in Bath.



Figure 67 *The Wiltshire Times*, 2 September 1960. Figure 68 Craig Douglas.



Figure 69 Valerie (at left) and Elaine with Garry Mills (nephew of Nat Gonella); 1961.



By now the trio had recorded another disc, again with Columbia. This featured the Pockriss–Vance composition *Four Little Heels* together with a song composed by themselves, *This Was Meant to Be*. Brief reviews are shown in Figures 70 and 71.

Competition between bright-eyed Brian Hyland and Columbia's singing threesome The Avons; Brian's London version of "Four Little Heels" carries the better accompaniment but The Avons make the neater job on their vocal.

Figure 70 *The Liverpool Echo and Evening Express*, 8 October 1960.

Look out for the Avons to re-appear in the charts with "Four Little Heels," another cute ditty from the American team Pockriss and Vance, composers of their first hit, "Seven Little Girls." It has the ingredients for another winner for Ray, Valerie and Ellen. Coupling, "This Was Meant To Be" is a joint composition by the trio.

Figure 71 *Porthcawl Guardian*, 28 October 1960.

On 7 November a twice-nightly show led by the comedic band Syd Millward and the Nitwits, and also starring The Avons and the comedienne Hylda Baker, opened at the Theatre Royal in Hanley, Staffordshire; it may have run for a week.

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| <b>SYD<br/>MILLWARD<br/>AND THE<br/>NIT-WITS</b> | Britain's Queen of<br>Comedy<br><b>HYLDA<br/>BAKER</b> | <b>THE<br/>AVONS</b>                 |

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Figure 72 *Evening Sentinel*, 5 November 1960.



Figure 73 Hylda Baker.

**Theatre Royal**

Music in the mixed-up manner is featured at the Theatre Royal, Hanley, next week when Sid Millward and his Nitwits top the bill.

The band was formed in 1937 as a jazz group with light incidental comedy. After the war the present band was formed around some characters who were in the army together. The band is going on to the Lido, Paris, for a year's engagement and then to Las Vegas.

The strong supporting cast includes the Avons, Hylda Baker, Judy Moxon and the Three Edorics.

Figure 74 *Stafford Newsletter*, 5 November 1960.



Figure 75 Syd Millward and the Nitwits.

Later in November The Avons and others appeared in a twice-nightly show with singer and actor Gary Miller (not to be confused with Garry Mills) at the Empire in Glasgow. In the record shops, *Four Little Heels* was, according to Press reports, selling well.

As 1960 drew to a close, a few newspapers mentioned in December that two new recordings had been made by The Avons, of the songs *Poor Little You* and *Tell Tommy I Miss Him*, neither of them their own compositions. The group appeared at the Roof Top Room in Belfast and also – with Craig Douglas – at the Empire Theatre in Liverpool. The latter event seems to have been somewhat under par, but was rescued to an extent by The Avons (see Figure 76).

On 17 December they joined comedian Leslie Crowther in entertaining at the Sankey Ballroom in Hadley, Shropshire. On Boxing Day they were with Craig Douglas again, this time on his home territory the Isle of Wight, where they performed at the Commodore in Ryde.

Altogether 1960 had been a year of great challenge and opportunity for the group, in which they earned much popularity and acclaim. From this point on their Press mentions would decline significantly, as they began turning their attention more towards creative songwriting and less towards touring and stage appearances.

### Later achievements

Further singles were recorded by The Avons during the early Sixties: *Rubber Ball* / *This Was Meant to Be* and *Skin Divin'* / *Little Bo Peep* in 1961; *Tonight I Cannot Sleep* / *Gotta Go* and *A Wonderful Dream* / *Tonight You Belong to Me* in 1962; *Hey Paula* / *I Wanna Do It* / and *Love Should Be True* / *All About You* in 1963; *I am the Girl* / *Once Upon a Summer's Day* in 1964.

Ray also ventured into solo recording, making a single *Venus in Blue Jeans* / *He's Got My Sympathy* with the German 'Karussell' label in 1962.

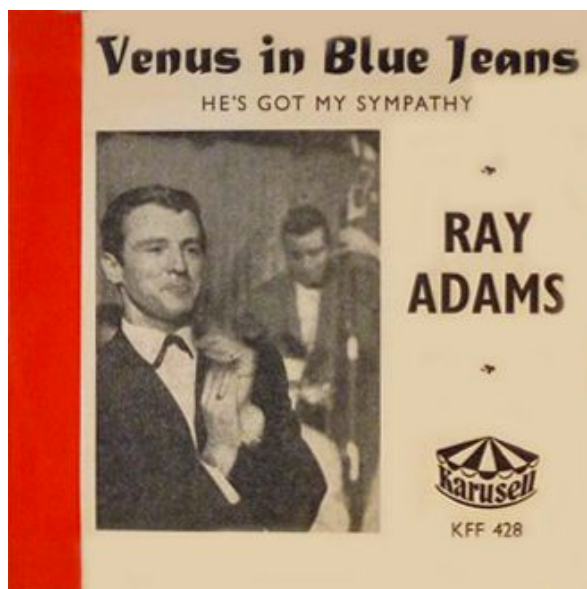


Figure 77 Cover of Ray's *Venus in Blue Jeans* disc.

