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# Doing the Lambeth Walk

**Fiona Harrison** is struck by the enduring appeal of *Me and My Girl*, which has been delighting theatre audiences for 85 years

**T**here are few musicals which capture the magic of what it is to be quintessentially English quite like *Me and My Girl*. Packed full of jaunty tunes, this charming unassuming show from the 1930s has enthralled audiences through the decades from as far afield as Japan and South America.

I have no idea what the secret of this musical is but certainly when I first saw the show back in the 1980s it made an indelible impression. Unlike so many musical comedies of its time, *Me and My Girl* continues to delight audiences of all ages from friendly coach parties to seasoned theatre critics with its happy-go-lucky melodies and innocent humour.

The first production of the show opened in 1937 at the Victoria Palace Theatre in London's West End. The

musical score was written by Noel Gay and perhaps part of the show's charm is Gay's writing style which is firmly rooted in the traditions of British music hall and the variety stage. This is unlike American musicals of the time which take their inspiration from Hollywood. The book and lyrics were by L Arthur Rose and Douglas Furber.

Lupino Lane starred in the first production and later went on to appear in and direct the musical when it was revived in 1941, 1945 and 1949. Lane had previously played the character Bill Snibson in horse-racing comedy play *Twenty to One* in 1935 and it was

thought that *Me and My Girl* would be a fresh vehicle for Lupino's character.

The plot is simple enough and tells the story of Bill Snibson, an unrefined cockney who is named as the 14th heir to the Earl of Hareford's estate, much to the disappointment of the family and the will executors, Maria Duchess of Deane and Sir John Tremayne. For Bill to claim his inheritance, he must first learn gentlemanly manners. The Duchess believes she can make Bill "fit and proper" for society but not his cockney girlfriend Sally Smith who is advised for the sake of Bill's future to return home to Lambeth and to never see her sweetheart again.

Mourning the loss of his true love, Bill undertakes a search to find Sally, not realising that Sir John Tremayne, touched by their love, has engaged a speech professor to help her impress the Duchess. When Sally returns to the

**Above: Lupino Lane, Teddie St Denis and other cast members doing *The Lambeth Walk* in a scene from the musical comedy *Me and My Girl* at London's Victoria Palace Theatre on 16 December 1937.**

family estate, she does so as a lady and the two are joyfully reunited.

To begin with, *Me and My Girl* attracted little attention until it was broadcast live on BBC radio. In May 1939, the show was televised live from the theatre and became part of British wartime culture with its memorable number *The Lambeth Walk* and title song *Me and my Girl* (not to be confused with the Judy Garland and Gene Kelly number *For Me and My Gal*).

During the war years, *The Lambeth Walk* caught on as a party dance with its cheeky thumbs up and was adapted for ballrooms by choreographer Adele England who was the principal dance teacher for the Mecca organisation. So popular was *The Lambeth Walk* it was reported that Mussolini danced it, Roosevelt *Lambeth* walked in the White House and the royal family jiggled to it in Buckingham Palace. When Lupino Lane went to *Lambeth* to do the “walk” there, literally hundreds of thousands showed up. All the traffic got stuck on *Lambeth* Bridge



**Lupino Lane had previously played the character Bill Snibson in 1935 horse-racing comedy play *Twenty to One*. Right: Sally Gray and Lupino Lane give a cheeky thumbs up from the 1939 film version of *Me and My Girl*.**

and Lane was hours late for his evening performance at the Victoria Palace.

In the 1940s, *The Lambeth Walk* came to symbolise London’s resilience to the blitz. The song’s ironic inclusion on daily cinema newsreels of Hitler’s

troops goosestepping back and forth appealed to the British sense of humour. Noel Gay had refused to allow the song to be played on German radio even before the outbreak of war which meant Gay’s name appeared on the notorious list of people “to be dealt with” once the Nazis invaded Britain.

In 1984, Stephen Fry adapted the show and brought it to London’s Adelphi Theatre where it ran for eight consecutive years. It’s hard to imagine *Me and My Girl* without the classic songs *Leaning on a Lamp Post* and *The Sun Has Got His Hat On* but these numbers didn’t appear in the first productions. They were added much later by Fry, after he gained permission from Noel Gay’s estate to do so.

Staging the show wasn’t straightforward. Fry discovered two of the songs had been lost, along with the script. Eventually a pre-rehearsal script was unearthed at the British Museum. It was the Lord Chamberlain’s original copy which had been submitted to him in 1936 as the official theatre censor. It still contained the Lord Chamberlain’s notes on what

## A MEMORABLE VISIT

It is strange how the sound of a song can bring so many memories back to life, and this came home to me recently when *The Lambeth Walk* was played on my local radio station.

I was immediately taken back to mid-1938 when I was a seven-year-old lad, living with my family in Vauxhall, part of the London Borough of Lambeth. My father was reading the *South London Press* one day and noted the stars of *Me and My Girl*, Lupino Lane and Teddie St Denis, plus a few musicians, were coming to the real-life *Lambeth Walk* as part of a promotional tour.

