

Strike up the band

Don Booker MBE meets Britain's top big band leader from Barnsley.



Television's 'Strictly Come Dancing' has taken the UK and America by storm, and way back it was a Barnsley lad that fronted the orchestra at the first televised BBC event when it was strictly 'Come Dancing'.

Born in Park Street, Wombwell, and brought up in Wellington Crescent, Worsbrough Dale,



Tony Evans has been keeping feet tapping for more than thirty-five years and has climbed to the peak of the big band scene with his orchestrations and big band; delivering the latest chart hits, swing, ballroom and Latin American music.

His first step into the world of dance music was in Barnsley, where hundreds of visitors to the various ballrooms will today remember his slick musical style.

It was in the local music scene where I first met Tony, but later it was at the Monte Carlo Sporting Club and Casino Cabaret where he spent twelve years as musical director with his band.

Not a bad journey of success for a lad who started as an apprentice television engineer for Henry Wigfall, in Sheffield Road, Barnsley. It was sited where the Alhambra shopping complex is today.

So how did the musical journey of Tony Evans really start?

Growing up in Wellington Crescent, he had an urge to play a musical instrument at an early age with his first choice being a piano. However, his parents could not afford to buy one, and



instead he was given a Selmer clarinet for his birthday.

His teacher was Jack Pacey, who lived in Gawber Road, Barnsley. Tony went three nights a week, plus Saturday mornings, for lessons on the clarinet and after two years he bought a saxophone. Jack again guided him with the new instrument, and word soon got round that Tony was a reasonable player and he became semi-professional. His first gig was with Ted Baker, a Musicians' Union official, who played at Denaby Baths.

More work came in the Barnsley and Leeds areas, as well as with the famous Bernard Taylor Band at Sheffield City Hall.

Things changed in a big way one night when a car pulled up outside his house. It was a Humber Snipe and the driver knocked on the door and introduced himself as Geoff

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◀ In action at the Monte Carlo Sporting Club.



Haigh, a pianist. He told Tony he had won a winter contract to put a ten-piece band on the stage at Barnsley Baths, in Race Street. It was customary for the summer swimming pool to be covered with a spring floor for dances which attracted thousands of ballroom dancers.

In Barnsley, Saturday was Baths night. Geoff offered Tony an alto sax chair and joined Arthur Merrill, Eric Roberts, Johnny Johnston, a three-trumpet section and a rhythm section.

'I have to say, for a semi-pro band it was a good outfit. Lead trumpet was Ken Johnson who went on to become conductor of Grimethorpe Colliery Band, Billy Bedford who had played with the Eric Delaney Band, and Bill Johnson,' said Tony.

With ballroom and Latin American dancing at its peak, the band had several seasons at the Baths. In the summer the unit moved to the town centre *Three Cranes Hotel*. A management change at the hotel saw Jacques Armes, who wanted to develop a resident six-piece

band, arrive from Switzerland.

Tony was offered the job, which he accepted with regret. 'When I told Geoff I was leaving he wasn't too happy, but wished me all the best.'

He then had to start putting a music library together and a set of music stands, calling on local sign writer and later artist Ashley Jackson to furnish with his name. In the week the band played at functions; Saturday was a public dance, and on Sundays the ballroom was changed into a lounge bar with carpets, tables and chairs, and an occasional vocalist.

Down the road at Harborough Hills Club, Monday night was dance night and Tony did that date, too. Then it was relief band at the posh Wakefield Locarno, owned by Mecca, quickly getting a telephone call from founder of the 'Miss World' competition, Eric Morley, managing director of Mecca.

Morley wanted Tony to join the company and turn professional. But he was happy at home and the *Three Cranes Hotel*, so he declined. A year or so later

there was another call from Eric Morley which led to Tony taking a train from Barnsley to London for his first visit to the capital.

It was September 1961, and the following March he was offered a contract and eventually started with a seven-piece band at Leicester Palais. When he returned to Barnsley to tell his band members, he expected sheer excitement, but all he got was: 'That's nice Tony if it's what you want.' Not one was prepared to leave Barnsley and the *Three Cranes*. He went home depressed.

But he had accepted the job and had to recruit new musicians by telephone and letter and left Barnsley with his instruments, music library, music stands and a new set of band jackets made by local tailor, Les Haigh, on 15 July, 1962.

Barnsley folk tread carefully, and Tony remembers hearing on the musicians' grapevine that his friend Dennis Langfield, from Darton, and band leader at the Wakefield Locarno, had said: 'Don't worry, Tony won't make it down there and he'll be back in



▲ Tony, left, meeting Princess Diana, also seen are Michael Crawford and broadcaster George Elrich. In 1997, Tony was asked to prepare special music for an expected visit from Princess Diana to the Sporting Club; however her plans changed and instead she made that fateful trip to Paris.

Barnsley within three months.'

Well, he had a year at Leicester and went on to Derby, still delighting Mr Morley whose next request was for him to take over the Plaza in Belfast. He agreed, but again, only three members of the band agreed to go to Ireland, where the manager was Brian Train, from the Locarno in Glasgow.

'He became a great friend and recalled his days in Glasgow, a tough place, where Sean Connery of James Bond fame was doorman.'

It was while in Belfast that Tony's band took part in the first BBC Television 'Come Dancing' competing against London South from the *Lyceum* in the Strand, with Joe Loss providing the music. In May 1966, Tony walked down the Strand to take

up residency at the *Lyceum*.