**EMPIRE.**—Rock star Craig Douglas tops the variety bill here this week. His voice is pleasant enough and he has the usual swinging sense of rhythm, but he lacks the personality to really "send" the audience. With him are the Avons, a bright trio of vocalists who give a much-needed fillip to the show; Reg Dixon and Joe Church. Reg Dixon's "Confidential" routine seemed a little tired. The brightest spot of the evening is provided by ventriloquist Arthur Worsley whose doll, "Charlie Brown" is as near live as makes no difference. He also provided a very funny line in sarcastic patter.

Figure 76 *The Liverpool Echo and Evening Express*, 6 December 1960.

**WITH "Venus in Blue Jeans" (Decca F 11507)** Ray Adams, of the Avons vocal group, makes his solo debut.

Ray tells me he will continue to appear with the Avons even though he is also striking out on his own. "As a solo artist I will miss the girls on either side of me," he said. "They give you a lot of confidence."

Ray, who is 24, was born in Jersey. Before he became a singer he was a chef, butcher, labourer, and roof-tiler. And all the time he was singing non-professionally with a beat group during his off-duty hours.

His big chance came in the summer of 1959. Nat Gonella, appearing in Jersey for the season, was persuaded to let Ray sing with him. The Avon Sisters—then a double act—were watching, and they were so impressed that they asked Ray to join them. Three weeks later they made the hit record of "Seven Little Girls."

Figure 78 *Manchester Evening News*, 14 September 1962.

During 1962 The Avons composed the instrumental piece *Dance On* and on 21 December a disc was recorded, for Columbia at the EMI Studios in London, on which the work was performed by The Shadows; on the flip side they played another instrumental work *All Day*, written by Bruce Welch and



Hank Marvin. The disc was released on 7 December. *Dance On* rapidly became a hit for The Shadows, moving to No 1 in the UK Singles Chart. A year later a vocal version of it was recorded by the singer Kathy Kirby; this rose to No 11 in Britain in September 1963 and to No 1 in Australia.

In March 1964 The Avons received an Ivor Novello award as the songwriters behind the *Dance On* disc in the category of 'Most Broadcast Work of the Year'.

Meanwhile, during 1961 the group had continued to make stage appearances around the country. In January they had featured at a celebrity dance at the Imperial Ballroom in Nelson, Lancashire, although had been unable to complete their performance owing to difficulties over accompaniment. Further north still, they sang at the Reid Hall, Forfar, Scotland on 1 April.

From March to October 1961 they made several appearances on the Jimmy Clitheroe show, including the following; at the Regal Cinema, Wells in mid-March; at the South Parade Pier in Southsea, twice-nightly for two weeks commencing 19 June; at the Empire in West Hartlepool on 27 September and at the Essoldo in Banbury on 29 September.

Below are some images relating to them in the 1960s.



Figure 79 The Shadows' *Dance On* disc.

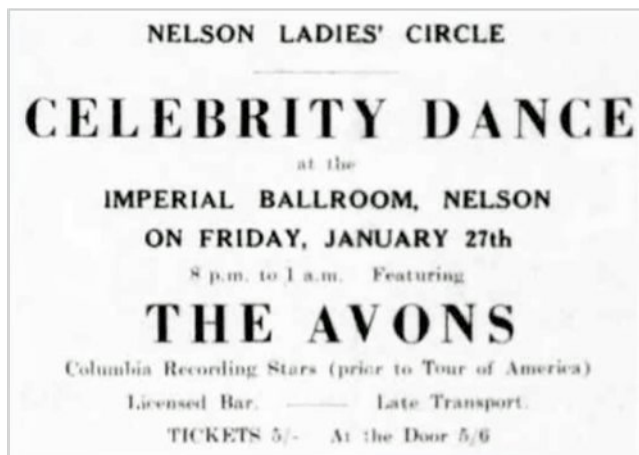


Figure 80 *Barnoldswick & Early Times*, 20 January 1961.

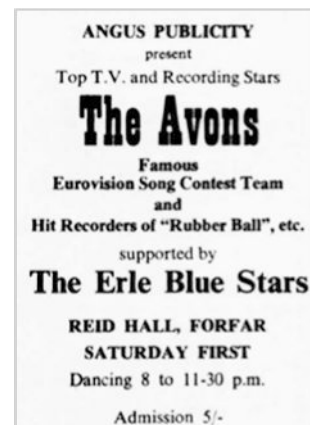


Figure 81 *The Forfar Dispatch*, 9 March 1961.

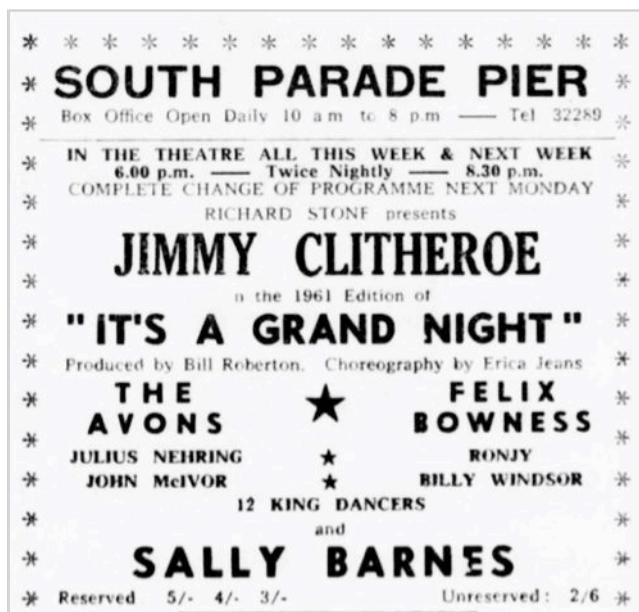


Figure 82 *Portsmouth Evening News*, 15 June 1961.



