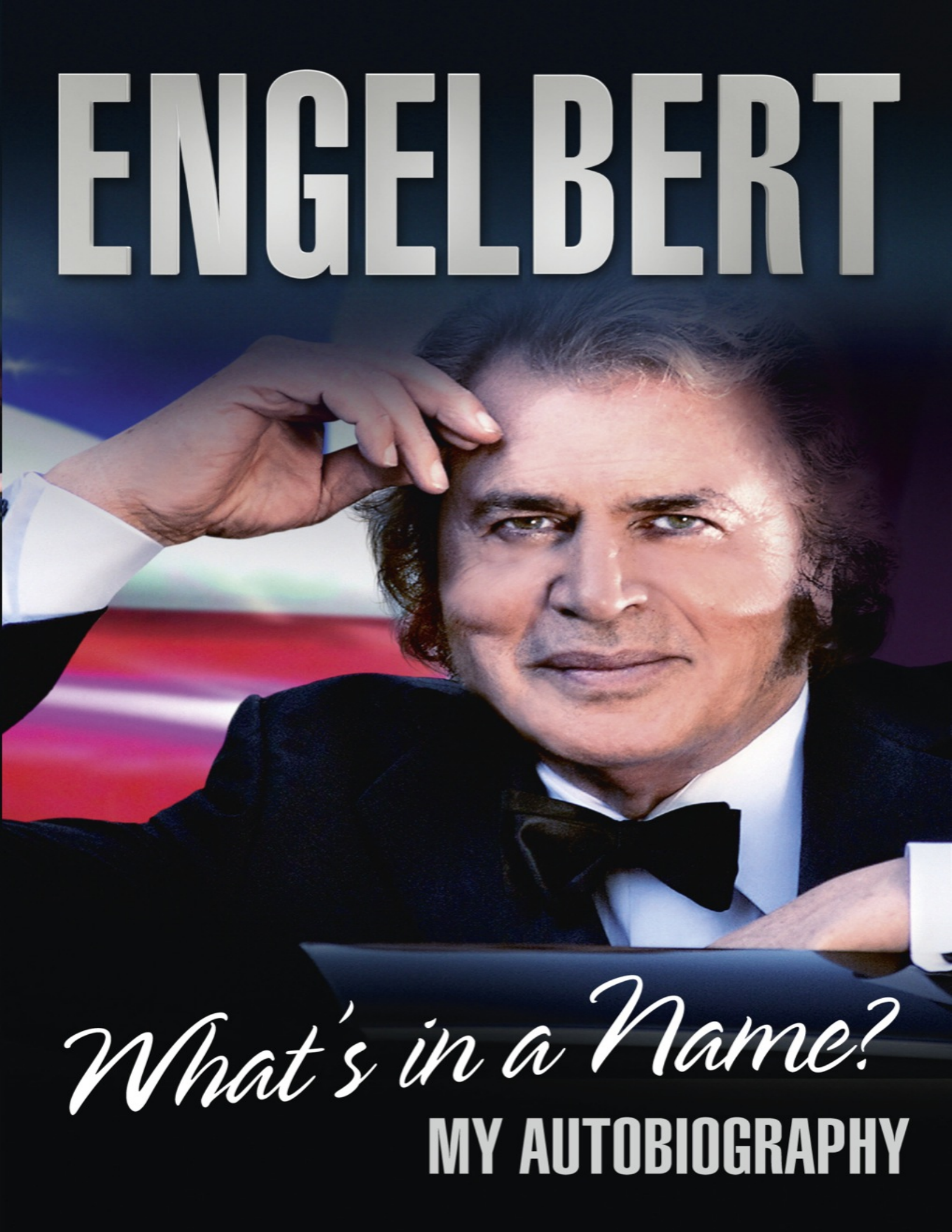
ENGELBERT



What's in a Name?

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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‘I had to take a deep breath before I decided I should tell all, but this is not a kiss-and-tell, it’s a kiss and get on with it.’

Engelbert – What’s in a Name? is the autobiography of one of the world’s best-loved singing stars, Engelbert Humperdinck.

The man known simply as ‘Enge’ by his millions of fans worldwide has sold over 150 million records and spent 56 consecutive weeks in the chart with ‘Release Me’.

Forty years on from his early hits, ‘Enge’ is still at the very top, selling out concerts across the world and representing the UK at the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest. From living on the dole and receiving last rites with tuberculosis, to buying a Hollywood palace with a heart-shaped pool and a fleet of fourteen Rolls-Royces, Engelbert shares his incredible life story with openness, humour and astonishing honesty.

