

AUSTRALIA'S

BILLY WILLIAMS



recorded  
**1907** to  
**1914**



Australia's  
**first** pop  
recording  
star



THE MAN  
IN THE  
VELVET  
SUIT



A selection from the Brownrigg-Williams Collection at Australia's National Film and Sound Archive

# AUSTRALIA'S BILLY WILLIAMS

**23 songs from over 500 recorded performances**

1. John, John, put your trousers on ZONOPHONE 3085 (1908) 3'23"
2. The taximeter car ZONOPHONE 558 (1908) 2'44"
3. The hobnailed boots that Father wore ZONOPHONE 557 (1907) 2'44"
4. Tickle me, Timothy! ACO G 15760 (1907) 2'12"
5. Put a bit of powder on it, Father REGAL G 6025 (1909) 2'54"
6. Little Willie's Woodbines ZONOPHONE 3090 (1908) 3'10"
7. I must go home tonight ZONOPHONE A 16 (1909) 3'37"
8. Girls of to-day ZONOPHONE 143 (1909) 2'17"
9. The land where the women wear the trousers ZONOPHONE 556 (1909) 3'07"
10. I've found Kelly REGAL G 6004 (1911) 2'31"
11. When Father papered the parlour REGAL G 6000 (1911) 3'00"
12. St Kilda TWIN 257 (1910) 2'55"
13. Let's have a song upon the Graphophone COLUMBIA-RENA 1566 (1911) 2'59"
14. Chanticleer ZONOPHONE 584 (1911) 3'00"
15. I never heard Father laugh so much before REGAL G 6008 (1912) 2'51"
16. Take me where there are no eyes about REGAL G 6009 (1912) 2'49"
17. She does like a little bit of Scotch GRAND PREE 18027 (1912) 2'31"
18. It's a grand old song REGAL G 6643 (1912) 2'57"
19. The kangaroo hop REGAL G 6643 (1912) 3'20"
20. Wait till I'm as old as Father REGAL G 6642 (1912) 2'59"
21. The ragtime wedding REGAL G 6646 (1913) 2'55"
22. There must be something nice about the Isle of Man REGAL G 6650 (1913) 2'47"
23. There's life in the old dog yet ZONOPHONE 1392 (1914) 3'22"

The dates shown above are those of the recordings used in this CD/cassette. Billy Williams often made recordings of the same song for different companies. There are sometimes major variations in the lyrics and melodies as well as the different forms of the title on the labels.

# AUSTRALIA'S BILLY WILLIAMS

A selection from the Brownrigg-Williams Collection at Australia's National Film and Sound Archive.

Billy Williams has suffered an almost total eclipse. In 1910 it could well have been argued that he was one of the most significant popular entertainers in the world. Dozens of his songs could be heard on disc and cylinder recordings wherever English was spoken. Many record companies clamoured to have him sing for them in the days when tight recording contracts for particular performances or repertoire were less common than they are today. Music hall audiences all over Britain and in the far flung colonies of the Empire joined in the rollicking choruses of his songs. But nobody wrote a biography to give this vast audience details of the life of the man who led them in chorus after chorus. Indeed so little is known of his life that

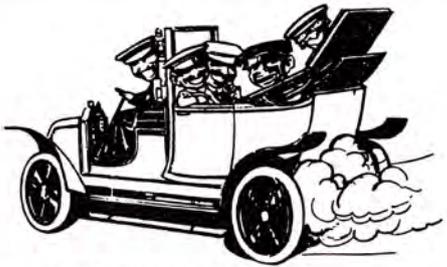
he is usually passed over with a brief note in recent accounts of the British music hall and in Australia he is often thought to have been English. He did not even begin to write his own story.

Such neglect seems outrageous given that he was probably the most 'recorded' popular entertainer until he died in 1915. However, he occupied a number of dangerous no-mans-lands. To begin with he was not English. He left Australia thereby resigning his rights, it seems, to be counted as such. He was a relatively late comer to the music halls which were probably in decline by 1912 when the acknowledgement of royalty in the first Command Performance (Variety) gave them an air of respectability and in some ways responsibility. That the music hall era waned in the form it had taken in the 1890s seems clear. It was replaced by a different set of variety acts and of course by the record player. Billy might have been seen as having compromised the living energy of his stage act in his recordings. This is why Marie Lloyd recorded so little. And of course he died young and suddenly.

Individually any of these reasons might have assigned Billy Williams to obscurity,

regardless of his prodigious output and the fact that his remastered recordings remained in the catalogues until the late 1940s. What is clear is that even today his energy and enthusiasm for his art can be experienced again in the recordings he made, all of which have survived. And his recordings are monuments to the live act. Billy brought to the fledgling sound recording industry a voice more suited to the acoustic sound recording process than any other.

One song in particular has kept the Australian in the recording catalogues, especially since the arrival of the long playing disc which is devoted to nostalgia. The song is *When Father Papered the Parlour*. What has not been clear, is the course of his early career in Australia which led to the building of the image of "the Man in the Velvet Suit". Even the name to which he was born was not known with any degree of certainty until the present research and the unravelling of a mythology that appears to have resulted from Billy's own exaggerated account of his Australian theatrical experience. I can find no evidence that William Holt (Billy) Williams was in a modern sense, a legally valid person. From Britain it would have been difficult to



Here's Billy Williams' latest success :

## "The Taximeter Car"

(Record No. 13606).

SUNG FOR REPRODUCTION EXCLUSIVELY ON

### GENUINE EDISON GOLD-MOULDED RECORDS.

And it is a success too. Sung in his own droll, inimitable style, "The Taximeter Car" is a topical song that is sure to be the rage with Phonograph owners everywhere. YOU know how successful and popular the Billy Williams' song records are—how big is the demand for them. This new song gives you an opportunity in a thousand to boom your record business at this time of the year. It will also help you in further increasing your sales of Genuine Edison Records, because your customers can obtain "The Taximeter Car," sung by Billy Williams, only on these records.

Write to your factor and order a liberal supply of this record without delay—don't let your competitor steal a march on you.