Figure 83 *Northern Daily Mail*, 23 September 1961.

**THE AVONS**

**Tonight I Cannot Sleep ; Gotta Go**  
(Columbia DB 4820) \* \* \* \*

I like this release by The Avons. They blend smoothly for **Tonight I Cannot Sleep**. The path is a lilting one along Latin lines and Harry Robinson directs the orchestra ... bringing out a compulsive sway to the whole side.



Figure 84 *Disc* magazine (facsimile), 14 April 1962.

**TEENAGERS' RECORD ROUND-UP**

## The Avons—now only two—have more scope

The Avons first became popular a few years back with their recording of 'Seven little girls' when there were three of them. Now there are only two and they bow in with 'Hey Paula.'

The tune is a slow one, and has the two singing solos, with replies from the other. It is very big in the States and it could provide the Avons with a new hit here.

Although they have not been in the charts as singers for a long time, they were at the top of the British hit parade recently as songwriters with their tune 'Dance on,' which provided the Shadows with another hit.

They said that at first they were a little nervous at losing the third member, but now they find they can perform a lot more varied work, for example country and western and modern jazz.

Flipside of their new one is a beat number entitled 'I wanna do it.'



**ONCE** they were three, and they were successful with hit discs like "Seven Little Girls." Now they are two, and they should be successful with hit discs like "Hey Paula."

The Avons were at the top of the British hit parade recently, not as singers but as songwriters via their tune "Dance On," which they wrote over two years ago. Now they could make it vocally with their power packed recording of "Hey Paula."

The Avons used to consisted

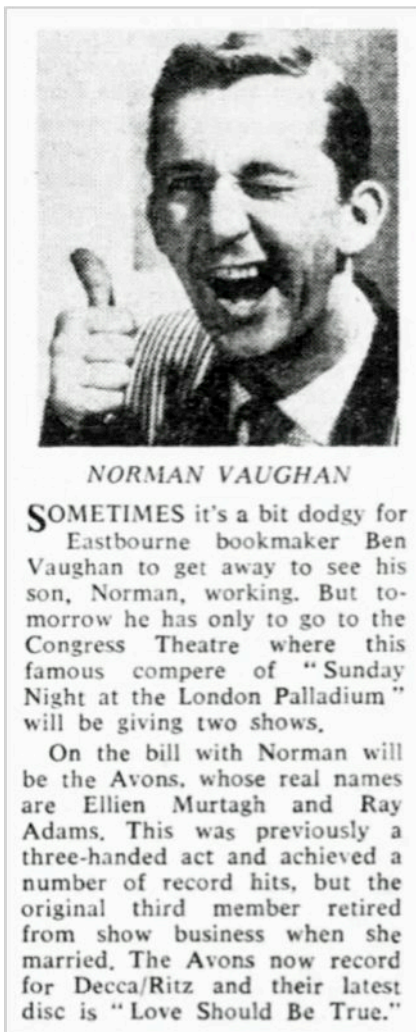
of Elaine and Val Murtagh and Ray Adams. Now Val Murtagh, who is married, has decided to settle down in London.

"At first we were a bit nervous at losing the third member," say the two remaining Avons. "We went into hibernation for a month, practising new routines and working out a new vocal approach. Now we find we can perform a lot more varied work, for example C. and W. and even modern jazz."

Figure 85 *Sussex Express & County Herald*, 8 February 1963.

Figure 86 *Highland News and Football Times*, 8 February 1963.



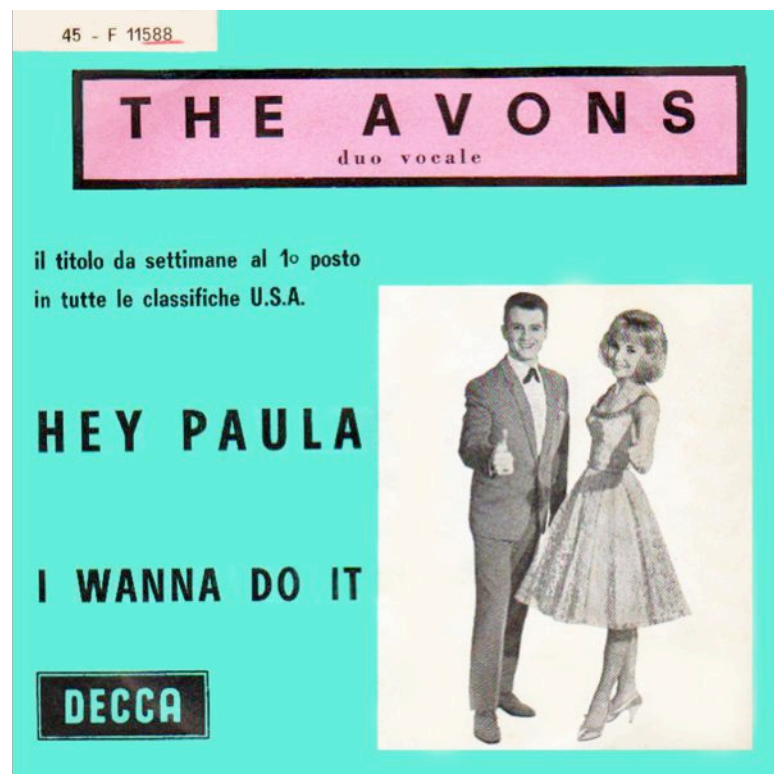
Figure 87 *The Stage and Television Today*, 4 July 1963.Figure 90 *Herald Chronicle*, 27 July 1963.

