

CHAPTER 7

THE BIG BEAT BUSINESS

As an offshoot of show business, the Big Beat is very much a profitable concern to a few people behind the scene. The main brain is undoubtedly Larry Parnes. Under his aegis, a remarkable crowd of boys with stage names based on their peculiar talents – Power, Keene and Gentle are examples – have been hurtled on to the scene.

Larry Parnes's 'stable', as it is known, consists of a group of rocksters all under contract to Parnes. Whereas other singers have managers and agents who take a percentage of their earnings, Parnes employs his singers instead of them employing him. Discovering them in various towns around the country (a surprising number come from Liverpool), he then grooms what talent they have and puts them under contract to him.

This contract (usually a five-year one) provides the boys with a regular weekly wage whether they are working or not. At first, the wage is low (sometimes as low as £20 a week) but the contract promises a regular pay increase until the fifth year, when his stable boys are assured of astronomical earnings. As yet, none of the boys have been working for Parnes for five years, and so they are not yet earning as much as, say, one of the self-employed singers who may collect £500 per week after only three months in the business.

However, the Parnes beatsters consider the way they are working infinitely better than being entirely dependent on a fickle public for their personal fortune and fame. Working with a five-year contract, the boys do have some security with Larry Parnes behind them. Bearing in mind the way that singers can shoot overnight to oblivion as well as to stardom, some form of security is highly desirable.

The Parnes stable includes Joe Brown, Dickie Pride, Tommy Bruce, Johnny Gentle, Duffy Power, Nelson Keene, Peter Wynne, Georgie Fame, Davy Jones, Johnny Good and Vince Eager. One boy Parnes has under contract is one of the most artistically creative and

sincere singers involved with the teenage side of show business. Lumbered with a stage name that seems to mock his true character, this boy still stands out in the beat scene as an individual in his own right. He is known as Billy Fury.

These words may seem ridiculous when used to describe a singer so often slated for his near-obscene performances. One paper referring to his appearance at a theatre stated that Billy Fury turns into *'a sex symbol of deformed contortions and suggestive songs the minute he walks onto the stage'*. Critics have claimed that *'the simple act of lighting a cigarette takes on a deeper meaning when performed by one of these masters of the suggestive'*. Billy Fury, say critics, *'is one of the rock'n'roll entertainers who purveys badly disguised sex'* to his audience. Those reports are quoted from a 1960 newspaper. They were saying the same thing about Presley years ago.

So, Billy Fury's show business reputation snowballs. The result of press reports stressing supposed lewdness in his performances is that Billy as his friends know him has never been seen by the public eye. That is the way he would like it. He does not make friends easily, and he genuinely hates the blown-up publicity of being a teenagers' idol.

Born Ronald Wycherley in Liverpool in 1940, Billy's early life was a tumultuous affair. He loved his parents and is still extremely fond of them, but he was a mischievous child. For him, the unhappiest period in his life was whilst at his secondary modern school. Resenting the petty authority wielded by his teachers, he was always in trouble. To young Billy, his teachers' attitude towards him amounted to persecution. He longed for the day when he would be free and leave school for good.

In 1955, at the end of the summer term ('summer season' Billy called it when telling this story), his last day of school came round. Billy recalled it like this: 'There were about five minutes to go before the final bell. I couldn't stand it. I put my feet up on the desk and lit a cigarette. The teacher told me to put it out – said school wasn't over yet. I just laughed. "Go on Teach, make me!" I said.

'With only a minute to go before the end of school, he caned me. He thrashed me six times on my hand. With each stroke I laughed louder, until the bell rang as he brought down the cane for the sixth time. Then I was free. I hated school; it was like being in jail. Now I was being released, a free man. I went wild, running out of school shouting, "I'm free, I'm free, I'm free!"'

As Billy remembered those days, he seemed to relive each

moment, each emotion, in his mind. His eyes were troubled until a rare smile broke up the sadness of his features and he laughed at his own school-day rebelliousness. ‘“You’ll achieve nothing; you’ll come to a bad end,” they told me at school,’ he said. ‘So I went back there in my car, just to show them.’ Billy’s eyes glinted at the memory of this. ‘They seemed different somehow. More human than I thought. But I showed them the car.’

When he left school, Billy started as an engineering apprentice in a job fixed for him by his father. All might have gone well for him, but he soon discovered he was only allowed to help the experienced workers; no one would give him a chance to do it himself. So, one day, Billy took up a few plates and welded them together for his own amusement. Unfortunately, the plates had been cleaned for a precision engineering job, and no one appreciated his handiwork. He was sacked.