**National Phonograph Company Ltd.,  
25, Clerkenwell Road, London, E.C.**

TRADE  
*Thomas A Edison*  
MARK

search the ragged pieces of personal history available in places either like Yanko Station (NSW) (where his parents married) or the regular church

records in Melbourne. An air of legitimacy was given to the "Holt Williams" in Britain by the change of name for the death record of Billy's father who died

in 1914 at Billy's house in Shoreham - his tombstone announces that he was Richard Shaw Williams. The father is buried next to his son, William Holt Williams whose will is witnessed by a Roland Holt Williams, presumably Roland Banks the important Australian golfer who is still called Roland (Roly) Banks later in Australia in the sporting journals. But Billy Williams was not given the chance to reflect with detached self-assessment that sometimes accompanies age.

George Robey and Harry Lauder had long and successful careers which were crowned with knighthoods. They both produced autobiographies and the establishment, which could flesh out their stage characters from these written accounts, supported their elevation to a status once unavailable to a popular entertainer. Robey remained on the stage and later, in films. Lauder, like Billy Williams, recorded well and his performances could be tailored to suit 2 and 4 minute recordings. The obvious nationality of Lauder and Robey helped to ensure that they could be hailed as great British entertainers and of course, both were in the public eye for more than 50 years. Billy's British career spans the period from 1900 to 1914. But how did he

get to Britain and what were the influences that shaped the first twenty years of his life? What sort of background in the theatre could have given him the foundations on which he would build? Once he is established in the UK there is some evidence available in the form of posters, the odd letter to his wife, photographs and the ephemera like advertising materials, which went with sound recording. Where did Billy come from and how did he find his place?

Time and a lack of interest have obliterated the answers to many questions like these and Williams himself obscured his origins. The first beads to be threaded onto the filament of his life came from the recollections of Mrs Amy Jennings who had been Mrs Billy Williams in her first marriage. Mrs Jennings died in 1976 sixty years after her first husband. What she remembered after 60 years is interesting but not always reliable. A discography by Bayly and Andrews contains a life based on Mrs Jennings stories and earlier printed materials and is a valuable addition to scholarship, especially to the field of discography. The first attempt to trace Billy Williams from his beginnings was not undertaken until this project commenced. It



*Mrs Billy Williams (Amy), later Mrs Jennings*

has come to fruition with the publication of the first Billy Williams compact disc and this set of notes. (Why, we might ask have Australians so neglected almost all of the early popular recording stars? Melba might have dominated one branch of singing but she was by no means the only singer of note. Billy certainly recorded better than she did and probably enjoyed a bigger total audience in the theatre and the parlour.) Even though my interest in Williams goes back to songs and recordings sung and played by my grandparents there was little information about Billy's life available in Australia. These notes have their origin in an affectionate but sentimental investigation of another age. But they have grown into rather more than that. The results follow, and though there is more to be done, even in Australia, this is a start. In fact there has been almost no serious, published research on many of these first popular international Australians.

## EARLY LIFE AND FAMILY

Amy Jennings who had married William Holt Williams in 1901, gave a series of

interviews to interested researchers in the 1970s. she was at this time quite old and a considerable distance from the 'facts', some of which were questionable when they were given to her at the turn of the century. Her marriage certificate and her first husband's death certificate are categoric. "Billy Williams" was William Holt Williams of Melbourne, Australia. Mrs Jennings recalled that Williams, whose real name had been "Banks", had been born in Collins Street, Melbourne and that his father had been a draper. She gave the year as 1877 and indicated that Williams had had his 21st birthday on the "SS Afric" late in 1899. She also noted that he had two golfing brothers, Dick and Roly, another brother named Reginald, also in vaudeville and two musical sisters. This information would prove invaluable in locating the true identity of "the man in the velvet suit".

The Melbourne Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages carried entries in the mid 1870s for two Banks families, both of them clearly in the process of child rearing. A search of the off-spring of Richard Shaw Banks produced a list of children which ran as follows: Lilly (1874), Richard (1876),

Richard Isaac (1878), Reginald Vale (1879), Rose (1881), Roland Ambrose (1885) and Violet Grace (1887). There could be little doubt that this was the right family, but it had two siblings called "Richard" and no "Billy". By my reasoning the inconvenience of three "Richards" in one family is self-evident and it is not surprising to find that Richard Isaac is not listed on the birth certificate of his next brother, Reginald, or on the certificates of the children subsequently born to the family. On Reginald's certificate the names of older siblings are given as Lillie (4 years), Richard (now "Richard Shaw" junior, 3 years) and William Isaac (1-1/2 years). Richard Isaac is given to us as William Isaac from this time on in the sparse records available to us.

The half dozen birth certificates provide some other useful information and a number of perplexing contradictions. It is possible for example to trace the family's movements and to suggest a probable sequence of events linked to changes in the father's drapery business. The first child (excluding Lilly who seems to have been born in NSW and who causes some evident tension for the Banks in later family birth records) is born into Reilly Street, Collingwood (now Alexandra

Parade) at a time when Collingwood supported a largely working class population serving the main trade of the district, bootmaking. It is likely that the Banks family lived on the corner of Ballarat Street and Reilly Street, given that Richard (the first) is said to have been born in the former. The two buildings on the corners of what is now the Eastern Freeway and Ballarat Street might well have been there in 1876/78. In any case the two addresses are close enough to speculate that the family might not have moved between 1876 and 1879, taking in the year when Billy Williams was born. Reginald was born (1879) at Castlemaine, his aunt (Ms J McIntosh) records on his birth certificate. By 1882 Billy was four and lived at Alfred Street Richmond but by 1885 he had moved to Bowen Street, St Kilda. These changes of address are recorded on the birth records of the children, together with other tantalizing information. The last child, Violet, was born at the house of Mrs Ann Martin, a midwife of Madelaine Street Carlton, in anticipation of a difficult birth perhaps or simply as a precaution.

The Banks family seem to settle in the St Kilda area. This contention is supported by the fact that Richard Banks (draper



*View of Melbourne with Victoria Parade in the foreground and St Kilda in the far distance*



*Photograph of Billy Williams, taken 16 November 1900*

owned a shop at 81 Bank Street, Emerald Hill (now South Melbourne) by 1887. The fact that Billy Williams, or "Curly" Banks as he was known by the 1890s, is said to have become involved as a strapper at Caulfield, a suburb which has a common boundary with St Kilda, gives credibility to that story. Mrs Jennings told an interviewer that she and her husband had stayed with her parents-in-law at Malvern in 1910. All of these places are close together, the long-standing dormitory suburbs for middle class professionals who needed easy access to the city and the south eastern business districts of Melbourne.