**7.30 \*\*IT'S YOUNG AGAIN.** New comedy series with Alan Young, The Avons and Alyn Ainsworth and his Orchestra.

Figure 88 *The Evening News and Star*, 4 July 1963.

**Alan Young show from Granada**

**T**ONIGHT a new series from Granada (on full ITV network) begins called "It's Young Again" starring British-born comedian Alan Young. Well known on American television, Young came to Britain soon after the start of independent television to star in Granada's "Personal Appearance".

Figure 89 *The Stage and Television Today*, 4 July 1963.Figure 91 Cover for the *Hey Paula* disc; 1963.

### Moving to Effingham

In 1962 The Avons left the urban landscape of Battersea and came to live in leafy Effingham. One of Bill's sisters and her husband had bought a newly-built house in the area. Its relative tranquillity appealed to Bill despite meaning a daily commute of at least an hour for him into Brixton where he worked as the director of a furniture shop. So in August 1962 he and Valerie purchased a detached house in Effingham near the north-western end of Strathcona Avenue. It was No 94 and they named it *Avonsville*. It would mean over an hour's commute for Valerie too, travelling regularly to London. In periods when she would be away on tour with Ray and Elaine, Bill's mother would stay in *Avonsville* to keep him company.

According to the Land Registry the transfer of title to Bill was made on 15 August, the vendor being Frederick Arthur Oak, the builder of the main south-east-to-north-west stretch of Strathcona Avenue on land which had for a long period been in the ownership of Effingham solicitor Sidney Alfred Williamson, until sold by him to A J Wait & Co Ltd in November 1958. That stretch of road was in the very early 1960s named not Strathcona Avenue but Norwood Gardens Estate – it was only a little later in the decade that it came to share the name Strathcona Avenue with the much earlier and shorter section of road branching off from Woodlands Road.



Figure 92 *Avonsville* in Strathcona Avenue, Effingham.

Ray and Elaine came to live at *Avonsville* too. On 4 January 1964 they married, at Effingham's Catholic church Our Lady of Sorrows, the ceremony officiated by Father Loader [GRO Ref: Surrey SW 5d 1821, 1964 (Q1)]. In the marriage register they each gave their occupation as professional entertainer and their address as 94, Strathcona Avenue. Elaine's first forename was entered as 'Ellien', presumably in order to be



consistent with her birth certificate. Ray's father was named as Walter 'Frederick' Adams, deceased army pensioner and Elaine's father as William Murtagh, deceased commercial traveller. Bill was one of the witnesses. As explained in Appendix I, Ray's father's second forename was not Frederick but Joseph.



Figure 93 *New Musical Express*, 10 January 1964.

Valerie has fond memories of Effingham:

'I remember, after living in Effingham for a couple of years, I went back to Battersea to visit my brother and I went into a food shop to do some shopping. I realised just how relaxed I had become since living in Effingham when the assistant and some of the customers started tutting because I was taking too long, ordering and chatting to the assistant. In Effingham my life had become far more relaxed than it had been in the hurry and scurry of Battersea.

Another first for me in Effingham was one winter when Bill and I came home from work on the train to Effingham Junction. It had been snowing heavily and we couldn't believe our eyes when one man got out a pair of skis and put them on and skied away.

Our first Christmas in Effingham had a heavy snowfall. Strathcona Avenue was a parade of new houses. Everyone was joining in clearing each other's drives so that they could get their cars out. Again, this kind of thing was not usually practised when living in Battersea.

For my business I put together a number of professional vocal groups and we used to rehearse at Strathcona Avenue, always in the daytime so that it didn't disturb the neighbours too much. They were a nice, friendly group of people in Strathcona Avenue, but as my business began to grow we knew we would have to move to a larger house, which was when we moved to Patchesham Park in Leatherhead. I lived there until the death of Bill, in 1997.

I loved my time and my friends in Effingham and Leatherhead, but once my husband had died I needed to get away, which was why I moved. Although it's been a long time since I lived in Strathcona Avenue, it will always hold a place in my happy memories.'

### The later years

As indicated in Figures 85-91, The Avons had reconfigured themselves by early 1963. Valerie began making a separate career of her own in composing and artist management.

Meanwhile Ray and Elaine cast themselves as 'The Avons' up to early 1964; after this they renamed themselves 'Ray and Ellien' and in 1965 recorded *You'll Never Find a Love Like Mine* on the Fontana label. They recorded also with Decca but never had a major hit. For many years they performed on tour in Britain – for instance, at the Cabaret Room, Formby in May 1971 – and abroad as seen in Figure 94.