In 1968, he worked at the American Club, Bayswater, backing James Brown, Ike, Tina Turner, Brook Benton and Sarah Vaughan. A year later he took over from Joe Loss at the Empire, Leicester Square, and went on tour to Expo 70 in Japan providing backing for Mary Hopkins, Number One in the international hit parade.

His orchestra was first choice to accompany Tom Jones, Englebert Humperdink and Gilbert O'Sullivan on UK and European tours. Leaving the Empire in 1976, he took up residency at the world famous Hammersmith Palais and went to Australia to play for the World Dance Championships in Perth.

Tony's big band was in demand for big dance events at the Royal Albert Hall and were televised. Radio also wanted his music and he worked on Terry Wogan's Radio One afternoon show and wrote and recorded the theme tune 'Breakthrough'. He also wrote and played the theme

for David Jacob's late night show 'Music Through Midnight'.

The Barnsley lad won three Carl Allen Awards for the top British Band for Dancing and UK Band Leader of the Year. In America he was presented with the prestigious Hall of Fame Award for his recordings.

During his spell in Monte Carlo, he not only provided music for dancing, but also backed prestigious international stars such as Frank Sinatra, Shirley Bassey, The Temptations, Diana Ross, Donna Summer, Whitney Houston and Barry White. His was the last European orchestra to accompany Frank Sinatra in concert in Monaco.

With an album catalogue of seventy-five CDs, the Tony Evans Orchestra and Singers continue to record music from the big band era to the chart sounds of today through his company, Tema International.

What a wonderful career and record for a lad from Worsbrough Dale and Wigfalls' workshop.



➤ The UK dance championships televised from Hammersmith Palais.

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Strike up the band

Big band leader
Tony Evans



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Raven of Barnsley

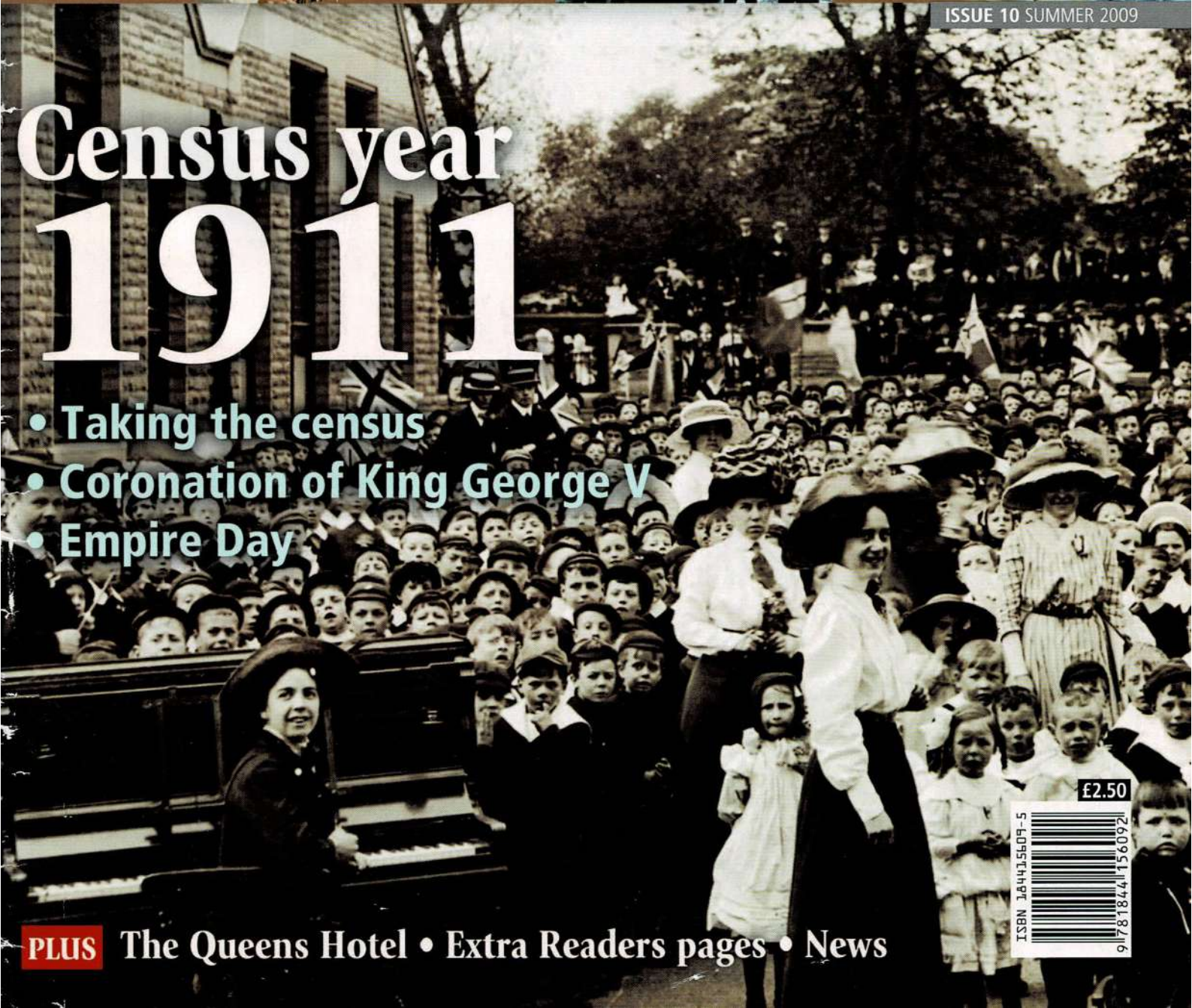
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