It is not entirely fanciful to suggest that the Banks family gradually gathered sufficient wealth to support a progress from working class Collingwood through the intermediate suburbs of Richmond or Yarra Park towards the more affluent area of St Kilda. The moves probably mirror the success of the drapery business which is finally established in the flourishing shopping centre of South Melbourne in its initial boom.

There is a possibility that Richard Shaw Banks was of Jewish extraction. This is suggested not only by his trade and his success, but also by

Billy Williams middle name "Isaac". While such flimsy evidence cannot be taken to be conclusive, it should be noted that the Banks parents called their first two sons Richard, doubtless (and ironically) in an attempt to preserve the paternal name, but placing an interesting emphasis on the name "Isaac" for their second son, in the event of the survival of the first. The advantages and disadvantages of being seen as Jewish in Melbourne at this time are not clear. However, Albert Waxman, the son of a wealthy banker Aaron Waxman, changed his name in order to give himself a better chance of acceptance on the stage and became Albert Whelan the elegant and successful Australian music hall singer. Twenty years later Roy "Mo" Rene would do the same for the same reason, although he celebrated his Jewishness in a sort of self-parody. Richard Shaw Banks was born in Dublin where birth records are less accessible than they are in Melbourne and at this time his records of passage to Australia have not been found. These might list his religion.

No information about Billy Williams' education has survived. The consolidation of denominational schools into what has become the State

School system happened in the decade in which he was born and some of the schools he might have attended hold attendance lists from the period. Gold Street School at Clifton Hill would have been the closest to Banks' home in the late 1870s and early 1880s but no records from the period have survived. Similarly other schools near to places where the family lived have no evidence of the attendance of this Banks family. Neither were there any indications in the Catholic archives that the Banks family had attended Catholic schools.

Effectively then, apart from birth records there is no tangible evidence that Billy Williams' childhood followed any particular pattern. His written hand, in letters written in England, evinces a careful, flowing script and an articulate mind capable of constructing a good sentence and of spelling words correctly. Wherever he was educated it was clearly to good effect.

## MELBOURNE ADOLESCENCE AND EARLY ADULTHOOD

Nothing tangible has survived from this period to help

to reconstruct the course of Billy's life. The main story circulated by Billy himself and with a fair degree of likelihood, is that his first career was as a strapper at the Caulfield Racecourse. This seems possible given that he lived close to the suburb where the track and stables still operate, at a time in his life when he could well have looked for employment. Another story, still in circulation in the oral tradition in the Dandenong area of Melbourne's eastern suburbs in 1986, was that he had been a boundary rider for a time. There is no firm evidence that either of these stories is true, but they do offer a reason for the choice of the professional middle name, "Holt".

If Billy Williams commenced a stage career with the most popular theatrical troupe in Melbourne at the time, the Bland Holt drama company, it is just possible that he later determined to acknowledge a debt to the leader of this group. Bland Holt was known for his spectacular stage events some of which included real horses galloping across the stage, live crows which dropped down onto skeletal remains on the stage from somewhere amongst the flyers to peck at empty eye sockets, collapsing mine shafts, bursting dams and the like.

Could Billy Williams have started in this way? Enter galloping horses stage right. Exit galloping horses stage left. Billy would have been well placed to participate in this sort of business.

We can be certain that he sang at the middle class radical working-man's club, the Melbourne Democratic Club, where he was heard by the English vaudevillian Tom Wootwell in 1896. Amy Jennings claims that the songs he performed in his earliest days bore no resemblance to what he would make his own on the English music hall stage although she makes no mention of Wootwell. Whatever he sang, and there is little evidence to suggest what would be normal fare at Smoke Night Concerts at these clubs, he impressed Wootwell who claimed that he gave Billy half a dozen of his own songs together with the right to perform them. We can speculate that he performed songs with a strong political or satirical bent. This would appear to be the most likely variety, given his hearty good humour and his poking fun at anything which struck him as being quirky, silly or just new and different. The Democratic Club like its fellows in the Melbourne suburbs was probably like the one described

by Mary Webb when she visited America, New Zealand and Australia to examine socialism in the democracies. She seems to have favoured visits and sojourns with well to do landholders, politicians and the gentry finding the raw edge of the emerging labour movement not to her taste. The authors of a life of Beatrice Webb give the following account of the one encounter that the Webbs had in Melbourne in the 1890s, with the Socialist party.

*The only socialists the Webbs met during their tour were members of the Socialist party of Victoria...who..invited Sidney to lecture. He agreed, not very graciously, to talk to a few of them. "We met our poor relations in a dirty ill-ventilated place" wrote Beatrice. "The believers in socialist shibboleths." The chairman was a young man with a "retreating chin, dirty coat and the inevitable red tie ... 'Comrade!!' 'Revolution!' capitalist press', 'class war; and all the rest of the socialist cant was showered on us.... Sidney, in a wily address tried to explain the Fabian policy of permeation..." The chairman, getting the message, suggested to members that they should follow Sidney's advice and "take capitalists down a back street and knock them on the head."*

The extent to which this is an accurate picture of the more salubrious establishments, designed for the entertainment

and edification of the working man, is difficult to ascertain. The Melbourne Democratic Club might have attracted radicals and it appears that the radicalism appealed to the middle class who found in it some expression for their bohemian streak and a spirit of independence from established British values.

The transition to a more conventional theatre happened sometime in the late 1890s. In one account Billy describes touring with the Gogill Brothers, an American travelling theatre company which performed all around Australia from Kalgoorlie to Hobart and Brisbane. At some time in the late 1890s he is supposed to have performed with a number of JC Williamson productions in Sydney and Melbourne. In an interview for a brief biography to be a prelude to a 1912 (circa) Billy Williams song book - edited by Charles Whilmoth - Billy named two popular stage shows of the time and the parts he played. Contemporary programmes do not help to establish the truth of this claim, regardless of the variety of aliases under which he might have performed.