About the Author

Engelbert Humperdinck has been a legend in the international music industry for over 40 years. He has sold over 150 million records and his remarkable voice and extraordinary talent have endeared him to millions of fans around the globe.

Katie Wright is a highly regarded Los Angeles-based showbusiness writer constantly featured in *US Weekly* and *People* magazines.

ENGELBERT
What's in a Name?

The Autobiography

Engelbert Humperdinck
with Katie Wright

DEDICATION

To my mother and father, who made me strive for perfection.

To Patricia, who made me realise what love is all about.

To Louise, Jason, Scott and Bradley, who bring me great joy.

To my wonderful friends around the world, who have kept all of this going.

INTRODUCTION

WHEN MY FATHER passed away in 1984, I was absolutely devastated, so overcome with grief that, when I was given the news, I regressed to childhood, went into a frenzy, threw myself on the floor and began to pound the carpet. Dad, although he had not been well of late, was OK the night I left Leicester. I was off for a run of shows which started in Lake Tahoe and was scheduled to run throughout Canada, but I had only just completed my first few breaths on the cabaret stage in the hotel in Tahoe when he breathed his last.

Even though I could not possibly have known that he was about to die, I cursed myself for being on tour, for not being there for him – with him. The truth is, knowing he had not been well, I had *wanted* to stay with him, but there hadn't seemed to be a real need and I didn't speak up. I'd assumed that he'd be there for me to visit as soon as the pre-booked tour ended and, as always, I didn't want to let my fans down. Likewise, I was responding to a long-established, inner need to present an infallible exterior to the outside world and keep my private life and personal relationships *very* private. All these were factors that sent me winging off on that plane to step on stage and continue my life as a performer.

I don't suppose anyone is ever *really* prepared for the death of a parent, and I proved to be no exception that night.

'Oh, God, no, I'm not ready for this,' I kept crying out in anguish when I received the news at Bill Harrah's home. Whenever I performed at his hotel, Bill always arranged for me to stay at his house and even hired a butler, a cleaner

and a Rolls-Royce for me, as well as a boat to take out on the lake. He was a very generous man who was like this to all the artists who performed at Harrah's, but he was also a great friend of mine.

If I had to receive such tragic news, it certainly helped to receive it in Bill's home, rather than in the anonymous surroundings of a hotel room. At least I wasn't left to pound the walls and chew the carpets alone but, gutted as I was, I couldn't stop repeating, 'I'm *not* ready for this, *not* ready to cope with such a loss …' My father was the pillar of my family – my rock. I couldn't imagine life without him.

A friend of mine who was acting as my stand-in manager at the time, John Smythe, went off to place the necessary calls for the cancelling of my show business engagements, and I began getting the word around that I needed to bypass a lot of other appearances on stage in order to spend some time with my family, followed by some time gathering my thoughts and putting the pieces of my heart back together.

Having spent the first ten years of my life in Madras, in India, where my father was stationed during the Second World War, courtesy of His Majesty's Army, I decided very soon after the funeral that I wanted – *needed* – to go back there. So, the year my dad passed away, I returned to my boyhood town to honour him – and my past – by visiting my first home and looking for some suitable venues where I might be able to do some performances.

As I stood in Madras in the incredible heat of the midday sun, breathing in air that always seems to be laden with the scent of exotic fruits and spices, I glanced up at our old house, which was situated in the area by the harbour, and I was amazed. I was only too aware *before* I had arrived outside the gates that when you're a child everything seems enormous to you and that my memory, which had been telling me that our old house was absolutely gi-normous, was probably way off the mark. In truth, I was

really expecting a tiny dwelling, where my mum, dad and we ten kids must all have been packed in like sardines – and this conviction was further endorsed by the fact that the route to my old home was totally poverty-stricken. Whenever I looked out of the car's window, the surroundings looked utterly different from anything I remembered from my childhood when British occupation had spit-and-polished certain areas, and the front gates to our house were protected by militia and manned by servants.

When we rounded the bend of Spring Haven Road, however, I gasped at what I saw. By then, I had become used to being in other people's big houses, but this house – my first home – was bigger than anything I'd ever been in, or lived in since, and there it was larger than life.

'Good on you, Dad,' I murmured when I'd recovered from the shock.

