

= George Formby Sr =

George Formby (born James Lawler Booth ; 4 October 1875 ? 8 February 1921) was an English comedian and singer in musical theatre , known as one of the greatest music hall performers of the early 20th century . His comedy played upon Lancashire stereotypes , and he was popular around Britain . His nickname , " The Wigan Nightingale " , was coined because of the way he would use his bronchial cough as a comedic device in his act .

Formby was born into poverty in the industrial north west of England ; his mother was an alcoholic and part @-@ time prostitute , and during much of his youth he was maltreated . To earn money he would sing for pennies on street corners , before he joined a singing duo in his teens . He began to develop his own act during the 1890s and built up a following in Lancashire . He also developed a series of stage characters , including that of " John Willie " , which is described by the cultural historian Jeffrey Richards as " the archetypal gormless Lancashire lad ... hen @-@ pecked , accident @-@ prone , but muddling through . " Formby also had a successful recording career and made the transition from music hall to revue in 1916 .

His health had always been poor , but a stage accident in 1916 weakened Formby 's lungs , and he suffered increasingly for the next few years , reducing his ability to perform . Tuberculosis and influenza ? the latter contracted in the pandemic of 1918 ? weakened his constitution further , and he died of pulmonary tuberculosis in 1921 at the age of 45 . Formby 's act , and one of his costumes and canes , inspired Charlie Chaplin in the formation of his character the Tramp . Formby 's son also used parts of his father 's act when starting his stage career and , once established , also changed his name to George Formby ; Formby Jnr went on to become the top British male star in box office takings between 1937 and 1943 .

= = Biography = =

= = = Early years : 1875 ? 90 = = =

George Formby was born James Lawler Booth in Ashton @-@ under @-@ Lyne , Lancashire , on 4 October 1875 . He was the illegitimate and only child of Sarah Jane Booth (c . 1856 ? 1912) , a poor , illiterate cotton weaver . His father , Francis Lawler , a coal miner , was not named on the birth certificate ; six months after the birth of their son , the couple married , both aged about 19 . Sarah worked as a prostitute ; she was small , around 4 feet (1 @.@ 2 m) tall , and sang in pubs in exchange for alcoholic drinks . She was convicted 140 times for offences that included theft , prostitution , drunkenness and brawling . The marriage was turbulent , and Formby was often neglected , mistreated and suffered malnourishment . Because Sarah was frequently absent from home , and often detained overnight at the local police station , Formby was regularly forced to sleep outside . As a result he developed asthma and became susceptible to bronchitis . In his later years he recalled that his " childhood was the most miserable as ever fell to the lot of a human creature " .

Formby left formal education at the age of eight or nine , and did not learn to read until well into his teenage years . To earn money for the household , he sang on street corners for coppers ; the family 's poverty worsened when , in October 1890 , Lawler died from pulmonary tuberculosis at the age of 33 . Formby secured a job at a cotton mill and spent two years as a loom builder . He supplemented his wages by singing in pubs , alehouses and free @-@ and @-@ easies , the last being places where informal arrangements were made for patrons to provide their own entertainment . Around this time he joined up with another boy to form an act , " the Glenray Brothers " (also " the Glen Ray Brothers ") , which was profitable enough to have a manager ; the act continued until Formby 's boy soprano voice broke , after which the pair separated .

= = = Burgeoning stage career : 1890 ? 1902 = = =

Formby began to develop his own stage act during the 1890s , and built a large fan base in Lancashire . He devised several characters with their own costumes , and composed a series of comic songs . By 1896 his assignment book records that he was buying and collecting comic songs and securing the singing rights . He was billed as J.H. Booth until 1897 , when he changed his stage name to George Formby . Although rumoured to have picked his new surname after seeing it as a destination on a railway carriage , the main sources agree this story is likely to be apocryphal . The origin of the Formby name is more likely to have been a suggestion from Dennis Clarke , the manager of the Argyle Theatre in Birkenhead , while George was chosen in honour of the music hall star George Robey . Formby first used his new stage name in Birkenhead in 1897 .

