



No more the fool

Thirty years ago Elkie Brooks would drink a bottle of brandy before going on stage. She tells Piers Ford that she has overcome her demons and is enjoying her singing more than ever

When record bosses run out of ideas and turn their attention to the next set of instant fame seekers, the question of how to sustain a meaningful career beyond a couple of hit singles is bound to arise.

When it does, they could hardly look to a better role model than Elkie Brooks. It is more than 40 years since the Salford-born singer left school and embarked on a career that has embraced everything from jazz and blues to torch songs, power ballads and rock and roll. She's even held her own with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. That distinctive voice, like gravel rinsed in warm brandy, has earned her an enviably loyal following.

"Versatile! It's a horrid word," she groans. "I am, but the trouble is that it can be to your detriment. People, certainly in the media, don't know what little slot to put you in. It used to frustrate me, but I don't worry about it any more."

At 61, Elkie reckons she is singing better than ever. Her fans apparently agree; seats for her concert at the Mercury Theatre in Colchester on June 22nd sold out months in advance, a story repeated around the country as she continues a major 65-date tour, conducted at the leisurely pace of two or three gigs a week. She also appears at Great Yarmouth's Britannia Theatre on August 28th.

That's how she likes it, surrounded by a band of musicians gathered down the years, and returning home to north Devon between times to practise her beloved aikido, go for brisk walks and work on a new album. At work or play, the family – Trevor, her husband of 29 years, and their two sons Joey and Jay – provide a constant

support network. Trevor manages her career, assisted by Jay and daughter-in-law Joanna. Joey is a gifted musician like his brother. Both boys have collaborated with their mother on stage and in the studio.

"There's not much they don't know about what it takes to go on the road," she says. "When they were younger, they did things behind the scenes like loading the trucks, tuning guitars, setting up drum kits. They're pretty good like that, very capable chaps and I'm very proud of them. And Trevor and I are a force to be reckoned with. We make family decisions on everything, but he leads the way in things like negotiating with record companies."

They met when Elkie recruited Trevor for a tour in the late 1970s after noting his impressive sound engineering skills at a Diana Ross concert in London. She agrees their long marriage is unusual in the music business; her manager at the time gave them just six months. "So we're doing quite well," she laughs. "Trevor always maintained that if we worked together, we'd stay together, which is what we've done. He's marvellous. He helps me work out the shows and the sound is impeccable – hence I'm singing better than I've ever done before because I can always bloody hear myself!"

As a contemporary of the great British female singers of the 1960s, Elkie thoroughly deserves a place in the class of Dusty, Sandie, Cilla and Lulu. Indeed, many musicians would suggest that even back then, she was the best singer of them all, ironically, with the possible exception of Lulu, she has sustained a longer and more consistent singing career than all of them. But while she cut several records at

the same time as they were riding high, chart success eluded her in those early days.


Perhaps more important was the apprenticeship she served, singing with Humphrey Lyttelton's band in London – they remain good friends and continue to record and play together from time to time – and touring with Eric Delaney. When they played the US airbases in Germany, she encountered the sounds of Motown for the first time, adding to a range of impeccable musical influences that included Ella Fitzgerald, Etta James and Dinah Washington.

"I've always liked all sorts of music, if it's good," she says. "The best singing lessons I ever had were from Rabbi Berkovitch, the cantor at our local synagogue. To this day, I can remember the ways he suggested for me to project my voice. And I just have this appreciation of all kinds of good singing. He played me Caruso and Mario Lanza. As the years went on I listened to different things – Johnny Ray, Frankie Laine, Cliff Richard, Gene Vincent."

Serious commercial success finally arrived for Elkie in 1977. She had re-embarked on a solo career after early 1970s stints with jazz-rock outfit Dada and the cult band Vinegar Joe, and hit the charts with *Pearl's a Singer*, a bluesy bar room ballad about a never-made-it singer that captured the imagination of the record buying public in an era dominated by disco and glam rock.

There were many hit singles to come across the next couple of decades, but Elkie admits she found it hard to compromise when record companies urged her to choose more commercial material.

These days, she has come to terms with



songs like *Don't Cry Out Loud* – always in demand at concerts – thanks to the quality of her musicians, who make singing them an occasion rather than a chore.

Elkie has long been firmly in control of her own career, writing a lot of her own songs as well as revisiting old faithfuls. The one thing she regrets, she says, is not hanging on to her youthful confidence through the tough times. She's recovered it, but the battle has been long and hard.

"I was very intimidated by a lot of things, by the business itself," she says. "And that held me back for many years. It got to the point where I had to drink a bottle of brandy just to feel confident enough to get on the stage. I was so panicky and neurotic. But I haven't had a drink before performing for about 27 years now. I treat it the same as my martial arts. I wouldn't have one before going on the mat! Although I might have a couple of Guinnesses when I get home."

"What advice do I have for young singers today? Keep the right attitude, try and keep that confidence, ignore people who try and intimidate you. I'm a lot more laid back about things now. The most important thing is that I'm still enjoying singing. I try, whatever I do, to make the best of things and I suppose that's why I'm still in the business."

COMPETITION

We have two pairs of tickets to give away to see Elkie perform at Britannia Pier, Great Yarmouth, on August 28th. Simply answer the following question and send your name, address and contact details by Monday, June 4th to: Elkie Brooks Competition, artscast, Winship Road, Milton, Cambridge, CB24 6PP

Q: Name the singer in Elkie's 1977 smash hit single