With the surprise confirmation that my memory was actually correct, I realised I needn't downsize the impact of any of the experiences that life had brought me thus far, whether they related to my career or personal life.

My childhood *had* been like a fairytale, one in which I was lovingly tended for, hand, foot and finger! And, from the time of my return visit to Madras, I began to recap my early life, beginning with a daredevil moment when I fell several feet off the garage roof. My sister Dolly had to tend to my sliced foot, which was bleeding profusely. I also recalled the times when my siblings and I played on the seesaw or swings of the children's playground, which had been erected in our garden.

Such thoughts – and the emotions they engendered – were very new to me. I had lived through so many years when I had donned privacy's armour and kept certain memories to myself that key moments were in real danger of fading, and what *really* shaped me – made me who I am

today – was likewise in peril of being modified by the image of myself that I read in press interviews.

I guess all genuine sentiment and reactions get accidentally modified over time, leaving small handfuls of significant moments to turn into key memories that seem to define who we are. It makes sense that the past is muddled by our present station in life, and I imagine this happens to everybody, even those of us who are not in the spotlight and on the paparazzi's hit list, and who do not, therefore, struggle to separate their two worlds – public and private – in order to keep their private life *private*.

Standing outside our old house in Madras, with my uniformed friend British Airways pilot Captain Brian Wallace alongside me, but with no other uniformed authority of yesteryear holding the gates closed, I allowed my mind to open up and expand and, for the first time in my life, I began to process certain events and consider their effects and significance. This outing back in time in my head, which brought new understanding of what went on inside me, felt good – *healing, empowering*.

'Perhaps in future I'll prop ajar the door of my life,' I thought, 'and put all the *real*, life-changing events and momentous experiences on paper, inviting anyone who's interested to have a look inside.'

At that moment, as these thoughts were running through my mind, the people who now lived in my former home and who were unaware that I'd been coming for a visit, caught sight of me. Having recognised me, they approached the gate and – very tentatively – asked if I would like to enter.

'Yes, thank you kindly,' I replied, only too aware that, just minutes after getting out of the car to stand at the end of my boyhood drive, this full-grown man, who was me, had taken on the appearance of a hunch-shouldered, wide-eyed, insecure boy. 'I'd like that very much – I'm ready now.'

And, straightening up, I unhunched my shoulders and strode into my past – and into the pages that would one day become this book.

Engelbert Humperdinck
California, USA, and Leicester, England, 2004

CHAPTER ONE

MADRAS, IN INDIA, now called Chennai, where I spent the first ten years of my life, while my father was stationed there courtesy of His Majesty's Army during the Second World War, was – and still is – a truly hot spot, chock-full of historic treasures and holy places, such as grand temples and shrines, and magnificent forts and palaces. Even then, before I'd reached the age of ten, I knew I wanted to be a *somebody* in the entertainment business, and I used to bite my nails and fret that I would never make a name for myself if I had to bring along my face and very unfortunate body!

I was a fat kid, with a flat nose that was so adhered to my face, it seemed impossible that my nostrils could be in working order; and the only thing I disliked more than my thick, car-bumper lips were my teeth that protruded way beyond them. In fact, my teeth stuck out so far, I could have eaten an apple through the strings of a tennis racquet. In those days, the 1940s, nobody thought of orthodontia; you got the teeth that came with your head and *that* was *that*. For three years I slept face-down, my mouth clenched over my closed fist, willing my teeth to move back and stand in line, or at least adopt a more presentable position. Every night when I went to bed, I hoped I would wake up a better-looking boy, but all I saw when I opened my eyes was a set of very sore, chapped lips and tooth-indented fists.

One of ten children, I believed my siblings – Olga, Dolly, Tilly, Arthur, Bubbles, Celine, Peggy, Irwin, and Patricia – were the lucky ones who had harvested all the good genes from our parents, Mervyn and Olive Dorsey, and that was why they had turned out as good-looking as our mum and

dad. I, on the other hand, who had entered the world on 2 May 1936, was a runt who had cropped misshapen looks that could only worsen as I grew.