Figure 94 *The Stage and Television Today*, 5 July 1973.



Figure 95 Cover of the LP *The Best of The Avons*, released in 1978.

In 1978 Ray and Elaine recorded their one and only LP record *The Best of the Avons*, in collaboration with the Rama III Orchestra of Poland led by Jan Rejnowicz. It was produced by SRT Productions Ltd. The track list was as follows:

- 1 Gentle On My Mind
- 2 You Light Up My Life
- 3 Don't
- 4 Isn't She Lovely
- 5 Annie's Song
- 6 The Way We Were
- 7 You Are The Sunshine Of My Life
- 8 Love And Imagination
- 9 Mexican Whistler
- 10 Neil Sedaka Medley
- 11 The Last Farewell



In the later 1970s they began cruising, which was very successful. They worked as entertainers under the title 'The Avons' for the Royal Viking Line from 1977. In 1980 Ray was made Cruise Director for RVL whilst Elaine became a successful agent supplying acts for the ships. The *Sea* and the *Sky* were among the RVL ships he worked on. Changes in the company led Ray to leave in 1994, taking up the position of Cruise Director with Crystal Cruises, joining the team on the ship *Crystal Symphony*. (These details are taken from his former *Facebook* page and from exchanges he had with former cruise staff on the website <https://cruiseoctopus.com>.)

Sadly, Ray and Elaine eventually divorced, after which Ray remarried to a wealthy American lady. He retired to the beautiful city of Rancho Mirage in California, using the surname Avon-Adams. In about 2020 it was found that he had cancer for which he was operated on several times. His last *Facebook* posting was on 15 September 2022. He died soon afterwards on 31 October, his second wife having not long predeceased him.



Figure 96 Ray's picture on *Facebook*, up to 2022.

Meanwhile Valerie pursued her own interests, firstly promoting new records on behalf of Pye Records and then putting together several successful vocal groups. She continued writing and had a successful career as a songwriter, manager and producer. Under her professional name Valerie Avon she co-wrote with her songwriting partner Harold Spiro the song *Long Live Love* which represented Britain in the 1974 *Eurovision Song Contest*. The performing of the song by Olivia Newton-John was staged by the BBC at the Dome in Brighton on 6 April. In the overall contest it achieved a commendable 4<sup>th</sup> place with 14 points, the winners being ABBA for their song *Waterloo*.



Figure 97a, b Olivia Newton-John at Brighton singing *Long Live Love* for Britain's Eurovision entry; 6 June 1974.

Many of the groups and solo artists developed by Valerie went on to have very successful careers. One such group was Stutz Bear Cats (singing in the style of Manhattan Transfer) who went on to have their own TV show. Another group Cover Girls (singing in the style of The Pointer Sisters) was at one time the most requested girl group in Britain. When Cover Girls split, one of the members Maddi Cryer went on to perform as an excellent impressionist, singer and actress in many top television shows such as *The Little and*

*Large Show, The Bobby Davro Show, You've Gotta Be Jokin', the Children's Royal Performance, Dr Who* and many others. Maddi is still represented to this day by Valerie.

Bill was in partnership with an estate agent and opened a furniture shop in Brixton, which was very successful until the Brixton Riots of 10-12 April 1981, when the shop was burnt to the ground. By this time he and Valerie were living in Patchesham Park, Leatherhead.

Following all the worry over Bill's business, he had a heart attack, followed by a stroke. He lost the use of his left arm and leg and when he returned home (which backed on to the Leatherhead Golf Course) the members had clubbed together to get him a golfing trolley and, as he was the Captain, they had a number plate 'WILLY 1' put on it. This was a great gift, as it enabled him to drive around the course and see his friends.

In late December 1981 Valerie and Elaine (and perhaps Ray too) were interviewed by *The Sun* as shown in Figure 98.

Valerie continued to live many years in Surrey but eventually left the county and today lives in Sussex. Elaine died in Surrey in January 2026.



Figure 99 Valerie on her birthday, 2025.

Figure 99 Valerie on her birthday, 2025.



NOW: Still happy, Ellien, Ray and Valerie

## THE AVONS

### *We never had lots of money*

For the last 20 years, Ellien Avon has been nudged in the ribs by jokers cracking: "Ding, dong, Avon calling."

The joker always creases up – but Ellien doesn't mind a bit.

Nor do the other original Avons – her husband Ray and sister-in-law Valerie.

Ellien, 40, says: "You'd be surprised how many people still recognise us. We're always being asked to sing Seven Little Girls."

And more often than not, they are able to oblige.

For though the Avons are no longer still together as a group, all three are involved in showbusiness.

Valerie, 44, left the group in 1963 to spend more time with husband Bill. She has managed Tina Charles and Mac and Katie Kissoon. Now she looks after the Stutz Bear Cats who appeared on this year's Miss United Kingdom Show.

Ray, 43, and Ellien, who married in 1964, now work as entertainments directors on a cruise line.

Ray and Ellien live in Kent, Valerie and Bill live in Surrey.

Valerie says: "We never had lots of money because we split everything three ways. But Ellien and I splashed out on musquash coats. They were £100 which seemed like a fortune then. But I wouldn't have done any of it differently. I had never planned on being in showbusiness. It was more of an accident. We've all lived charmed lives."