Then came what Billy described as some of the happiest days he has ever known. His father got him a job as a deck hand on the tugboats operating around Merseyside. This job was to change not only Billy’s whole life, but his whole outlook as well. For a few days each job, the boats would be away from Liverpool, Billy living and mixing happily with the crew. One of the seamen, a fellow called Jack, used to spend his free moments strumming country & western numbers on a battered guitar.

Billy would watch fascinated. A moody boy, even then, he liked to sit in silence listening to the river and Jack’s guitar playing. Flattered by the youngster’s interest, Jack offered to teach young Billy how to play. He was an eager and attentive pupil, picking up chords and tunes without too many snags.

On the tug boats, Billy’s closest friend was a young man who, from the very first day that Billy came aboard, took him under his wing. They worked together, Billy learning all he could from his new mate; a firm trust and friendship grew up between them. The end to this happy phase came with the tragic death of his friend. Billy transferred to another boat and although he was a conscientious worker (he was promoted to Ordinary Seaman), he was eventually fired.

At the time this was a terrible blow to Billy. For ten weeks he was out of work. He began to think that his teacher’s prophecy was coming true. In desperation he turned out some of the songs that he had jotted down in odd moments. Marty Wilde was appearing in a Larry Parnes show at Birkenhead just across the water. Billy decided to take his songs along to see if he could get them published.

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He got to the theatre and pushed through the crowd of girls at the stage door. Feeling very nervous, he walked straight in whilst the doorman was busy somewhere else. Going along a corridor, a man stopped him and asked him what he wanted. 'I'm looking for Mr Parnes,' said Billy. 'I'm Larry Parnes,' the man replied. Whereupon Billy told the man about his songs.

Instead of turning him out, Parnes took him to Marty Wilde's dressing room. There Billy sang a few of his numbers in the hope that Parnes could use them. Larry Parnes not only liked the songs, he liked the singer as well, asking Billy to go onstage and sing something for the audience.

In the wings there was a terrible argument. Billy did not want to do it. 'No, no; there's been a mistake,' he kept on saying. 'I don't want to sing, I just want you to publish my songs.' The compère announced him, the curtain went up, Parnes pushed, and Billy was onstage. For a few seconds he just stood there, stricken with nerves and anger. He looked furious, glaring at Parnes and really hating him for making him look a fool. But the girls in the audience loved him, squealing with delight at his singing. There and then Parnes renamed him: Billy Fury was born.

He joined the show permanently the next day. At first, his parents could not believe it when their son told them he was leaving home to join a rock'n'roll show. When he started packing, they knew he was serious. For Billy Fury this was the beginning of a career that brought him into the charts with 'Maybe Tomorrow', 'Margo', 'Colette', 'That's Love', etc, as well as fame and a certain amount of fortune. But, unlike every other beatster, these are not the things that make him happy.

'I don't feel a happy person,' Billy has said. 'I'm easily affected by sorrow or sadness. I went to a hospital once, sick people everywhere. Some of them had no arms even. I could talk to them. I stayed with them for hours. I felt something for them.

'And I like to sit by myself without anyone talking to me, just thinking. I don't make friends easily because of that. Most people are loud-mouthed, all talk; they don't see what's going on.'

Billy seems to live on his emotions – fear being the one emotion he is most conscious of. Billy would never be a coward in a dangerous situation. This is not because he considers himself particularly heroic, he just likes the feeling of being scared.

As a young kid, he and his pals would take part in a form of

chicken run. They would walk along the railway tracks towards an oncoming train. 'We used to jump clear in plenty of time,' said Billy. 'There was no real danger.' They stopped that when one of the kids, paralysed by the sight of a train bearing down on him, caught his leg and was killed.

Now Billy is a car driver and a speed fan. 'I never want to be passed in a car,' he has said, 'and neither do a lot of other drivers. They seem to dare me to overtake them when I try to pass. I get a kick out of that sometimes. I might catch up with a car on a bend. My sense tells me to slow down, but my foot won't come off the accelerator. The tension builds up: *Will I be able to make it?* That's when I capture that "scared" feeling.'

Frequently, Billy is plunged into bouts of depression. Sometimes these phases are the prelude to a spurt of songwriting. Many of his hit songs were written that way. If he were a better-educated person, Billy Fury might well produce poems to enrich the heritage of English literature. But, because he was born in a Dingle backstreet and brought up as a job in a rock'n'roll era, he has become a teenagers' idol writing poetry in the only medium he knows about – blues-style songs. He is, in effect, a modern-day equivalent of the great tragic poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In appearance, Billy is casually dressed. When he first came to London he had an authentic Liverpool look of a few years back: drape jacket and drainpipe trousers. Now he favours jeans, sweaters and cowboy boots. Suits bore him for being too much of the same colour. At the time of writing, he has just started to learn how to tie a tie properly. Formal occasions are certainly not for him.

