

THE ETERNAL

エンプレスオーケストラ。
ブラックプールで演奏を始めてから
今年で8年目となる彼らは、ダンサーを
踊らす影のダンサーたちである。
今回は、そのバンドマスターを勤める
アシュレイ・フローリックさんの人生を
「ダンスと音楽」という観点から
3回にわたってご紹介してまいります。



トップミュージシャンの素顔を追う

Dance Pro file

THE ETERNAL EMPRESS **Part 1**

Able to count amongst his admirers the British Royal Family, Ashley Frolick and the Empress orchestra have reigned supreme for eight years at Blackpool, lending their lush arrangements to the dancer's artistry. For the first time to a Japanese readership, Ashley tells his story in a special three part feature.

I was born in December of 1967 in Blackpool, both my parents were teachers, my Mother taught English, my Father, Mathematics.

My Grandfather, though I never knew him, ran a very successful orchestra and held residency for 14 years at the 400 Club in London from the 1950's. Mentioned in a book by Ian Fleming (author of the James Bond series) his name was Maurice Smart and he performed for many of the world's rich and famous.

Coincidentally I discovered that Carl Barnett, my bass player, is the son of Harry Barnett who played guitar for my Grandfather in the Maurice Smart Orchestra.

I moved when I was four-years-old to Wigan, a small coal-mining town in the north of England. Aged 12 I started taking trumpet lessons in school, it seemed at the time to be a perfect way to skip classes for an hour a week. Practise was never a chore and as the development of youth music was well structured in Wigan, my musical advancement was unhindered.

I joined the Wigan Youth Jazz Orchestra two years after my first lessons and my first concert with them was at the Royal Albert Hall in London. My career started to take shape after my first paid work came aged 15 playing for dancing at the Monaco Ballroom.

At around the same time, I joined the National Youth Jazz Orchestra and at 17 (unbeknownst to me), was entered into the BBC Big Band Competition, to find Britain's best performers. It was a huge surprise to discover I'd won the coveted "soloist of the year" award and

subsequently performed live on BBC Radio 2 at the awards ceremony.

From there I toured many countries in Europe, also Hong Kong and Japan and from 18 to 21 took Jazz & Contemporary Studies at Leeds College of Music, where I graduated with a first class with honours in performance.

Since then I have performed throughout the world with many different bands and orchestras, playing on radio, television, shows, films, DVDs and albums. I've had the fortune to work with some incredible people. Though there have been many, the most memorable performances for me, were those for the British royal family: HM the Queen, Prince Philip, Prince and Princess of Wales, and with artistes such as; Frank Sinatra, Dame Shirley Bassey, Tony Bennett, Sir Tom Jones, Stefan Grappelli and Sir Elton John.

I met my wife Suzanne (a fabulous dancer) in Blackpool in 1991; ten years later we married and now have two wonderful children, Jodi (five) and Ethan (two). Shortly after we met I decided to curb my touring commitments and find my work closer to home, which had now come full circle back to Blackpool. Over an 11-year period I worked as trumpeter with the different bands and orchestras performing in the Tower Ballroom, Blackpool and as Musical and Assistant Musical Director with five of the orchestras during this time.

In 1996 I joined the Irvin Tidswell Orchestra and after his retirement in 2002 was asked by Leisure Parks and festival organiser Mrs Gillian Mackenzie to take over the role as Musical Director to the dance festivals.

In 2004 I was also asked to provide music for dancing in the Tower Ballroom Blackpool, where for four years we've appeared with the Empress Orchestra and seven-piece Empress Dance Band.

Since taking over in 2002, we have performed live to around half-a-million dancers & listeners, appeared on programs for the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, RTL & Sky and our music has been broadcast to over 70 countries and heard by around 140 million people worldwide.

The major events we perform for are the: Blackpool Dance Festival, Blackpool Junior Dance Festival, British National Dance Championships, Blackpool Sequence Dance Festival, BDF World Professional Ballroom Dance Championship, BDF World Professional Latin Dance Championship and the BDF Star Championships.

I thoroughly enjoy all the events & festivals, but the Blackpool Dance Festival is very special. It's an event steeped in history, an event truly open to all, and an event where the worlds best battle for the ultimate

accolade; to be crowned "Champions of Blackpool".

I regard my position as Musical Director to this wonderful festival as an honour and a privilege. I have a better view of the dancing than anyone else in the world and the responsibility of inspiring all (audience included), to give their very best through the music we play. It's a responsibility that I relish and one that I work hard to fulfil note-by-note, piece-by-piece and hour-by-hour.

I have some extremely gifted musicians on stage and through direction and their professionalism have managed to hone them into a group that is now widely regarded by many of the world's top professional dancers, teachers and adjudicators as the finest orchestra for ballroom dancing in the world.