Figure 98 *The Sun* (facsimile), 21 December 1981.



## ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figures 1, 2, 4: from <https://www.irishgenealogy.ie>
- Figure 3: from <https://www.buildingsofireland.ie> [Survey Data Reg No 50070048]
- Figure 5: from Glasnevin Heritage (Facebook): <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100064451661581/search/?q=annamoe>
- Figure 6: London Picture Archive Record No 51804, photo from 1978; LCC Photograph Library Catalogue No SC\_PHL\_01\_032\_N14102
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- Figure 45: from [https://www.bigredbook.info/nat\\_gonella.html](https://www.bigredbook.info/nat_gonella.html) on *This Is Your Life*
- Figure 46: from <https://www.discogs.com/artist/4663918-The-Avon-Sisters>
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- Figure 73: from <https://televisionheaven.co.uk/biographies/hylda-baker>
- Figure 75: from <https://www.r2ok.co.uk/genarder.htm> (detail)
- Figure 77: from <https://www.goldenoldies.se>
- Figure 79: from *Wikipedia*
- Figure 84: from *Disc* magazine, 14 April 1962
- Figure 86: image © Highland News & Media Ltd: image courtesy of The British Library Board
- Figure 92: from Christopher John Hogger
- Figure 93: from <https://www.worldradiohistory.com/UK/New-Musical-Express/1964/NME-1964-01-10-S-OCR.pdf>
- Figure 96: from <https://www.facebook.com/raymond.avonadams>
- Figure 97: from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1eOMLWb0YIE&list=RD1eOMLWb0YIE&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1eOMLWb0YIE&list=RD1eOMLWb0YIE&start_radio=1)
- Figures 98, 99, 105-113: from Valerie Murtagh
- Figures 100-104: from *Ancestry* public tree <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/family-tree/person/tree/28455353/person/150087449509/facts>

## RECORDINGS

Many of the songs mentioned in this article can be listened to on the internet. Examples include:

|                               |                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Seven Little Girls</i>     | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDYpr99FgEk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDYpr99FgEk</a> |
| <i>Which Which Doctor</i>     | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2N9Ew223tk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2N9Ew223tk</a> |
| <i>My Grandfather's Clock</i> | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXs7oZP_P6s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXs7oZP_P6s</a> |
| <i>Alone at Eight</i>         | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAuYrEFBqbM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fAuYrEFBqbM</a> |
| <i>Four Little Heels</i>      | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mZzk62ldmI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mZzk62ldmI</a> |
| <i>This was meant to be</i>   | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wib8mBjn9GI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wib8mBjn9GI</a> |
| <i>Long Live Love</i>         | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1eOMLWb0YIE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1eOMLWb0YIE</a> |

## APPENDIX I

*Ray's family background*

As noted earlier, Ray was born in St Helier on 19 July 1938. His mother Olivia Matilda (née Anquetil) had been born in Jersey on 3 October 1894 and baptised in St Ouen parish on 11 November 1894. Her father Edmund Andrew Anquetil was at that time a postman and her mother was named Isabella (née Fauvel). Ray's father Walter Joseph Parle was also born in 1894, in Devon [GRO Ref: Exeter 5b 89, 1894 (Q3)]. Walter Joseph's father, also named Walter Joseph (senior), was occupied as a builder's storekeeper at the time of the 1901 Census when the family was living in Colchester, Essex at 79, Northgate Street. Walter Joseph's mother Matilda (née Richer), then a tailoress, had been born in Colchester; she may have married Walter Joseph (senior) in Ireland, as their first child (also named Matilda) had been born in Cork; another of their children, Helena Emily, had been born in Alexandria, Egypt.

Ray's father Walter Joseph seems not to have made a good start in his early life as in 1906, at age 12, he and another boy were convicted at Colchester Police Court of cruelty, having deliberately injured 32 cows with heavy sticks. The newspaper report of this incident makes difficult reading. His youth had probably been an unhappy one. By the time of the 1911 Census his parents had split: his father, still occupied as a builder's storekeeper and described as separated

and an Army pensioner, was living at 8, Hospital Lane in Colchester with a likewise separated woman Edith King and her children; however, Matilda and some of her children (but not Walter Joseph) were boarding in the household of an unmarried iron moulder at 122, Harwick Road in Colchester.

Walter Joseph had meanwhile joined the Army and in the 1911 Census was shown ranked as 'Boy' with the 1<sup>st</sup> Devon Regiment in the Lucknow Barracks at North Tidworth near Andover, Hampshire. By early 1915, while still in the Army, he had begun a relationship with his future wife Olivia Matilda. Their first child Olivia Beatrice was born in Colchester in late 1915. They married a year later [GRO Ref: Reading 2c 830, 1916 (Q4)]. Their marriage certificate describes him as a Private in the Army Service Corps serving as a munition worker. His father Walter Joseph (senior) was described as a Sergeant Major also in the Army Service Corps. Olivia's father Edmund Andrew was now a cycle engineer. The marriage took place on 16 December 1916 at the Register Office in Reading, where they were living at 10, Vachel Road. Walter Joseph (senior) was indeed holding the rank described on the certificate: he had enlisted in London on 9 September 1916 for service in the Royal Defence Corps, while still living in Colchester, having already served 22 years in the Army in the previous century, 20 years with the 1<sup>st</sup> Devons and then 2 years with the Royal Garrison Regiment. His Service Record in The National Archives notes that at the time of his 1916 enlistment his next of kin was recorded as 'Unmarried wife Mrs Edith E King, 8 Hospital Lane, Colchester'.