He also shows his individuality as a beat star by really detesting recognition. He cannot abide being recognised, pointed at, and spoken to by complete strangers. His efforts to avoid being recognised and treated as a freak lead him to dress casually and slink past people, keeping entirely to himself. But when he is called 'scruffy' by fans, it hurts.

Of all the singers connected with the business, Fury is probably the one who has changed least since the day he started. Unchanged in personal evaluation by the 'big time' treatment that is. He has, however, become considerably dazed during his months as an idol. He genuinely never has any idea of what date, month, even year, it is. He takes absolutely no interest in the so-called importance of world news and affairs. His preoccupation with his own thoughts makes it difficult

for him to remember anyone other than his closest acquaintances.

When he sings, he means whatever he is singing. Admittedly, when he first started in the business he did imitate Presley, but that was because he liked it and thought it felt natural singing that way onstage. Now, as he learns to understand himself more, his act becomes completely genuine and original.

Occasionally at night, he dreams. Some of these dreams have been of death; death in flames with smoke and bits flying everywhere. Convinced he was going to die before he was 21^{*}, Billy went to his mother on the day he was 20 and asked for the key she had promised would be his on his 21st birthday. She gave it to him; he wears it on a chain around his neck as a talisman.

In the Parnes stable there is a remarkable collection of talent and tousled-haired contortionists. A lad who now has the most professional outlook of the stable crowd is someone known as Dickie Pride. Originally dubbed, perhaps unfortunately, as the 'Sheikh of Shake' because of his novel stage routine, he is fast becoming an accomplished and versatile young singer.

Dickie Pride is a slight, dark-haired lad with a strong individual appearance. His entry into the business must have been achieved solely through his singing talents, for he lacks the sex appeal of most teenage idols. In fact, he does not regard himself as a teenage idol, nor does he think it likely that he will ever become one. His main interest is singing, and his kicks come from that, rather than from any adulation from screaming fans.

His chance to enter show business came when he was spotted singing by that piano-playing favourite entertainer, Russ Conway, in the Union Tavern in London's Old Kent Road. Conway then tipped off Larry Parnes and, after a trial appearance at the Gaumont State, Kilburn, Dickie Pride was on his way. But this step was not achieved overnight. His school days had been spent at the Royal College of Church Music and singing as a choirboy at Canterbury Cathedral.

Although Dickie has appeared many times on television and has a recording contract, he has not yet had a disc in the hit parade.

'When I first came into the business, I thought it was great. I did a lot of silly things because I could not really believe it at first. Now, I've settled down to serious singing. Singing is my life – a hit record would mean I might become a flash in the pan.'

* Fury died in 1983 from a heart attack, aged 42.

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Dickie Pride broke into the beat business in 1959 with his shaking gimmick. Since then he believes he has learned a lot, although he would be the first to admit that he still has plenty more to learn. Having settled down in the business, Dickie Pride has grown used to the differences in his life.

‘I’ve become quite scatterbrained during the past few months,’ he has said. ‘It’s the pace, I suppose. Normal life seems so unusual now. And I’ve got so used to late nights that I can’t possibly sleep before one o’clock. Old friends come up to me and say I’ve got it cushy. But I haven’t. It’s much harder work in this business than anything else I’ve done.’

As a singer, he favours jazz numbers – not way-out jazz, but strictly commercial tunes. He much prefers Big Beat numbers to beat ballads. His main aim is to be able to work with and gain experience from real artistes. Rather than have a hit single, Dickie Pride’s ambition is to be a successful album seller. For such a conscientious young man, his ambitions should not be impossible to achieve.

Joe Brown is the self-confessed ‘scruffy nit’ of the Parnes stable. He is also a happy-go-lucky beatster who has the makings of a comedy entertainer. A product of London’s cockney East End, although born in Lincolnshire, his background includes a variety of jobs from barrow boy to British Railways fireman. His first break came as a guitarist when Jack Good signed him for his television show, *Boy Meets Girls*. Straight away, his vivacious personality and lively guitar playing endeared him to viewers.