“We must go,” said my mother, and so we did, accompanied by my five-year-old sister, Jean, who thought she was already a good dancer. Sure enough, at noon, the show crowd arrived at the *Lambeth Palace* end of the *Lambeth Walk*, which was a lane about a quarter of a mile long that ran through to Kennington. It was lined on both sides by rows and rows of market stalls selling vegetables, fresh fruit and everything for domestic life.

Each stall seemed to have its own Del Boy-style character running it.

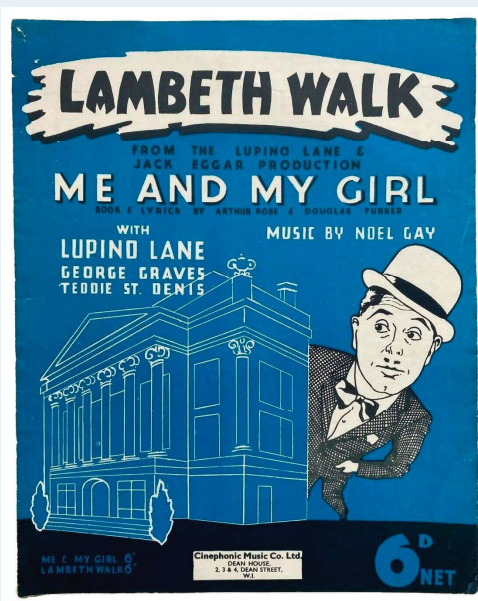
A big cheer went up as Lupino Lane, dressed all in green with a red bowler hat, took Teddie’s hand and began the famous dance down the middle of the walk. Banjos played, trumpets were blasting away with a few mouth organs as a back-up to the famous song. It became a slow-moving group, singing and dancing with all the crowds joining in.

Near the end of the *Lambeth Walk* itself, my mother and Jean stepped out and danced with the stars for a short distance.

They all stopped outside Marcantonio’s ice-cream parlour where Lupino Lane shook my hand and called to the Italian owner: “Give the children an ice-cream on us,” and he did. About 10 of us tucked in with relish as the group passed on to the end of the walk, where an enormous crowd were waiting for autographs and show publicity leaflets. A motorcoach eventually turned up to rescue the group and off they went.

Lupino Lane died in 1959, aged 67, but his role as cockney costermonger Bill Snibson lives on in my memory and I hope in many others’ as well.

**Ron McGill**





he considered appropriate for the time. These included the word “cissy” which was underlined with a roaring “NO” along with the word “naughty” and the exclamation “oo”. The missing songs turned up, after one had been mislabelled in the EMI archive and the other on an old lacquer disc found in the attic of Richard Armitage, Noel Gay’s son.

## “ Me and My Girl holds the record for the most performed and revived musical in the West End. ”

I first became acquainted with the musical when I saw it on my 15th birthday. It made a huge impression on me and I’ve continued to sing the songs all through my professional career. On this occasion I was privileged to see Robert Lindsay and Emma Thompson in the two leading roles. Since then the show has had no shortage of stars from Gary Wilmot, Brian Conley, Su Pollard and Bonnie Langford to name but a few.

In 2017 Me and My Girl celebrated its 80th birthday and continues to hold the record for the most performed and revived musical in the history of West End theatre. It is still a favourite for touring theatre productions and even during the pandemic lockdowns those songs had a cheery resonance for lifting the spirits.

During the lockdown at the start of 2021, I streamed one of the lesser-known numbers Take It on the Chin. Within 24 hours I had received more than 3,000 views which just goes to show Me and My Girl still continues to delight audiences. 🇬🇧

**A 15th birthday visit to Me and My Girl left an indelible impression on Fiona.**



## Working-class Royalty

Pearly kings and queens have been part of London life since Victorian times and are still committed to raising “bees and honey” for charity.

**Gilly Pickup** delves into their history

**T**he story of London’s Pearly kings and queens started in the 19th century with Henry Croft. Born in 1861, Henry was an orphan who was sent to work as a street sweeper and rat catcher in London’s East End when he was 13. At that time, market traders or “costermongers” as they were known – “coster” from “costard”, a kind of apple; and “monger” meaning seller – enthralled him with their cheeky chatter as they shouted their wares to attract the attention of customers while walking the streets with their barrows, donkey carts or “shallows”, the name given to the large trays they carried on their heads.

“Chestnuts, a penny a score”; “three a penny, Yarmouth bloaters”; these cries and others were well known in the East

End. The traders – around 30,000 of them in the mid to late 1800s – had been a feature of London life since the 11th century.

A journalist of the day, Henry Mayhew, perhaps most famous for being the co-founder of political satire magazine Punch, recorded the array of goods for sale, which besides a lot of fish – oysters, eels, fried fish and pickled whelks – included baked potatoes, cough drops, crumpets, gingerbread, cocoa, peppermint water, pea soup, secondhand musical instruments and books.

Some costermongers specialised in buying waste products to sell on to their customers. These could be things like old metal, candles and broken bottles. Generally speaking, costermongers back then were unlicensed, so frequently