On 6 August 1917 Walter Joseph, ranked as Private, retired from the Army, discharged owing to being medically unfit. Only a few details of his military service are known, these drawn from his WW1 medal cards (of which there are two, in The National Archives), and these are not straightforward. It appears that he served as Walter Joseph Parle with the 1<sup>st</sup> Devons having Service Number 9108, entering the 'theatre of war' on 22 August 1914, and was duly awarded the usual WW1 medals (Victory, British and Star). However, one card's initial entries for these awards were struck out and the remark 'Forfeits: Desertion' added alongside. But then further entries on that same card indicate that the awards had been restored, these having the remark 'Found serving as No 36779 as W J Adams in the Somerset Light



Figure 100 Ray as a baby.



Infantry'. It is not clear what to make of all this, but the transition to a new regiment having adopted a new surname may have created confusions in the Army's bureaucracy – rather than a 'desertion' there may have been only an irregularity in the way these transitions were implemented. An additional remark on one of the medal cards states that Walter Joseph later re-enlisted on 8 February 1920 with the Royal Engineers.

In September 1917, shortly after leaving the Army, Walter Joseph was working as a horse dealer. This is known from a lengthy newspaper article [*The Chronicle* (Reading), 21 September 1917] reporting a case before the Reading Magistrates in which Walter Joseph was accused of having fraudulently obtained financial aid payments from the office of the Reading War Pensions Committee without having divulged to the staff there that he was already in receipt of war gratuity money. He disputed the accusation but was convicted and fined £2-10s with the alternative of 21 days' imprisonment.

The 1921 Census finds Walter Joseph, Olivia and their three children back in Colchester, living at 41, Vineyard Street. His occupation was given as soldier, consistent with the observation above that he had re-enlisted in 1920. On the Census form he incorrectly entered 'St Helier, Jersey' as his birthplace.

The family's movements and activities throughout the rest of the Twenties and most of the Thirties are unknown to us, except that by 1938 they must have been living in Jersey, where Ray was born. Olivia would have been aged nearly 44 when she gave birth to Ray, and he would have been 23 years younger than his earliest sibling Olivia Beatrice. His mother was old enough to have been his grandmother.

In July 1940 the forces of Nazi Germany occupied Jersey and instituted the 'Registration and Identification of Persons (Jersey) Order' whereby every person residing there had to possess and carry an Identity Card.

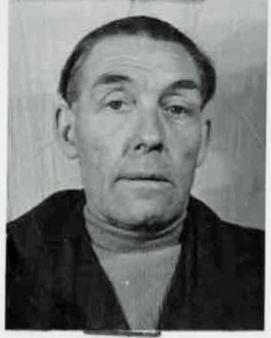
|                                      |                                          | IDENTITY CARD No. 3706                                                                |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Surname                              | ADAMS                                    |   |
| Christian Names                      | Walter Joseph                            |                                                                                       |
| Maiden Name                          |                                          |                                                                                       |
| Place of Birth                       | England                                  |                                                                                       |
| Date of Birth                        | 7-6-91                                   |                                                                                       |
| Residential Address                  | 11 Seale St St Helier                    |                                                                                       |
| Status                               | Married                                  |                                                                                       |
| Occupation                           | None                                     |                                                                                       |
| 7/2/44. 22, Seale Street, St. Helier |                                          |                                                                                       |
|                                      |                                          |                                                                                       |
|                                      |                                          | IDENTITY CARD No. 3739                                                                |
| Surname                              | ADAMS                                    |  |
| Christian Names                      | Olive Matilda                            |                                                                                       |
| Maiden Name                          | ANQUETIL                                 |                                                                                       |
| Place of Birth                       | St Owen Jersey                           |                                                                                       |
| Date of Birth                        | 5-10-96                                  |                                                                                       |
| Residential Address                  | 9 Boie Collage, St Saviours Rd St Helier |                                                                                       |
| Status                               | Married                                  |                                                                                       |
| Occupation                           | Housewife                                |                                                                                       |
|                                      |                                          |                                                                                       |
|                                      |                                          |                                                                                       |

Figure 101 The Identity Cards issued to Walter Joseph and Olivia Matilda in 1941.

Walter Joseph registered for his card on 8 January 1941 using his adopted Adams surname and giving his address as 11 Seale Street in St Helier; he gave his birth date incorrectly as 7 June 1891. Olivia registered on the same day, giving her birth date incorrectly as 5 October 1896; she further declared (as was required) that she had with her a child Raymond Stanley Adams born at 2 Coie Cottage on 19 July 1938. She gave her address as 9 Coie Cottage, St Saviour's Road in St Helier, indicating that she and Walter Joseph were now living apart.

Walter Joseph died in Hautville, St John's Road, St Helier on 3 February 1953 and was buried on 9 February at Mont à L'Abbé cemetery 'in the poor ground', according to the cemetery's burial register (which gives his age incorrectly as 68 instead of 58).