Now Joe Brown has ventured into singing. He has a charming way of underestimating his own abilities, saying quite definitely that if he were a producer he would sack himself. He does not consider his talents at all exceptional and, bearing in mind the resilient natural humour of the cockneys, he is quite possibly right. However, he is dedicated to guitar playing, although his approach to the beat business may seem casual – ‘The mere fact that I am playing my guitar is good enough for me,’ he has said.

Joe Brown does not have any strong ambition in show business. He finds it laughable to trot out the hackneyed phrase about wanting to become an ‘all round entertainer’. The songs he would like to sing, he believes, are way beyond his capabilities. Listening to him talking, it is easy to get the impression that the future does not worry him very much. Providing he can see that he would still be playing his guitar and making people happy in the immediate future, he is quite content.

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For Tommy Bruce, who made a smash hit recording of Fats Waller's 'Ain't Misbehavin' ' in 1960, giving the number yet another lease of life with his raucous untutored voice, the future does present some problems. His entry into the beat business was a complete surprise to him, and his success as a singer a surprise to everyone else. Spotted by actor Barry Mason who, thinking he at least looked like a singer, persuaded him to sing for the first time in his life and make a test recording. Bruce was snapped up by the record-buying public as a refreshing novelty. His rasping voice which, even when he speaks, grates uneasily on the ear, has won him for a time, a place in the fans' hearts.

Having sampled life as a beatster, he would like the spate of prosperity to last, although he has found it much harder mentally than he imagined. He has said hopefully that he will stay in the business as long as the public wants him. His attitude is to have a go at anything, for he feels he has nothing to lose and certainly everything to gain. For him, remembering his accidental discovery, the beat business was a big laugh – 'I like a nice lark-about,' he has said.

Of the other beatsters on Parnes's books, it is difficult to choose any who stand out as potential top names in the teenage world. A big name could well be Peter Wynne, a handsome six-footer with musical association through a relative being a Covent Garden principal tenor. Or the lucky break could come to a good-looking Parnes favourite who has been trying for a long time to get ahead, Duffy Power.

The really big time might hit Vince Eager, dubbed the dandy of the beatsters, who has appeared many times on the teenage television shows. Or it might be the turn of that Liverpoolian ex-merchant sailor, Johnny Gentle. Then there is Nelson Keene, whose 'Image Of A Girl' vied with Mark Wynter's for hit parade honours in 1960. Those boys, and others bearing equally bizarre stage names, represent Larry Parnes's investment in the Big Beat business.

Although Parnes is the only impresario of any consequence who employs his own chain of Big Beat names, there are other shrewd managers adopting the same methods. In Southampton, for instance, there is Reg Calvert. In 1960, he had under contract to him a character going under the name of Eddie Sex. This nineteen year old, once known as Eddie Thunder, whose real name is Edward Bennett, was employed by Calvert at £16 per week to perform at dance halls through the South and Midlands.

Taking a feather out of Larry Parnes's cap, Reg Calvert has

christened his boys with odd – and at times crazy – stage names. He created Ricky Fever, Babby Bubbly, Buddy Britten, Colin Angel and Danny Storm. It will probably not be long before we have a Norman Passion or an Elmer Twitch. Another of Calvert's gimmicks was to have singers appearing as other singers' doubles. Vince Taylor, when he worked for Calvert, was employed to imitate Elvis Presley. Eddie Sex himself looks remarkably like Vince Taylor!

For each beat singer launched on stage shows touring the country, a backing group is needed. Normally, one would expect a worthwhile promoter to pay a fair wage to the backing group for a week's work. This should be around £25 each, with travelling and maybe hotel expenses provided. The backing groups would either be paid by the show's promoter or, if they are a singer's regular group, by the singer himself.

During the early years of rock, certain unscrupulous promoters in the business, in an effort to spend as little money as possible and reap the largest profits, decided to get their backing groups as cheaply as they could. Using the glory of being in show business as bait, they would pick up a guitarist or drummer of suitable ability in a coffee bar and offer him work at, say, £12.10.0 a week. The youngster, probably an apprentice by day and a musician in his spare time, would naturally jump at the offer.

At first, all would seem well under the system. A group ('the Blanks') would find they had only three nights a week to play at local dance halls. Their £12.10.0 would be easy money. Then comes the step when the promoter puts the Blanks on tour with a stage show. Their job then would be to back all the artistes on the bill for two shows a night, six nights a week.

Not until the tour has started do the Blanks realise just what it is they have let themselves in for. Out of their £12.10.0, they find they are expected to pay their hotel bills and contribute towards their fares to each show. They also have to stamp their own insurance cards. This means that for a week's work they receive only between £5 and £6. Being famous and signing autographs, the Blanks soon realise, is no compensation for poor wages. But if they don't like it, the promoter tells them, they can get out. There is always another group only too eager to break into show business.