Although, in my heart of hearts, I knew from a very early age that looks should not matter if you had a real talent for hire, I was convinced I would always appear as a spotlight repellant that would quash any dreams I had of fulfilling my then-ambition to become a big-band leader. I really fancied being in control, dressed in sophisticated clothes. For years, refusing to believe that a nose is just a nose, I tried to take matters into my own hands by spending endless hours pinching, pressing and massaging my face, trying to sculpt it into the kind of profile I craved or, at least, into a look that was a closer match to the one I imagined myself possessing whenever I was daydreaming about my future on stage. Each night as I pulled upon my nose and pinched my cheeks, I willed it to 'stand' up and become more elegant and, however many times I was disappointed, I just had to keep those beauty rituals going. Bandleaders, I believed, were a dapper lot; men of charm and cheekbone, whose handsome facial features were only surpassed by their musical talent. I knew audiences adored stars like Sinatra for their singing, but I also knew that it was thanks to his looks that Sinatra's adoring fans called him 'Ol' Blue Eyes'.

Nose aside, I still hoped I might be in with a chance. After all, my mother was an absolutely stunning brunette. Standing 5 ft 3 in, she had a beautiful porcelain complexion that remained flawless until the day she died. She was a great violinist well worth listening to and, oh, how I hoped I'd inherited some of those genes, and that I'd become as talented a musician as she was. As well as playing the violin, Mum had an operatic voice with a range that was capable of cracking crystal and shaking chandeliers, and our party guests were forever asking her to sing for them.

My father, who was always my hero, was an engineer with a brilliant mathematical mind and stern, Victorian ideals when it came to bringing up his ten children. A great entertainer, with an unlimited store of wonderful anecdotes, he was also very amorous – sexual – in the way that he interacted with my mother – and our female guests! I guess, in my case, some people would mutter 'the apple doesn't fall far from the tree,' but more on that later!

There was never a dull moment during those years. Our home was a large red-bricked house with a veranda running round it with balconies on each floor and numerous bedrooms. It had a flat roof on which we would sit at night, playing the guitar, or listening to the sound of the tropical wildlife, and watching the ships in the nearby harbour. I remember the sky and stars always seemed so close that you felt as if you could just reach out and grab the moon.

Dad hosted massive, lavish parties for all the British and American troops, and he presided over these in a *perfectly* pressed suit and *perfectly* arranged bow-tie, and at 5 ft 10½ in, with prematurely grey hair, he looked quite debonair. He had a muscular physique due to the fact that he was a superb athlete, always playing football or hockey or going deep-sea diving.

As his hostess, Mum looked equally sophisticated. Her evening gowns were wonderful and the shoes she wore had such high heels that I used to gape at them in astonishment, trying to work out how she could put one foot in front of the other without landing on her slim bottom. She really was supremely elegant – and the two of them were always perfectly coiffed with a wonderful kind of poise that I found enchanting.

At family get-togethers, Dad would often gather us kids in the garden, or the parlour, to sing for the guests, and there we would stand in a neat, orderly, Von Trapp *Sound of Music* sort of way that all the adults seemed to approve

of and love. During one of the parties, though, I let the side down by picking up a half-full bottle of rum and downing some of the contents. I honestly didn't realise I was drinking anything potent. I don't think I had that much of the stuff before I was discovered in the act, but I still ended up running amok among the guests, picking up garden chairs and balancing them upside-down on my head. It was probably the only time in my early years that I wasn't at the mercy of my shyness and trying to hide behind a piece of furniture or blend in with the wallpaper.

At these get-togethers Dad, who obviously thought I had a good voice, would single me out and say: 'Come over here, Son, and entertain these people. Come and do a song for them.'

'Daddy,' I would reply, wriggling and overcome by shyness, 'I will. But can I sing from over here – behind the curtain, or underneath the table?'

'Sing wherever you like,' he would call back chuckling.

So, shrouded in linen curtains, or hidden beneath the heavy, dark oak table, sing I would. Even as a very young boy, my voice was strong and masculine, but I would always try to make it sound even more manly. The guests, as a result, were more entertained by my determination to sound like a grown-up man than they were by my voice. I wanted to be *somebody* – anyone other than my ugly self, even then – and, when the guests were gone, although I was still unable to reach the forte pedals on the piano, I would do a boogie-woogie. In those moments I was always in complete command of my imaginary audience, and I would sing and make grandiose gestures. The inanimate objects in the room *really* loved me!

Even though singing for real people – our visitors – made me feel uncomfortable, I felt much more at ease at home in those days than I did when I had to put my daydreams on hold, venture out to school and witness real life on the Madras streets where the temperatures often

rose to 37°C. The riots of pre-Independent India were under way and producing some pretty horrific events and images and, before Independence was finally achieved in 1947, these inspired a whole string of terrifying nightmares that often disturbed my childhood slumbers.