In 1898 or 1899 he was seen performing by George Adams, who was a rich horse racing entrepreneur and the organiser



A railway pier in Melbourne late last century

of the "Tattersalls" lotteries. Adams gave him a one way ticket to London and one hundred pounds. This story seems likely, although Billy certainly entertained on the "SS Afric" and was given a lump sum and a list of the passengers who had contributed to it at the end of the journey to Britain. The list has survived and is dated 9th December 1899, a date close to the disembarkation.



## BILLY WILLIAMS IN THE UK

Billy married Amy Robinson in 1901 and commenced his recording career five years later with some encouragement from another expatriate Australian, Florrie Forde.

Although I cannot pretend to have a comprehensive knowledge of Billy's life and career in the United Kingdom, it is possible to reconstruct some sense of what it must have been like from documents which survive and which are held at

the National Film and Sound Archive. These include letters, newspaper clippings, manuscripts of songs and contracts with composers for the use of material which Billy performed but which he had not written.

Billy's first English home was in Brixton. (An address on his correspondence at this time is "191, Brixton Hill". Note paper with this address in the letterhead usually carries the partial date 191-, so we can assume that he had some connection with the address until after 1910.) This London suburb gave him easy access to a variety of music halls and London, of course, was linked to a comprehensive rail system which served his need to travel to Scotland or Wales.

At sometime, probably after 1910, Billy and Amy purchased a series of bungalows at Shoreham. After Billy died and until 1925 when she came to Australia, Amy ran a club which was in one of these premises. (Ferry Road, Bungalow Town, Shoreham.) According to the published auction notice it was sold for 1525 Pounds, possibly to Florrie Forde. In the same part of Shoreham the Williams owned the "Kangaroo", "Emu" and "Wallaby" bungalows. Amy sold these three at the same auction for another 1525

Pounds. Four more adjacent building blocks fetched 625 Pounds. The sale of a considerable amount of antique furniture added to the bank balance which Amy used to

establish her family in Australia.

We have no way of knowing what other assets Billy had, but what we can quantify demonstrates that his successes had brought some rewards.

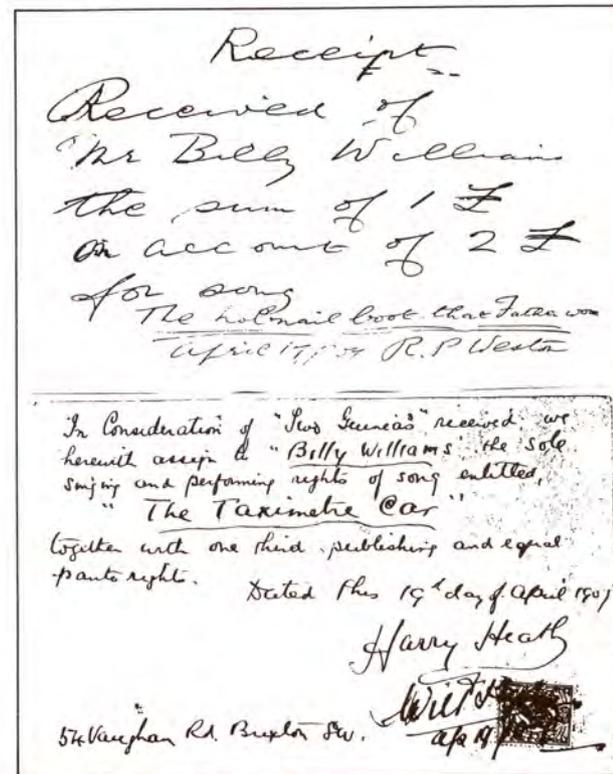
Of his life in Britain little seems to have survived, although much might be buried in the stage journals, programmes and handbill that have survived from the time. He was still living in Brixton in March 1912. One of the few letters which has been preserved was written to a Miss Ward from 68 Mervan Road.

The letter to Miss Ward is one of five which were written in the early months of 1912. There might be letters to or from Billy in private collections, but at this time these are the only ones known to the author. The Ward letter is reproduced in the Andrews and Bayly discography, which until the writing of these notes, was the fullest piece of biography.

These letters give some sense of what touring must have been like. They also give a valuable insight into Billy's state of health. The following transcription of a characteristic note home also gives an indication of repertoire. (Square brackets indicate editorial changes. Parentheses are used for additions and pointed brackets for capitalization.)

"Hippodrome"  
Bolton  
Feb 19th 1912  
Dear Wife,

No letter to hand this morning hope you are alright. I am getting better (.) <W>ent for a ride in the





L to R: Amy Williams, Mrs Fred Godfrey (?), chauffeur, Fred Godfrey, and Billy Williams seated on the running board

car yesterday. Friday has been bad.) <A>|| the week with an abscess on the tooth. Am still doing well here singing "Lets all go mad", "Wish it was Sunday night" (" Old grey Coat (" ("Little Billy's Wild Woodbines ("), ("), <H>ave a little one. We are having big houses (. ) <A>m glad those conformations came along (. ) They were for forty two and a half. <M>any thanks for Reggee(sic?) letter.

I have splendid digs this week (. ) <P>ut them in your book(: 8 Castle Street (. ) Bolton (. )

Best and Only love Billy XXXX

Billy's letters show evidence of haste and are delivered in an abbreviated form of English where capital letters and punctuation are left to the discretion of the reader! They also note a troublesome cold, evidence of what Amy Jennings, more than half a century later would call his "weak chest". On the 23rd January 1912 clearly on tour in the Midlands Billy had written from Manchester.

60 Rumford Street  
Manchester Jan 23rd  
Dear Amy,

Just a few lines hoping this will find you in the best of health (. ) <T>hanks for your nice letter (. ) <Y>ou will be pleased to know I made a big success in Bury (St Edmunds.) I sing six or seven songs each night. I caught a bad cold Sunday. I have had to stay in bed all day (. ) I feel much better for it (is) these English winter('s) kills me (. ) Fred Godfrey did not come down and I gave him his fare on Monday (. )



Billy Williams swings, at Southampton

When I was up on Sunday I found you did what I told you not to do. <T>hat(s) the reason why I have not written (. )

Much love and XXXX  
Yours  
husband  
XXX for Maggie and Billy

The rather enigmatic sentences at the end of this note have not been explained.