From the musicians' point of view, the trouble is this. Once caught in the clutches of a shrewd promoter, it is not easy to escape. There is nowhere to run to. To leave would mean that the musician

would be out of work with little prospect of finding another job. For what well-paid jobs there are available, there are dozens of talented guitarists and drummers to fill them. Because of this situation, there are many rock musicians who receive no more than meagre wages, even today.

Those boys who once had steady jobs in the humdrum life of ordinary people would say to aspiring beatsters, 'Don't come into the beat business!' The beat is like a drug. Once a boy has sampled life in the rock'n'roll world, he is hooked. Even though he can earn more and not work so hard as a builder's labourer, he is loath to quit the beat business. Addicted to the world of Big Beat he still believes some day he will make the big time and knock up a thousand quid a week.

That was the situation that prevents really talented groups from earning the money they deserve. If they were to ask a theatre owner for £500 a week, they would be laughed at. That owner knows he can get groups for £50 a week. Although they may not have the drawing power of a star group, the profit margin should be greater.

Fortunately, the cheeseparating ways of these promoters are turning against them. A man's reputation soon spreads, even on the fringe of the scene. More and more musicians are refusing to work for promoters with bad reputations. At the same time, the fans have been expressing their disgust at the quality of some of the shows they have been offered by staying away.

In the early days all that was needed to pack in audiences was a single star name. He would stroll onstage, sing a few numbers and then wander off. Fans, having more taste than the rock tycoons credited them with, have grown tired of sloppy routines like that. The result is that a new form of stage show has taken to the roads. Lavishly produced, these shows are comparable to first-class West End revues.

The production of any rock show is in itself a new idea. Until recently, these package shows, providing the road manager had assembled the artistes in the right theatre at the right time, just happened. Larry Parnes made some attempt at showmanship by, amongst other gimmicks, getting Billy Fury's backing group to bleach their hair. The result was not too successful; wherever they appeared the group became known as 'Fury's fairies'.

Realising the need for skilled, streamlined presentation to win back to the theatres audiences who had been driven away by shoddy productions, impresario Larry Parnes sponsored his *Rock & Trad* show in 1960. This was a completely new innovation on which no expense

was spared. Parnes engaged Jack Good to produce it, together with famed choreographer Leslie Cooper. The success of this is a superb example of what enterprising promoters can do when they try. Larry Parnes's efforts suggest that the gloomy reign of the cut-throat promoters is on the verge of being overthrown.

Under the old conditions, when groups were expected to pay for their own lodgings out of small wage packets, many used to take the easy way out. Signing autographs for the crowd round the stage door, they would mention that they could not afford to stay at a hotel because their pay had not arrived. Could anyone, they would ask casually, put them up for the night?

Someone in the crowd would be only too glad to have a 'star' staying with them, and so the beatsters would get free board and lodging for the night. One group (actually it was the one that would become the Beatles) managed on a complete four-week tour of Scotland like that in early 1960. 'But we were careful,' their leader explained, 'to go with the monsters. The pretty chicks usually expected something in return.'

The original edition of this book was recalled soon after publication in 1961 for the following paragraphs to be deleted. It was then re-published without them.

That remark is an ideal introduction for comments on the so-called immoral life these rock'n'roll and beat stars lead. It should be remembered that these boys are essentially normal lads with the healthy desires of millions of teenagers. In their position surrounded by an aura of fame, however, they have the power to have as many girls as they like. Or so the story goes.

It is quite true that there are people in show business who take advantage of their position to indulge in a way which other people outside the business would rarely have the opportunity for. Many of the teenage stars are, in the minds of their fans, seen as sex symbols.

But for the sake of his own reputation, no teenagers' idol is going to exploit his position to go out or have sex with as many girls as he can. Although this would be easy for someone with so many admirers, it would undoubtedly ruin his career; a public figure has to use discretion. In fact, as far as girls are concerned, most of the young

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idols have probably no more experience with them than the ordinary teenager.

The situation where good-looking boys are managed and guided by older men is comparable to the days of Ancient Greece when handsome young athletes were fêted by maturer adults. Just as once mothers were warned not to put their daughters on the stage, nowadays the warning would seem to be that mothers should keep their sons out of show business. Homosexuality is certainly common in the Big Beat business; various aspects are discussed, joked about and even practised among some of the stars.

The seamy side of life, the swindles, the hard work, and the failures: the Big Beat Scene has an exaggerated share of them all.