I was just eight years old when I saw my first beheaded policeman lying in the dust and dung of the roadside, and before my next birthday had come around I'd seen a dozen such sights. Our school, St Kevin's, a Catholic school run by nuns and priests, was located within a compound and we would often see mutilated, dismembered bodies, minus heads, eyes and limbs, and other spoils of the riots, placed in rolled-up mats on either side of the gates that led into it. Witnessing terrorism at any age is very traumatic, and as a young, sensitive boy it took its toll on me and made me retreat even further into myself.

I was a loner. The kids used to call for my brother Irwin, who was eighteen months older than I was, but they never called for me, and I felt rejected and left out. I was small for my age, while Irwin was well proportioned and very good-looking. I ardently wished I could look more like him. Appearances aside, though, I could never *really* resent anything about Irwin. Without him, I would not be here now – he saved me from a horrendous fate that would have resulted in a very short life.

Our house was situated in a harbour that was always teeming with colour and life, and right opposite was a railway line which ran alongside another small, watery inlet that lapped directly into the ocean beyond. A servant used to take us on a late afternoon stroll there most days, but on one memorable occasion we escaped her clutches, crept off unaccompanied, and got ourselves into near-fatal trouble.

The inlet housed timber logs that the ships used to drop off and, as kids aged between five and six, Irwin and I and other local kids loved playing on these. It was obviously a potentially dangerous activity for the unwary, and that

evening, when Irwin and I were there with a whole gang of kids, this proved to be the case. Playing the daredevil – showing off – I started to walk out much further than usual, stepping from one slippery floating log to another. Naturally, I lost my balance, slithered sideways and, as the log began to swivel and turn, I plunged into the water.

In seconds the intense, blinding brightness of the Madras day disappeared and turned to hellish dark; moments later, I found myself sinking beneath the logs into the murky depths of eight feet of water that was steeped in wood splinters and contained a shoal of jellyfish. I had never been taught to swim, and with the logs blocking my way, it was impossible for me to surface.

All the children that had been with us – about a dozen or so – had run away. The only person that was left was my brother, who could not swim either. Crying and screaming, 'My brother! My brother!' he was brave enough to crawl over the logs and risk his own life in order to save mine.

Holding on to a cluster of logs that were tied together, Irwin splashed around until, by the hand of fate, my own hand popped up and he was able to grab it and pull both of us up and out to safety.

By then, the life was ebbing out of my body and I had swallowed enough water to sink a small ship. My mouth and lungs were full of painful wood splinters and every inch of my skin had been stung by jellyfish.

Once he'd got me to the bank, Irwin, young as he was and acting purely on instinct, sat me up, spread my legs and kept forcing my head down between them. As he repeated this action, I began to struggle and choke, and all the water came gushing out in great torrents. Slowly, but surely, I found myself able to breathe again.

There is a postscript to this near-death experience.

The next evening, my dad, having made sure that Irwin and I – and all our servants – fully understood that we were *never ever* to visit that place unaccompanied again,

decided that a return visit would lessen the trauma and help us boys to feel less fearful of water in the future. This was a bit of child psychology that backfired! In the event, we ended up *more*, rather than *less*, traumatised by the experience.

As the servant, Irwin and I stood on the small bridge that crossed the inlet, staring down at the dark water where I had disappeared into the depths the night before, we caught sight of something huge, black and very sinister moving just beneath the surface. Then, suddenly, there was a tremendous heave and splashing that sent us and the servant reeling back, and the water parted. Moments later, we could clearly see the outline of a large shark dislodging the clutch of logs that Irwin had clung on to when he was pulling me from the water.

The shark, which was open-mouthed and displaying a wondrous set of pin-sharp teeth, was frenzied, obviously panicking at finding itself trapped between the logs in the bay.

Looking on in horror, we knew without expressing it, that if that frightened giant had been there the night before, Irwin and I would have been shark meat for sure. We had been even luckier than we had thought.

Later when a local fisherman informed Dad of what had happened, he was sorry he had given Irwin and me a bedtime belting the day before. He was truly overwhelmed by our good luck and only too thankful that we had been spared and had come home to him and Mum.

I might have been lucky to avoid being shark fodder but, even though I'd avoided losing a few chunks of myself, I still didn't feel lucky in my looks. Every time I looked in my bedroom mirror, there was no improvement and my terrible shyness and lack of self-confidence only increased. While I accepted what I was always being told that my legs would grow and I would be able to reach the piano pedals, I was in a tearing hurry. I had to, I felt, get a more suitable, more

accessible, musical instrument to master if I were to have *any* hope of a future life on stage. If I succeeded in that, I decided, I might be able to demonstrate sufficient natural talent to distract people from my dreadful looks.