This, then, is currently all we know of Ray's rather complex and possibly turbulent family background.



Figure 102 Ray with his mother Olivia Matilda.





Figure 103 Ray with his mother Olivia Matilda.



Figure 104 Olivia Matilda with the wife Alice of Ray's brother Ronald Albert.



APPENDIX II  
*Additional Avons photographs*



Figure 105 Wedding of Elaine and Ray at Our Lady of Sorrows, 4 July 1964;  
at far left is Valerie whose husband Bill is to the right of Elaine (her arm holding his).



Figure 106 The Avons – Elaine, Ray and Valerie.



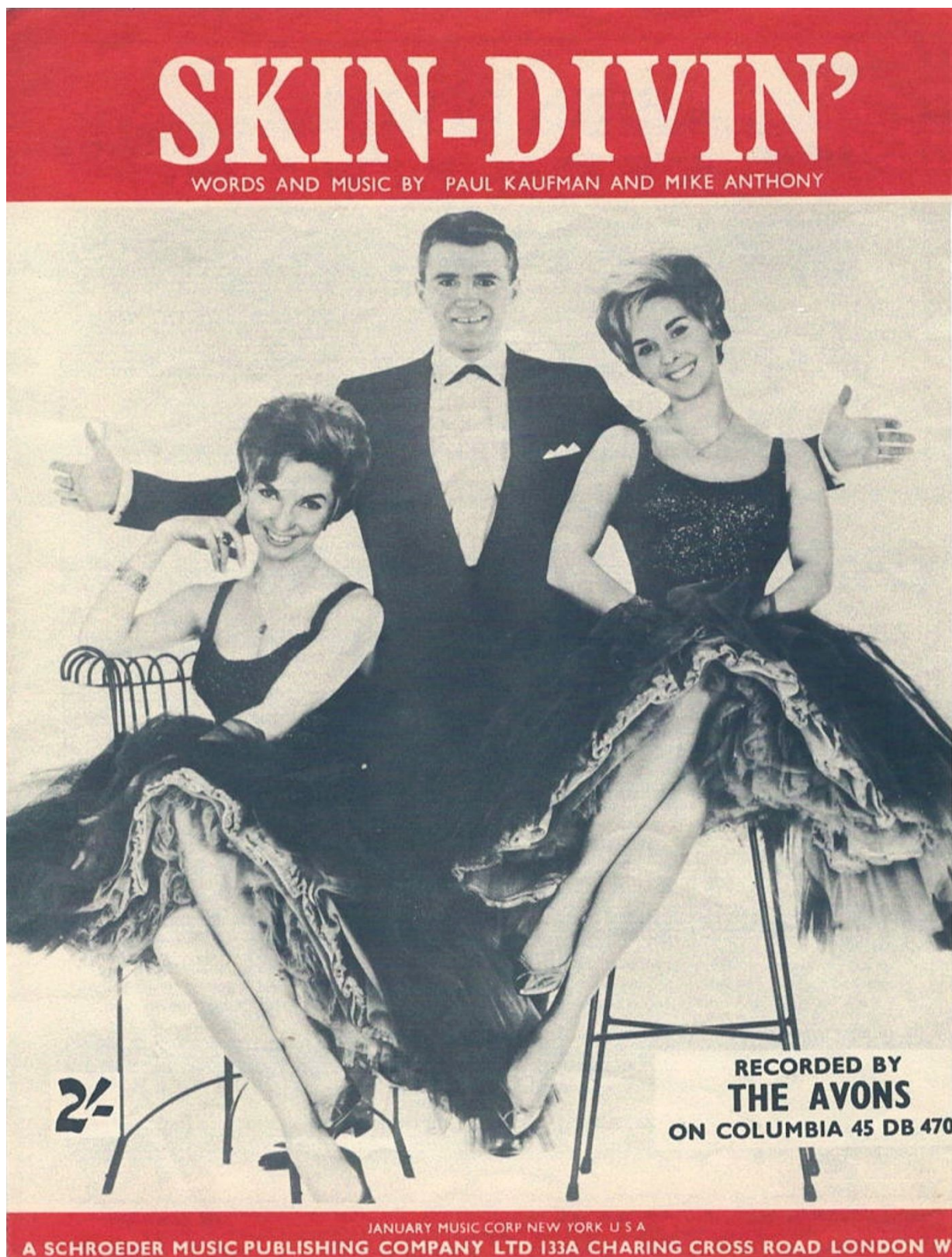


Figure 107 Sheet music for *Skin-Divin'*, a song recorded as a Columbia single by The Avons in 1961.





Figure 108 The Avons – Elaine, Ray and Valerie.





Figure 109 The Avons – Elaine, Ray and Valerie.



Figure 110 Award by *Disc* magazine to The Avons for *Seven Little Girls*.





Figure 111 The Silver Disc award for more than 250,000 copies sold of *Seven Little Girls*, early 1964.





Figure 112 Sheet music for the song *Long Live Love* composed by Valerie and Harold Spiro, performed by Olivia Newton John as Britain's entry in the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest.





Figure 113 Medal, bearing the BBC's motto 'Nation shall speak unto nation', awarded for Britain's entry in the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest.