Fred Godfrey was probably the most important prop to Billy's career. Godfrey, who was

born "Llewellyn Williams" in Swansea, Wales in 1880, was responsible for most of Billy's "hits" as well as those of many other popular singers, including Australia's Florrie Forde. He was a close family friend of the Williams and he figures in a number of family photographs. In one of these he is playing golf. In another he is part of a group setting out (or arriving after) a motoring excursion. Amy Jennings suggested that he had a fine natural gift for the

invention of tunes and an easy improvisatory ability at the piano. But his work frequently extended to the words and in some songs he wrote both words and music. But the usual method was collaborative, and he worked with many other lyricists. No account of Billy Williams' career would be complete without an acknowledgement of the significance of Fred Godfrey, even though his life and achievements have been largely

forgotten today.

Godfrey wrote songs which were performed by George Formby Jr., Gracie Fields, Max Miller and many others. Like the Australian singers who are absent from a list of "national treasures", Godfrey made an important contribution to the first stirrings of those who would become the gramophone's first international stars. And like many others of his time, including Peter Dawson, he used a number of pseudonyms. Amongst these were Godfrey Williams, Edward E Elton and M Romany.

When Godfrey died, in London in 1951, he left behind a

string of notable tunes and especially memorable choruses.

Billy Williams' act depended upon tuneful choruses. He would walk up and down the footlight encouraging his audience to participate. And he was successful wherever he went.

*The Gorbals Hall has another splendid company this week, and a most enjoyable programme is the result. Billy Williams makes a welcome reappearance here, and with his jolly good humour, and catchy songs, soon had the audience assisting him. He was in capital voice last evening, and was with difficulty let off.*

This undated and unidentified

clipping from Glasgow is a characteristic assessment of his act, although reviews frequently mention Billy's sound recordings. The following extract which is also undated and unidentified is probably from Bradford or Leeds. It demonstrates that Billy did more than sing.

*Mr Billy Williams, who has the part of the Cannibal King in the pantomime of "Robinson Crusoe"... has been engaged by Mr Hart for his Sheffield production next year.*

*One does not often have in a city at the same time two such gramophone and phonograph artistes as are now appearing at the two Bradford pantomimes. (Billy*

*Williams at the Theatre Royal and Florrie Forde in "Cinderella" at Prince's Theatre) Billy Williams who ... is in the front rank of phonograph record makers ... Mr Williams was in London on Sunday last, when he put on three more records for a leading phonograph company ... For several years has been an expert in phonograph-record singing and has offers almost daily for his services at almost any price. Mr Williams can generally get a good record out of three efforts—a feat which few artists can perform.*

The general tenor of all of this would suggest that the article and the pantomime appearance occurred in about 1913, although *I Wouldn't Leave My Wooden Hut For You*, which is mentioned in the Bradford review as typical of his parodies, was recorded first in 1907 and was Billy's second sound recording. He recorded it again in 1909 and in 1911 which suggests that it remained popular. In fact another article, dated possibly incorrectly 1906, describes a charity football match at which the two pantomime casts took a leading part. The "cannibal king, King Koko Cariboo" made "a thrilling Rugby dashup the wing" only to be Rugby-tackled and brought to ground. Florrie Forde left the field for a time and made a great success as one of the girls selling chocolates to the large crowd. The idea for the match

came from Billy.

The article contains a number of surprises.

*Miss Florrie Forde opened the second half with a strongkick, which sent the ball to Ferguson, who opened up a quick burst for the Artistes' citadel ...*

*There was a yell of merriment when the ball got lost somewhere in the region of the skirts of one of the Ugly Sisters.*

In Belfast Billy's popularity "tended to prolong the first house half an hour beyond its proper limit". Great ovations are recorded all over Great Britain.

In 1910 Billy was presented with an opportunity to tour Australia under the management of the well established ex-English vaudevillian Harry Rickards who had developed his entrepreneurial skill in Australia. Billy visited South Africa and Australia. It is not clear why he did not complete the Empire Circuit taking in New Zealand, Shanghai and India as well. Perhaps there were constraints of time. Billy's younger brother Reggie died while on tour in India possibly before 1910, but the date has been difficult to confirm. Valerie Abbey has followed Billy's progress through Australia in the various newspapers and has assembled the first comprehensive

examination of where he went and how he was received. (A report on this research follows these notes.)

Billy died in 1915 of a combination of factors. It was said that he worked too hard but his death certificate states that complications followed from routine surgical procedure. The certificate gives the cause of death as septic prostatitis.

He was buried beside his father at Shoreham, his father having died the year before and having been buried as Richard Holt Williams, playing even in his death the game of name-changing invented for him by his son.

Billy's sound recordings remained in the catalogues until the late 1940s and have, since the advent of long playing vinyls, remained before the public. These notes accompany another stage in his recording career. They accompany his first compact disc which will introduce a new listening audience, especially that in Australia, to a part of its audio heritage. There are twenty three tracks here of the 500 odd different performances which he recorded so this might be the first of several compact discs of the man who might well be styled the most successful Australian popular recording star in the first two decades of



Billy and Amy on sled in London (Highgate?)



*Billy Williams inspecting his car the morning after it was crashed by his (drunken) chauffeur in Norfolk Bridie, shortly before his death*

the twentieth century.

That his voice suited the recording process of the time is amply evident in all that he recorded. But let the discs and cylinders speak for themselves!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who have, in various ways contributed to this production.

My own grandparents and parents must take initial credit for my introduction to Billy Williams and to Florrie Forde.

The next serious excursion into popular music came at the University of York where Professor Wilfrid Mellors encouraged the study of all branches of music making.

In Australia many people have supported my interest or have helped with my research. They include Peter Burgis, Paul Burke, Ross Laird, Steve Rattle and Frank Van Straten. There have been others who will forgive their omission from this list. Encouragement has been received from various quarters. Dr Jane O'Brien provided support at a critical stage.

Similarly the staff at the National Film and Sound Archive and the Performing Arts Museum, Melbourne have provided various services and shown admirable interest.