One of the earliest characters Formby developed was " John Willie " . Baz Kershaw , the professor of theatre , described the character as Formby 's " onstage alter ego " , while the cultural historian Jeffrey Richards describes Willie as " the archetypal gormless Lancashire lad in baggy trousers , tight jacket , and bowler hat , slow @-@ talking , hen @-@ pecked , accident @-@ prone , but muddling through . " His costume included ill @-@ fitting clothes , large boots worn on the wrong feet , and a variety of hats ; he would often carry a cane . In 1908 he lent one of his costumes to a young Charlie Chaplin when the latter was touring with Fred Karno 's troupe ; Chaplin also incorporated Formby 's cane twirl and duck @-@ like walk into his act .

In 1897 Formby met Martha Maria Salter , a 20 @-@ year @-@ old music hall performer , and they married in her home town of Halifax in August . Little is known about Salter , although the 1901 census shows that she was still living with her parents . The marriage does not appear to have been successful , but according to Formby 's biographers , Sue Smart and Richard Bothway Howard , there is no evidence of a divorce between the couple and no information relating to when the couple separated .

In 1897 or 1898 Formby was signed to appear at the Lyceum Theatre , Blackburn , supporting the magician Walford Bodie ; a 40 @-@ week tour followed , with Formby earning 30 shillings a week . In 1898 , while performing at the Wigan Empire as part of the tour , Formby met Eliza Hoy , the daughter of the Empire 's cashier . The couple married in August the following year at Wigan Registry Office , although this marriage was bigamous because of his union two years previously with Salter . In the months after their marriage , Eliza persuaded Formby to join the Roman Catholic Church , which helped her parents overcome their initial distrust of him . Formby and Eliza had thirteen children , of whom seven survived : four daughters and three sons . The cultural historian David Bret states that Formby was " possessed of staggering consumptive virility " , as the comedian also had several children with other partners . Eliza became an important figure in Formby 's professional life , making his costumes and standing in the wings during his performances to help him . Eliza also continued working as a seamstress and would sell chips during lunchtimes to supplement the family 's income .

= = = London , and a growing reputation : 1902 ? 16 = = =

In 1902 Formby performed for the first time in London , when he was booked by Ted Granville , the proprietor of the Royal Albert Music Hall in Canning Town , to appear for £ 3 a week ; Granville subsequently became Formby 's London agent . Eliza Formby later recounted that Belle Elmore , the wife (and later victim) of the murderer Dr Crippen , saw Formby perform , and was so impressed that she contacted Granville and told him to travel to Leeds to see the act . Formby soon transferred to the London Pavilion music hall , where he was immediately successful , and became " an idol of the town " , according to The Times . His popularity increased when Marie Lloyd , the influential music hall singer and actress , said that she would only watch two acts : his and Dan Leno 's . Lloyd recommended Formby to the proprietor of the Tivoli Music Hall , who gave the comedian a ten @-@ week run . Robey was also impressed , and in 1905 he recommended Formby as the lead in a pantomime in Newcastle at a salary of £ 35 a week . He was able to command £ 325 a week by 1920 .

After the Formbys had lost three daughters to early deaths , their first son , George Hoy Booth , was born in 1904 . Although the boy was born unable to see owing to an obstructive caul , he

gained his sight during a violent coughing fit or sneeze when he was a few months old . Over the course of 1904 Formby purchased the singing rights to 57 songs , more than his normal annual number of between 10 and 20 ; the average cost of his songs was around a guinea . Two years later he made his first recordings , on phonograph cylinders , for the Louis Sterling Cylinder Company , and in 1907 he signed a recording contract with Zonophone . He was one of the few performers who had no difficulties recording clearly with the primitive equipment , and he performed in a relaxed fashion for an invisible audience . He would sing his song and then talk to the listener using a variant of his normal stage patter . Some of those songs , such as " Playing the Game out West " and " Since I Parted my Hair in the Middle " have been identified by Dave Russell , the social historian , as " clever depictions of a provincial innocent let lose [sic] in the capital " .