I despaired that my name would ever be announced on any radio show or uttered by the people who mattered in show business, however talented I might turn out to be. I was, it seemed, doomed never to see my name – *ARNOLD GEORGE DORSEY* – lit up in neon lights, twinkling in my parents' home city of Leicester. And, as for Liverpool or London, *no hope*!

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN THE TIME came for my father to move us all back to his native Leicester in 1946, I was really happy about it. Dad had brought us up to be proud that we were British and had told us such a wealth of stories about life in England that I had absolutely no regrets. In fact, when I watched the lights of ships coming into the harbour in Madras, I'd always imagined that they were coming from England, teeming with the kind of goods – and rich experiences – that could only be gleaned there, and I wanted to board ship!

Now, on hearing we were about to sail across the ocean and land on her shores, I started fantasising about the new life we would have when we got there. Every day, during the late afternoons, I would sit swinging in a hammock on the terrace, daydreaming about this during that magical hour when the sun is setting, but the heat of the day lingers on, causing the overripe fruit on the trees to smell extra sweet and wet, and the tropical birds to quieten their singing as the bats begin to dart about the air.

Across the ocean, I imagined there were would be plenty of jobs for a boy with show business ambitions and any number of musical instruments waiting to be bought – and played. 'All the world's a stage,' I had learned in my schoolroom studies of Shakespeare, but I was sure this applied more to the Bard's birthplace – England – than anywhere else in the universe.

Once there, however, England required a bigger adjustment than I'd ever imagined. We had moved into a detached house which, although quite large, was by no means as grand as the one we had just left. I used to play

football in the street with other children who lived in the same street, and go hunting for money in the grilles which covered the coal chutes. There were no servants to wait on us hand and foot; we had to do everything for ourselves! It was also a big shock to my system – *cold* and *wet*, rather than sunny and dry, and frequently gloomy rather than bright; and, while oranges and bananas were plentiful where I'd come from, fruit was scarce and food and clothes were rationed.

Nevertheless, although everything seemed rather drab and dreary after all the teeming life and the sweltering heat of days spent living by the harbour in Madras, it was still wonderful to be in my homeland. I had been taught that there was a time when 'the sun never set on the British Empire', and I was very aware that I was now living in a country the world had respected for centuries.

Although I realised that even necessities were in short supply, I kept begging for a musical instrument. By then, I was absolutely desperate to prove that I had something to offer and I was convinced that I could do this if only I was given a chance. But times were hard for my parents, who had ten kids to clothe and feed, and I will never forget the day I was sent on my bicycle to pick up our egg ration. Having put the sixty eggs inside my jacket to protect them during the ride home, I hadn't got very far when the whole lot slipped out and – *splosh* – created an uncooked omelette all over the road. Can you believe that? Two weeks of breakfast for the entire family now running down my bicycle frame in sorry *glops* on to the street and into the gutter.

'Oh, no,' I wailed, looking at the colourful, gooey mess, 'I'm *done* for! Oh, God!'

My chief despair, though, as the yellow yolks continued to streak off in all directions, was the realisation that I now had no chance of persuading my father that I deserved – was *responsible* enough – to own an instrument.

So, for a short time, after this dreadful event in which we all went egg-free at breakfast, I accepted my fate and stopped asking and moaning and complaining.

Within the year, however, Dad surprised me with a gift of a secondhand saxophone. As an ex-military man and engineer, Mervyn Dorsey may have ruled us all with the proverbial ‘iron glove’ but, as a father, he had a heart of pure gold, and was always ready to dip into his pocket for friends – or even strangers – who needed help.

The sax was not in good shape – the bell, in particular, was very dented – and it was probably only worth about £5, but I was thrilled. I knew that Dad, in his heart of hearts, wanted music to be my hobby *not* my career, yet he had done this for me anyway. That made the sax, whatever its condition, very special.

Dad, brilliant man that he was, could make the most marvellous toys out of wood and metal, and he could figure out mathematic equations in his head faster than most people could manage on a calculator. I was always aware that he wanted me to follow in his footsteps and become an engineer. Years later, when I was a budding singer and going out with Patricia Healey, who was to become my wife, Dad took her aside one day and muttered, ‘Why don’t you tell him to stick with a *proper* job?’