Wanda Lazar worked patiently and long on the transfers for original discs and Valerie Abbey accepted the challenge to pursue Billy on his 1910 Tour, which was up to this time largely unresearched and certainly not publicly recorded.

Richard Williams, at this time the last "Williams" in the male line stretching back to Billy, has shown great interest in the history of his family.

Without the sponsorship provided by Martin Wright and Move Records this recording might not have been compiled. Martin has watched this project come to fruition with patient care and quiet enthusiasm.

Finally, I wish to thank Dorothy, Laura and Will who have learned countless Billy Williams' songs by heart through constant exposure and to my extended family at the NFSA who have listened to long expositions upon the finest recorded voice from the acoustic period.

DR JEFF BROWNRIGG  
HEAD, RESEARCH AND INFORMATION  
NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND  
ARCHIVE  
CANBERRA, AUSTRALIA.

## THE SONGS

These notes are not intended as comprehensive discographic data. The fullest account of Billy Williams' recordings can be found in Billy Williams' Records: A Study in Discography, by Frank Andrews and Ernie Bayly (Talking Machine Review 1982). Original label and catalogue numbers have been included with title listings on the back card. They have been verified by Ross Laird from listings of recordings which he makes after having seen actual labels.

The date given beside each title below is that of the earliest known recording of that piece. We have averaged the varying title details and follow a chronology of the time of first release, even when a later record has been used.

### JOHN, JOHN, PUT YOUR TROUSERS ON

1. Williams (1906)

Billy's first song was his own composition and was a great success. In the future he would buy the rights to songs written and composed by many



others. The most significant of these was a Welshman called Fred Godfrey who must always share the credit for Billy's popularity.

### THE TAXIMETER CAR

2. Hyde and Heath (1907)

Once there was some novelty about riding in a taxi! Eight pence a mile and "better than having your honeymoon over again"? Perhaps not, not even in 1907.



### THE HOBBNAILED BOOTS THAT FATHER WORE

3. Williams, Barnes and Weston (1907)

A firm favourite in its time, this song persisted in the memories of many people. The tune is quite like another music hall number, "Mick Maccougall" which was sung by Tom Leamore.

### TICKLE ME TIMOTHY

4. Barnes and Weston (1908)

Like most of his songs this one depends upon its tuneful chorus. In live performance the audience would have been expected to join in with each repeated chorus. For this reason they needed to be catchy and memorable.

## PUT A BIT OF POWDER ON IT FATHER

5. *Castling and Godfrey* (1908)

"Father" is frequently the butt of Billy's humour, either because he has taken on unusual domestic responsibilities or, like this song, because of his physiognomy.

## LITTLE WILLIE'S WOODBINES

6. *Weston and Barnes* (1908)

Little Willie's luck in finding a penny in the garden soon turns sour after he turns it into a packet of five cigarettes.

## I MUST GO HOME TONIGHT

7. *Hargreaves* (1909)

One of Billy's greatest hits, this song remained in circulation as a "sing-along" favourite. Like most of his songs the chorus is easy to learn and it has a memorable tune.



## GIRLS OF TODAY

8. *Hyde and Heath* (1909)

Some of Billy's songs poked fun at "married bliss". It is not, unfortunately, a parody of a male position about the claims women were making with considerable energy at this time.

## THE LAND WHERE THE WOMEN WEAR THE TROUSERS

9. *Williams, D'Albert and Godfrey* (1909)

Both this and the previous song pick up the suffragette theme, a very contemporary theme in 1909. Once again the comical dislocation of "normality" is more important here than a genuine effort to parody mens' intolerance of the claims made by women.

## I'VE FOUND KELLY

10. *Williams and Hargreaves* (1910)

Often Billy's songs "fed off" prevailing enthusiasms. This one is an answer to the question posed in a song by his close friend and compatriot, Florrie Forde, "Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?" It is in effect, a sequel.

## WHEN FATHER PAPERED THE PARLOUR

11. *Williams, Weston and Barnes* (1910)

Probably his greatest song, this one remained popular for decades after Billy's death. It is full of the energy and silliness that made his work popular and is the song most likely to be identified with the singer.

## ST KILDA: AN AUSTRALIAN SONG

12. *Williams and Weston* (1910)

Many of Billy's songs make reference to Australia. This one describes an amorous encounter at St Kilda, a Melbourne suburb. Billy's famous laugh and spontaneous patter are well represented here.

## LET'S HAVE A SONG UPON THE GRAMOPHONE

13. *Williams and Godfrey* (1911)

Advertising can pay dividends. In this song Billy manages to incorporate not only many of the titles of his own songs, a comment about the quality of his own performance but also manipulate the title to suit each of the recording companies for whom he made a rendition of this number. Others include *Let's have a Song Upon the Gramophone*, *Homophone*, *Pathephone* or *Phonograph*.

## CHANTICLER

14. *Morse* (1911)

Another jolly attempt to come to grips with the latest fashions - this time it is the inclination of women to dress up in feathers. The "run off" patter contains a reference to the differences between Australian and English tastes in clothing.

## I NEVER HEARD FATHER LAUGH SO MUCH BEFORE

15. *Williams and Godfrey* (1912)

Once again father is found in a number of situations, most of which reflect upon his character! Billy has a lively interaction with the band as individual instruments come forward to the recording horn. The tune owes something to "When Johnny Comes Marching Home".

## TAKE ME WHERE THERE ARE NO EYES ABOUT

16. *Williams and Godfrey* (1912)

Like the other track this song is remarkably 'alive' considering the primitive nature of sound recording when it was made. It is another perky chorus song and a very clearly audible piece of "run off" patter.



### SHE DOES LIKE A LITTLE BIT OF SCOTCH

17. Williams and Godfrey (1912)

Peter Dawson, the Australian bass baritone, adopted a new name in order to cash in on the Scots craze which included a strong following for Sir Harry Lauder. This song is Billy's response to the Scots craze. The tune is a variation of "Comin' Through The Rye".

### IT'S A GRAND OLD SONG

18. Williams and Godfrey (1912)

Set in the Australian bush this song reflects upon an old standard parlour ballad made famous by Patti, Melba and others.