For much of January and February 1908 Formby appeared in various London music halls for which he received £ 20 a week . The following year , and staying in the capital , he played three halls a night in exchange for £ 45 a week . One such venue was the Tivoli with Lloyd and Little Tich as the headline acts . When not performing in London , Formby continued to tour the provincial music halls . In 1910 he again appeared at the Tivoli , and was reviewed in The Times , in which the reporter opined that Formby " becomes more of an artist the longer he sings " . Later that year Formby recorded what would become his most famous song , " Standing at the Corner of the Street " , which he also co @-@ wrote . By 1913 his record sales were strong enough for him to negotiate a new recording contract worth £ 300 a year .

Formby 's career received a further boost in July 1913 when he was one of seven acts to appear before George V and Queen Mary in a Royal Command Performance at Knowsley Hall , near Liverpool . The Times reported that Formby 's " broad humour succeeded with unexpected ease , and their Majesties praised him very highly after the performance . " Formby was embarrassed by his performance . His usual act partly consisted of a running patter with the orchestra conductor , which he again did on this occasion ; behind the conductor sat the royal party , and it looked to some that Formby was speaking disrespectfully to them . The king understood to whom Formby was talking , however , and afterwards presented him with a tiepin . In October Formby appeared in his second Royal Command Performance of the year , in a charity show organised by the French actress Sarah Bernhardt . He took part in two acts : a performance of " Ten Little Nigger Boys All in a Row " , alongside other music hall entertainers including Robey , Mark Sheridan , Cicely Courtneidge and George Graves , followed by a short solo piece .

In March 1914 Formby appeared in No Fool Like an Old Fool , a 20 @-@ minute long silent comedy film , which is thought to be lost ; it was his only film appearance , and little is known about the plot or his character . When the First World War broke out in August that year , he tried to enlist , but was turned down on medical grounds ; instead he , like many music hall stars , was active in the recruiting campaign for the army and spoke at rallies , particularly on behalf of the Derby Scheme .

Formby was always worried that his son George would watch him on stage , as he did not wish the boy to become a comic , saying " one fool in the family is enough " . Nevertheless , although he had sent George away to train as a jockey , in 1915 he allowed his son to appear on screen , taking the lead part of a stable boy in By the Shortest of Heads , a thriller directed by Bert Haldane . After the filming , Formby sent his son to Ireland , to continue his jockey training , and also sent the five horses Formby had purchased that year , which joined others he had previously bought .

= = = Worsening health , and death : 1916 ? 21 = = =

Formby was injured in June 1916 during rehearsals for the revue Razzle @-@ Dazzle , after a stage collapsed onto him at the Theatre Royal , Drury Lane . He suffered lung damage and was treated for a pulmonary haemorrhage at Guy 's Hospital before recovering . Although he was the lead in the show , the premiere took place without him ; it was criticised by reviewers , and The Observer thought that " some of it seemed to have strayed in by mistake out of a second @-@ rate provincial pantomime " . Formby returned within a week and the reviews were more positive , with The Observer stating that it was " one of the successes of the season ... Razzle @-@ Dazzle is now one of the liveliest revues in London , and the most spectacular " . By August the production had

transferred to the Empire Theatre , Leicester Square .

The damage to Formby 's lungs from the accident was exacerbated by tuberculosis , and he began to miss an increasing number of his appearances . In 1917 the Southport Palladium took court action against him for failing to fulfil a theatrical engagement as contracted , whereupon his lawyer said that Formby was dying of the lung disease and was working for the short time he had left for the benefit of his large family . Formby lost the case : his plea of ill @-@ health was compromised by his accepting an engagement elsewhere at the same time .

Formby 's health was further damaged in the influenza pandemic of 1918 , during which he contracted the disease while appearing at the Manchester Hippodrome and was unable to work for a month . He was taken ill during the runs of pantomimes in both 1918 and 1919 , was forced to rest for three months in 1919 , and collapsed on stage during a performance in Newcastle upon Tyne in the 1920 ? 21 pantomime season . Formby was advised by doctors to emigrate to South Africa for the benefit of his health , but he preferred to stay in Britain , with his wife and children , and continued to work . During his performances his wife would wait in the wings with ice for him to suck to stop internal bleeding , and an oxygen tent was present in the stage wings ready for emergencies .