So where from here? Well the future for us looks good. I have contracts through to 2015, a brand new album 'Always & Forever', I'm finding composing & arranging for the orchestra incredibly rewarding and am thoroughly enjoying performing for the best dancers the world has to offer.

Other plans I have are to travel further a field; touring in Asia and South Pacific is a goal I would love to achieve.

We had some very positive discussions with the Asian Open Dance Tour recently and would love the opportunity to be involved in such a wonderful event. It would be a great honour for us, a coup for both and our participation would hopefully help spotlight and further the AODC Tour on the International stage.

Obviously a venture of this magnitude would require some major sponsorship but I remain hopeful that it will become a reality in the near future.





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THE ETERNAL EMF

Following last issue's profile of Mr. Ashley Frohlick, the musical director of Blackpool Dance Festival, Dance Wing asked him to write about his orchestra and its newly released CD.

The Album — “Always & Forever”

Since 2002 our reputation and standing has improved dramatically; it is a much better orchestra now than it was then. Many of Blackpool's former champions have been extremely vocal in their praise of the Empress Orchestra and regard it as the finest orchestra they have ever heard for dancing.

Being aware of people's perceptions of the Orchestra and of its position in World Dance I recognised the need to produce something special.

I asked Marcus and Karen Hilton MBE if they would write the sleeve notes, here is part of what they had to say:

“...of the 18 wonderful tracks 5 are brand new compositions written and orchestrated especially for Ballroom Dancers. It's reassuring for us to know that there is still someone working on behalf of the dancing community to inspire us musically so that dancers can give more of themselves creatively and artistically.

“Fitting we think then, that of all the fabulous music on this album, our favourites are 2 of the 5 new works written & arranged with dancers in mind.

“My personal favourite is “Always & Forever



” (Suzanne's Waltz) and Karen's “Samba de la Torre”.

We are sure that all dance enthusiasts and lovers will be mesmerised and taken on a wonderful journey when they either listen or dance to this very special music!

“So sit back, or take up your hold and be transported into another world by this superb album.”

The Orchestra

The orchestra comprises 13 musicians for the Festivals: three trumpets, two trombones, four saxes, piano, bass and drums, I play percussion.

We do not use our vocalist for competitive performances. I feel that by their very nature, vocalists want and need to be the centre of attention and that detracts from the dancers vying for that very same spot.

Vocalists that are too good will capture the

RESS **Part 2**

audiences attention and I don't want this to happen, believe me, the Orchestra gets its fair share of spectators watching us instead of the dancing as it is.

Therein lies the problem; if a vocalist doesn't captivate its audience, what's the point of using them in the first place? I would sooner write something beautiful, something that will lift the dancers, something that will stir the audience to be more vocal, so creating a better atmosphere and a better competition. This format works well for us and extremely well for the events at which we perform.

Members of the Empress Orchestra are highly sought-after musicians. Their credentials are noteworthy and diverse ranging from work with the Royal Shakespeare Company to Harry Potter, Bob Hope to Samuel L. Jackson.

While the festivals are wonderful events, the schedule is gruelling. We perform between six and nine hours-a-day, three or four times longer than one would normally expect, which requires incredibly high standards. This is very important because at the end of our performances we have to be at the top of our game as the semi-finals and finals are recorded, this year for the first time by Studio Himawari.

There is no other orchestra in the world asked to perform in this fashion and the players deserve all the praise they receive. It is a fabulous orchestra!

(Written by Mr. Ashley Frohlick/Subheading by M.Kammoto & G.Gillespie)

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THE ETERNAL EMPRESS

Empress Orchestra: A Glimpse Behind the Music

Part 3

ON STAGE

Being onstage is the easiest part of the work that I do and the most rewarding. It is exhilarating to be stood in front of a world-class orchestra whilst a world-class field of dancers battles it out in front of some of the world's most revered dance icons and a superbly receptive audience.

I can honestly say... I love my job!

Though there are many aspects to directing an orchestra; my number one priority is to keep the tempos consistent. I use a metronome as reference point, though I can pretty much feel straight away if tempos begin to wander from the chosen path.

The chosen path for tempos this year was left, (for the first time) in my hands alone. As far as I am aware, no previous musical director has been free to make this choice without intervention from the Chairman of Adjudicators.

A historical moment then and I must admit, one that felt quite liberating.

Of the nine disciplines in Standard and Latin performed during the Festival, I have only ever played the Paso Doble at the tempo stipulated in the British Dance Council handbook. This year I made further changes to the cha cha, samba, foxtrot, tango and quickstep, changes that I felt would benefit the dancers and which received many wonderful comments from competitors, officials and audience alike. The main being that it made the music more exciting, therefore the dancing more exciting, enabling a greater freedom of expression on the floor.