### THE KANGAROO HOP

19. Williams and Godfrey (1912)

An unmistakable piece of jingoism. Billy lost few of the Australian sounds in his voice and certainly none of his enthusiasm for the place where he was born.

### WAIT TILL I'M AS OLD AS FATHER

20. Williams and Godfrey (1912)

Billy speculates about the possible changes which will happen in his life once he is grown up. His mind runs to all of the apparently desirable things in Father's life.

### THE RAGTIME WEDDING

21. Williams and Godfrey (1913)

Ragtime was another contemporary fashion. This song has something of the strict tempo and rolling mechanicalness of ragtime which excludes a chorus. Billy is clearly parodying the musical style.

### THERE MUST BE SOMETHING NICE ABOUT THE ISLE OF MAN

22. Williams and Godfrey (1913)

The Isle of Man occurs in a number of music hall songs including Florrie Forde's "Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?", where Kelly is a native of the place.

### THERE'S LIFE IN THE OLD DOG YET

23. Williams and Godfrey (1914)

It seems ironic that this should be one of Billy Williams' last songs, carrying as it does such an optimistic title. However, the recordings collected and remastered here put beyond doubt the liveliness of one of Australia's first sound recording superstars. It is also of interest that in this recording, his last, the "run off" patter is amongst the longest he was to perform. Billy is by himself, without the band, and filling in the time between the end of his song and the end of the record.



## BILLY WILLIAMS AUSTRALIAN TOUR, 1910

by Valerie Abbey (National Film and Sound Archive)

Harry Rickards, Manager of the Australian "Tivoli" theatre circuit, saw Billy Williams perform at Margate, in England and persuaded him to tour Australia in 1910. He had been absent from his homeland for over 12 years when he travelled to Australia with his wife Amy on the RMSS Omrah. During those 12 years he had become a major "star" of the music hall circuit and a "best seller" amongst those who made sound recordings. Before he set out for the Southern Hemisphere Billy had over-life-size posters made, which showed him standing on the map of Australia. They were sent on ahead of him to be hung outside the theatre in the weeks before he was due to appear there.

"The man in the velvet suit", as Billy Williams was generally known, made his first

appearance on Tuesday night, 11 April 1910 at the Opera House, Melbourne. The reviewers spoke of Billy as a popular 'comedian' rather than a singer, but most of his comedy was in the lyrics of his songs and in their delivery. His songs were full of fun and humour.

*He had very little patter in his act. It was mostly songs. No jokes.*

Billy's was one of the "brightest and breeziest" acts seen at the Opera House. His personal style with its easy, almost casual delivery, reached out to his audience from the time he stepped onto stage, and he held them in the palm of his hand throughout his allotted half-hour. Folk in the "gods", the cheap seats near the ceiling of the theatre where the occupants attracted Billy's particular attention, sang with him almost the whole time, whilst people from all parts of the house joined him in his choruses giving them a refreshing swing. He expected this sort of participation and management encouraged it.

Punch commented on 28 April:

*Billy Williams, who dons a velvet suit so dear to the heart of the dago, is a comedian with an irresistible laugh. His business is infectious, and he has that happy way of becoming quite at home with*

*the house immediately he tattles on. It is not so much what he sings and patters, it is how he does it, that spells success. The boys near the roof demand "I must Go Home Tonight" - with a tremendous aspirant on the home - before they allow the genial Willie to depart from the Opera House stage.*

Billy presented his songs with great vigour and enthusiasm. When he came off stage he was usually wringing wet. Unlike most music hall singing comedians he used very little greasepaint. In fact, it was the naturalness of his performance, the way in which he shared fairly ordinary qualities especially laughing and good-humoured asides, which endeared him to audiences everywhere.

There is some evidence that Billy commenced his life as a professional sportsman, riding horses at Caulfield. Many of the surviving photographs show him playing golf. He played golf during the day and the combination of exercise and fresh air no doubt gave him all he needed for a fresh start in the evening. Amy Jennings claimed a special place for this activity suggesting that it helped to reduce the tension of a very busy life. And there can be little doubt that he completed a few rounds in Australia with his professional golfing brother.

Two weeks before he was due to leave Melbourne for Sydney Punch let his fans know that he was going and mentioned his costume:

*"Billy" Williams makes his departure from the Opera House shortly - in fact, last nights are up. His season has been a brilliant and most enjoyable one, and his retirement from the Opera House bill will cause a void in the way of laughter production. Billy Williams's velvet coat sends its pile out to every portion of the house. He is very popular.*

Billy's famous velvet suit was blue. Although he preferred to wear the blue one on stage, he also owned others coloured grey and claret. This was his only concession to the theatrical conventions which produced black faces and fantastic costumes. In the following week a reflection in the Argus included an acknowledgement of his costume.

*"Billy" Williams of gramophone record fame skips from the Opera House soon, "Australia's Own," as "the man in the velvet suit" is called, will be sadly missed.*

On Wednesday 25 May the Argus reported:

*At the Opera House this afternoon "Billy" Williams will be heard for the last time at a matinee, his season closing to-morrow night.*

Thursday 26 May was to be Billy's last night and farewell. He would thank everyone and say 'Goodbye'. From the evidence of this it is fair to assume Billy wasn't actually engaged to reappear in Melbourne.

When Billy made his first appearance at the Tivoli Theatre in Sydney on 28 May he was announced as "one of England's most successful laughter-making Comedians" - a mistake which was soon rectified. He was acclaimed as the best artist and the most successful at the Tivoli. The Sydney Morning Herald reported he:

*taught the audience three comic songs in a few minutes and then for 20 minutes put them through a practice. At a wave of "Billy's" hand "the committee", as he styled the people in the gallery, sang as obediently as a choir, while everyone who was not singing was laughing at the comedian's droll sayings and antics.*

The "man in the velvet suit" could always get most of his "chorus work" done by the gallery who joined him with characteristic energy, but he didn't always put them to the mental and vocal strain of singing the chorus of new songs usually choosing the old favourites which were so familiar to the audience. Billy was repeatedly recalled never

losing his initial appeal for his audience.