That moment, though, when I first raised the saxophone’s mouthpiece to my lips, while he was standing there, hands thrust deep in his pockets, watching, was *very* touching. The first note I made the instrument sound was a good solid note and, although the sax was old and battered and terribly difficult to blow, I managed to play a song immediately, and could play ‘My Blue Heaven’ all the way through within an hour.

Flashing me a satisfied smile, Dad said: ‘OK, Son. Practise on this one, and maybe we’ll get you a new one later.’

I was up for the challenge – more than ready to prove at eleven years old that I would deserve that ‘later on’.

For the next four years I did a morning paper round, earning, come rain, sleet and snow, a weekly pay of 4 shillings, the exact cost of a single saxophone lesson with Mr Parker. His place was a long, chilly walk from my home in winter and, since you can’t play keys with frozen fingers, I’d strap the sax around my chest in order to keep my hands tucked in my pockets and protected from the cold. Despite this, every Saturday, I would arrive, fingers chilled to the marrow, and Mr Parker would meet me at the door, saying, ‘Come and have a warm-up,’ before leading me to his living-room fireplace, where there was always the good, cheerful glow of a fire burning in the grate.

The unspoken understanding between us was that my fingers would always arrive cold – and he respected the reason why. He knew I couldn’t afford to buy mittens without sacrificing a few weeks of my classes with him. So, ignoring the chilblains on my hands, I would play whatever tunes I’d been practising and, although he always told me he was pleased with the progress I was making – and he could tell I had musical talent – he would add: ‘But I *don’t* want you to play like *that* – I want you to play the way *I* teach you. Don’t try to do anything by ear. That is not the way to learn an instrument. You need to learn in the practical, sight-reading way that I teach you.’

But I loved playing by ear and was always fretting that the weekly lessons were not bringing me any closer to my dream of becoming a Tommy Dorsey-type bandleader, able to command an audience with a trill of a horn and a flash of a hand. While Mr Parker never seemed to worry whether I really had the ability to reach a professional standard or not, *I did*.

When I was fifteen, I left the Melbourne Road School for Boys and Girls and began work as an apprentice at an engineering firm. My father approved of this move, but I

wasn’t very happy. I had no wish to follow in his footsteps, because I had my own ideals, but I did want to earn sufficient money to buy myself a better musical instrument and some better clothes and shoes.

The plan, though, didn’t really work out for either of us. My moans and groans were so deafening and the money was so minuscule – 28 shillings a week – that, by the time my sixteenth birthday came round, I’d got shot of that job. I’m not sure which one of us – Dad or me – had the last laugh, though. My search for another job, with better pay, landed me in yet another engineering factory!

On my first day there, I worked from eight in the morning straight through to six in the evening, gathering a few shillings extra for an hour’s overtime. At the day’s end, I was handed £2, which was more money than I had ever held at any one time. I couldn’t wait to show Mum. Feeling very pleased with myself, I ran all the way home, never slowing down once over all three miles, and headed straight into her room. Once there, I opened my fist like I was performing a magic trick.

‘Oh, *good* boy,’ she said. Then, as was the custom, she added, ‘Now give it all to me to pay for your room and board.’ But she then handed me 5 back, and I felt like a *rich* man. Those five coins, cupped in the palm of my hand, had real weight and not just because they were big money for me to squander.

‘Some,’ I thought, ‘can go into savings, some for the pictures, and what’s left over can buy me a bite to eat.’

Over the next year I earned a little bit more and, by the time I was seventeen, I was earning £4 a week. This was ‘Big Time’ for me, and I was able to buy some clothes on a weekly hire purchase basis and to dress a bit better.

I have always been proud of the fact that my parents taught me self-discipline and how to support myself, thus allowing me to become my own person. They always used to say to me, ‘civility costs nothing’, and if you respect

yourself you will respect others. An easy ride and a free meal ticket presents no challenge to young people to get up and go; and hard work and good grooming has always been of the utmost importance to me. Being able to improve my appearance with smart new clothes works wonders for my self-confidence when I venture out on stage.

In those early days, however, my self-confidence was hard-earned even in new clothes. By then I'd discovered some local clubs in Leicester where I could play my sax or sing. I wish I could have joined in with the bands there and gained some experience, but I lacked the self-confidence to so so and thus it never came to pass.