Probably the hardest aspect of directing an orchestra for this type of event is to keep the musicians focused on the job at hand. Most musicians here in the UK tend to work between two or three hours per day, during the festival however they can work up to twelve and a half hours per day. It can be a gruelling schedule at times.

As all the musicians have different personalities, they require motivation in different ways. I am very vocal on stage offering encouragement and praise, words of motivation, sometimes I shout when focus is needed instantly, (a short, sharp, shock so-to-speak). Humour, however, tends to

work best when they are at their most fatigued.

My relationship with Marcus (Hilton) is pretty good, we keep in touch throughout the year and he is every bit as nice in real life as he appears on stage. He does tell some awful jokes though, (to be expected of a Manchester United football supporter)!

He thinks my job is easy, I think his job is easier and though it would not be proper for me to do his work on stage, I do occasionally put him on the spot and let him do some of mine. He has failed dismally (several times) to bring the orchestra in for the chord before his announcements and his performance on guiro this year left a lot to be desired. (The guiro is a percussive instrument with serrated edge giving a rasping sound when scraped with a stick).

Joking aside, I think his introduction to the position of Chairman of Adjudicators has been a very positive one for the Festival and his and Karen's dancing inspired me to bid for the role of Musical Director in the first place. When asked my opinion by Mrs. Sandra Wilson (Festival Organiser) of whom I thought should take over duties from Peter Maxwell, he was my first and only choice. A true champion!





OFF STAGE

The Orchestra has its own suite above and to the back of the stage where the members can relax briefly before being thrown back into the fray. We have a wonderful group of musicians in the Orchestra and their sense of humour is far different from the one normally perceived by the rest of the world.

The band-room can be a devastatingly funny place to be!

For the duration of the Festival I reside in one of the three rooms reserved for the officials. Room one houses the adjudicators, this year they held a "jenga" competition between rounds. I popped my head around the door a few times to watch the action, it is nice to see that after all their (collective) years away from competitive dancing they have lost none of their competitive edge.

And though the competition had switched to removing small blocks of wood from a loosely constructed tower, the desire to win was just as keen and at times; the atmosphere quite tense.

Room two houses Mr. Marcus Hilton MBE, Mrs. Sandra Wilson, Mr. Bryan Allen, the stewards and scrutineers. This is where I spend some of my time when not in my own room.

As the nucleus of the Festival team is consistent year after year, the camaraderie in this room is very apparent and creates a very positive working environment. Conversation here is wide and diverse, though mainly about dance and music.

As our album "Always & Forever" was launched during this week and played virtually continuously throughout the Festival (a little too often for my liking), some of the conversation was inevitably about the CD. (A hot topic, as it has been a decade since a "Festival Orchestra" last released an album).

There was a discussion about why I had not included the tune "Espana Cani" on the album as the Paso Doble and why I do not perform it as often as other orchestras at festivals and competitions around the world.

My answer was simple; "Though I love the music, the dance is called the Paso Doble and not the Espana Cani".

My job, as Musical Director to arguably the best dance festival on the world calendar, is not just to play music. I want to challenge all that enter to listen and dance and feel the music that is being performed for them. The new material I write is subtly different from the old in many ways, some styles are completely different.

The form I use does not always conform to the traditional. Sometimes I will write the music with a five or eight-bar introduction, the dancers that are aware of the music will adapt their choreography to compensate. I do not always use sixteen-bar phrases in my compositions; it does not feel natural to do so, the music has its own course, as the dancing should.

For me those that are totally aware of all around them can sense the subtleties, can adapt their routines, can improvise-remember; the adjudicators here are not just looking for technique and choreography, they are looking for artistic flare and personality, the human touch.

In Anne Laxholm's wonderful presentation at the BDFI UK Congress, (the featured DVD insert of Dance Wing's volume 49) she talks about "Keeping it Human" and in a musical sense that is what I try to do with the music I write.

As a musician (and dancer) wonderful technique is vital if you are to reach the very top of your profession. As a soloist, I have always sought to find the beauty in music and to convey, through performance, how that music makes me feel. For me, self-expression, passion and emotion when linked with ability, can elevate performance past those with excellent technique.

To have both is very rare and sometimes, not even the world champions possess them.

The late Mr. Bill Irvine MBE put it well when he said; "Music is the first inspiration to dance. Let the music inspire you to give more of yourselves".

There is nothing quite like a live orchestra to dance to, it is one of the many reasons why Blackpool is so special. For the thousands that compete and watch each year I would like to think that our music helps inspire them to give more of themselves.

EMPRESS ORCHESTRA
[ALWAYS & FOREVER]