Early in June "Billy Williams' Songster" was published. It went on sale for 6d and contained "a new budget of songs by the King of Laughter Makers, the hit of the hour, and the favourite songs as originally sung by the great artist".

Sydney farewelled Billy Williams, "the clever and versatile comedian", on 15 July. His exit was said to have created a void; "the crowd laughed with Williams...." he "buzzed about the stage like a bee in a bottle". He thrived on his audience and they loved him. He was obviously happiest when he was joined by them in his role as the people's singing comedian.

By the time Billy returned to Australia in 1910 he was already famous for his gramophone and phonograph recordings. He had a brilliant reception and was tremendously popular and successful throughout the tour, so much so that Rickards extended his contract and he was engaged to reappear in Melbourne for an "encore farewell" and gave the public more of what they so much enjoyed. Billy had probably intended returning to Melbourne in any case to pay another visit to his relatives in Malvern. He and Amy stayed with them earlier in the year.

Billy Williams was proudly announced as "Australia's own singing comedian" and those who missed seeing and hearing him didn't do so through lack of notice in the Argus:

*Reappearance for a short farewell season of nine nights only ... These will be absolutely his last appearances in Australia as he sails for London on 10 August.*

He was given an enthusiastic welcome "home" when he returned to the Opera House on Sat 30 July. His performance, as always, was "full of joyfulness" and he had every reason to maintain his happy smile for the "Committee" in the gallery who needed little encouragement to sing along with their favourite.

Although it has not been possible to find programmes for all of his Australian performances, some of Billy Williams' most popular songs at this time are mentioned in press reports. It is highly probable that he included most of his standard favourites. These included:

- *I must go home tonight* (recorded in 1909) *Save a little one for me* (recorded 1908) *Where does Daddy go when he goes out?* (recorded 1912). Billy certainly sang *I must go out tonight* on his Australian tour. Of his other songs he probably included those recorded in 1910

and perhaps others recorded in previous years such as these amusing ditties:

- *When father papered the parlour*
- *St Kilda*

Billy Williams was on tour in Australia when the following three recordings went on sale:

- *Too-ral-oor-al-laddie*
- *That's a jolly (fine) good song.*
- *She's coming home tonight*

Others from the time included:

- *Why do you think I look so gay?*

- *It's a treat to be alive*
- *Matrimonial Chimes*
- *I've found Kelly*
- *Bobbing about in the briny*
- *Come into the Garden, John*

Billy Williams was a star "turn both at the Tivoli in Sydney and the Opera House in Melbourne. He appeared, for his last 'season' in Australia at "a matinee on Wednesdays and Saturdays and every evening except Sunday" from 11 April to 8 August 1910.

On 9 August the Argus gave him:

**A Favourite's Farewell**  
*'I Must Go Home Tonight' - The Opera House was crowded yesterday evening, the occasion being the farewell to "Billy" Williams, who, having completed a successful season, returns to London today. When the curtain rose for the second part of the programme there was not a vacant seat in the*

house. When the small boy who manipulates the cards announcing the next turn disclosed the name "Billy Williams" there was prolonged applause, which increased as the orchestra played "Auld Land Syne". To these strains "the man in the velvet suit" made his entrance. It was some moments before he could begin his song, hundreds of voices clamouring for one or other of the numbers in which the artist has been popular. In all Williams had to sing seven songs, and then he received a further demonstration. A dozen floral tributes were handed up to the stage and the mysterious parcels were explained when bottles of champagne, boxes of cigars, a walking-stick, and other presents found their way over the footlights. With the flowers as a background another song was demanded, and the audience joined heartily in the chorus of "I must go home tonight". A farewell speech followed. The orchestra again played 'Auld Lang Syne', and the audience in stalls, dress circle, and gallery rose and sang the words of the first verse as the curtain fell.



## TECHNICAL NOTES

The recordings used for this compact disc/tape have been selected from the Brownrigg-Williams Collection at Australia's National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA). This collection consists of sound recordings and manuscripts and was donated to the NFSA in 1989. They were collected over a long period and are all well used. The transfers were made by Mrs Wanda Lazar, using filtering and equalization equipment in the NFSA studios.

Speeds are as indicated on particular discs. Where the speed is not shown the ears of the technician and the producer were used to make a subjective judgement based upon a long listening experience and with only small variations from likely speeds. (Less than 2%).

All the tracks were acoustically recorded in the first instance and the surface quality varies. The range is from excellent to fair and this is often an indication of how much the original disc has been played in the last 50 years. No attempt has been made to change the original sound beyond cleaning up some of the surface noise. However, it is NFSA policy not to over-filter, thereby removing some of the performance as well

as the surface noise.

Following is a list of the equipment used at the NFSA to prepare the master tape. Before any filtering or equalisation was used, however, it was essential to achieve maximum clarity of signal by selecting the optimum size and shape of stylus.

KEITH MONKS AUDIO LTD record cleaning machine  
EMT 938 & 950 turntables  
STANTON cartridges with EXPERT PICKUPS styli  
PACKBURN 323 audio noise suppressor  
PHASE LINEAR 1000 II Autocorrelator  
ORBAN 622B & RANE PE 15 parametric equalisers

NAGRA T audio tape recorder  
UREI 811B loudspeakers

The tape was transferred to digital tape in preparation for transfer to compact disc by Martin Wright of Move Records using the following equipment.  
OTARI MX 5050 tape recorder  
SONY PCM FI digital processor  
SONY BETA HF 950 video recorder  
TANNOY monitor loudspeakers  
KLARK-TEKNIK DN 22 graphic equaliser  
DIGIDESIGN 'SOUND DESIGNER II' on a MACINTOSH II computer (used to digitally remove some of the "clicks")

Dr Jeff Brownrigg is a graduate of La Trobe University (Australia) and the University of York (UK). His studies have included doctoral research on singing and song. He is currently the Head of Research and Information at Australia's National Film and Sound Archive.

Wanda Lazar is a graduate of the Warsaw Academy of Music, where her work included musical studies as well as specialist training in sound recording technology. Mrs Lazar works in the Sound Preservation Section of Australia's National Film and Sound Archive.



**move**  
[move.com.au](http://move.com.au)





*Billy Williams, Fred Godfrey playing golf at Southampton*