In early 1921 Formby was appearing at the Newcastle Empire in Jack and Jill when he collapsed after a show . He returned to his home near Warrington , where he died of pulmonary tuberculosis on 8 February , at the age of 45 . He was buried in a family plot in the Catholic section of Warrington Cemetery . He left over £ 25 @,@ 000 in his will , listing Eliza as executrix . As their marriage had been bigamous , he described her as " my reputed wife Eliza Ann Booth , otherwise Eliza Ann Hoy "

The obituarist for The Manchester Guardian wrote that Formby was one of the " great drolls " of the music hall whose humour " always seemed to take its rise in a sympathetic perception of human vanities and weaknesses " . The Dundee Courier considered him a great comedian , made all the greater by his continuing to perform through his illness , while the drama critic J. T. Grein , writing in The Illustrated London News , thought that Formby , " along with [Harry] Lauder , Robey and [Albert] Chevalier , formed the leading quartette [sic] of the profession " .

= = Stage persona and technique = =

Formby was the first comic to use a delayed entrance as a joke to make the audience laugh before he arrived : his orchestra played his entrance music , and then he failed to appear on stage . His act included songs , described by Smart and Bothway Howard as " characteristically simple , some with tunes derived from Methodist hymns , and with catchy choruses " , and he would chat to the orchestra conductor and front rows , punctuating his stage patter ? delivered in a deadpan style ? with his cough . He used his health ? particularly the coughing ? as part of his act , and would say that he was " Coughin ' well tonight ! " He also created the phrase " It 's not the cough that carries you off ? it 's the coffin they carries you off in ! " One of Formby 's nicknames , " The Wigan Nightingale " was coined because of the way he used his bronchial cough in his act .

The " John Willie " character , like much of Formby 's act , used pathos as one of the comedic drivers , " but it was not contrived and was never mawkish " , according to Alan Randall and Ray Seaton , two of Formby Jnr 's biographers . In his examination of British screen stars , Geoffrey Macnab agrees , and identifies that although Formby 's jokes were about himself , " there was grit in the routines , a resolute denial of self @-@ pity " . The Times examined the performer 's style of humour , and considered it " often crude , and always simple , but it was always true humour , and , what is more , it was invariably clean . "

Much of Formby 's humour was based in his north western roots , particularly Wigan , which he told people was where he was born , rather than Ashton . He would refer to taking his holidays at Wigan Pier , which was a small wooden platform on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal for loading coal , rather than a pleasure pier . The Manchester Guardian called him " Lancashire 's accredited representative on the London variety stage ... clown @-@ satirist of genius " .

When he performed in London , Formby would change his act , introducing himself as " Good

evening , I 'm Formby fra ' Wigan ... I 've not been in England long " ; he slightly modified his stage persona , and he played " the naïve boy trying to fit in with the sophisticated south " . Smart and Boothroyd consider that " the contrast between his northern accent and metropolitan bravado was humorous , and the more urbane and sophisticated his audience the more George exaggerated his provincial gormlessness " .

= = Legacy = =

Six weeks after Formby 's death , his son George first appeared on stage in a copy of his father 's act ; he initially appeared under the name George Hoy ? using his mother 's maiden name ? but soon took his father 's stage name . Formby Jnr went on to become the top British male star in box office takings between 1937 and 1943 , and the highest @-@ paid entertainer in Britain .

Chaplin , who derived some of his stage persona from Formby 's , sailed in 1908 with Karno 's troupe to the United States , where he developed the character of the Tramp , the image of which became universally familiar by 1915 . George Orwell later used Formby 's humorous concept of " Wigan Pier " in the title of his 1937 study of depression and unemployment in the area , The Road to Wigan Pier .

Formby also left over 190 recordings , and after his death The Times commented , " There cannot be many people who have not heard at some time in their lives either the words or the refrain of ' John Willie ? Come On ' , ' One of the Boys ' , ' I was Standing on the Corner of the Street ' , or ' Playing the Game in the West ' " , songs described by Fisher as " afizz with gaiety and champagne " .

In October 1922 a large marble memorial was unveiled at the site of Formby 's grave , in the presence of Formby Jnr , Eliza and a large crowd . The memorial later became the resting place for both Formby Jnr and Eliza . In June 2012 a blue plaque was unveiled at Hodgson Street , Ashton , Formby 's birthplace .