Autobiographies tend to pinpoint a moment in a person's early years that reveal the future's compass: the potential vet saves an injured bird, the likely Olympian outruns a bully, the barrister-to-be wins an argument; and each, having experienced one of these subtle moments, is set upon a path that has a specific direction. The life I was searching for – and hoping for – was sitting right under my nose, but I was utterly blind to the clues that I *could* succeed in what I so desperately wanted simply by shifting my focus. I wanted to be an entertainer, a band leader and, while I had been singing harmony by the age of five and performing for an appreciative audience (albeit my father's guests) even before I could lace my shoes, I was still clamouring for success as a saxophone player, the instrument I had started to play at the age of eleven.

Somehow it never occurred to me that I had an instrument all along, and that it was nestled right there within my larynx and voice box.

All this changed, however, the night I got a standing ovation when I was singing for the first time on a real spotlit stage in a little club in Bond Street, in Leicester. My face, Irwin told me later, was an absolute picture! As I stood there in the golden spotlight (*real* stage boards beneath my feet!) I looked like a taken-aback, gob-smacked

guest-of-honour at my own surprise party. In that split second, as I fully took in that the eyes of every smiling cheering person were focused directly upon me, I blushed to the roots of my hair, then beamed back at each and every one of them.

I do believe in the saying ‘what will be will be’, and I hadn’t gone to that club on that Friday evening to do a turn and hopefully be discovered. A few months short of the legal age to drink in public places, Irwin and I had found our way to this particular venue because some factory lads had told us that this was a place where the barman did not query your age when you were craving a pint. Given that I had got up on the stage without even noticing that the club was hosting auditions for working men’s clubs, destiny for me, it could be said, came served up in a pint glass.

So it was, then, that having enjoyed some illicit sips of ale, while I watched a variety of people taking turns at the microphone, I downed my own pint of bitter and then got up on the stage to sing. Turning to the guy sitting at the Hammond in the corner, I said, ‘Do you know “Your Eyes Are the Eyes of a Woman In Love”?’ Fortunately, he realised I was referring to a song title!

Obviously a man of few words, he replied by swivelling back to the keys and playing the opening chords of the number. By then, the courage given to me by the liquor was fading fast, but I knew I could not back down without looking a fool. Once centred in the spotlight, I gave him the ‘off’ nod and did my very best to look and sound like someone other than myself – like Frankie Laine of ‘I Believe’ and ‘Answer Me’ fame.

Most beginner-singers start by copying other artists and I was no exception. Provided we follow the original singer’s phrasing well enough, we remind the audience of the hit performer and get a warm reception. That night, I obviously pulled off my rendering of Frankie’s ‘Your Eyes Are the Eyes of a Woman in Love’.

‘Wow!’ I thought as I looked around the smoke-filled room at all the people holding their hands above their heads and clapping, ‘I would never get a reaction like this playing my saxophone. This is magic – *wonderful*!’

I could see Irwin on his feet, swivel-eyed and proud as Punch, smiling as broadly as I was, but before I could get to him, I was surrounded by some gentlemen in suits who seemed somewhat over-dressed and over-coiffed for such a club. Collectively, all smelling of hair lotion and aftershave, their reaction was, ‘That was good, lad’, and they fired the same questions at me in unison:

‘Who’s your agent?’

‘Who are you working for right now?’

‘Have you any vacancies in your book?’

I told them I hadn’t even realised I had entered an audition and I certainly did not know that there was a pre-arranged order for people to take their turn on stage and perform.

‘You didn’t know this was an audition?’ the nearest suit scoffed. ‘Oh, come on, lad, pull the other one, I *don’t* believe you.’

‘You *must* have known,’ said another. ‘It was surely obvious this was an audition for people who want to perform in working men’s clubs. *Right*?’

Wrong!

The bafflement I had caused was pure magic – a seminal moment for me. I may have garnered my initial courage from the pint of ale, but the boost to my confidence that followed came from the men-in-suit’s disbelief that I had not already labelled myself a ‘professional singer’, or let a music label, or an agent, do so on my behalf.

I did *not*, thanks to this experience, become a professional singer overnight, but my destiny was sealed. I was *hooked*! I no longer wanted to be a sax player or a big-band leader, I wanted to be a singer and get ‘high’ every night on repeats of that standing ovation. That said, it

wasn’t just the audience’s reaction that made me decide I wanted to add song to my sax-playing skills – and sing, it was the feeling of the performance experience itself. Holding the sax had always given me confidence, and now, as I moved on to become a singer, the microphone became my crutch.

I had just quit another job – this time at a factory manufacturing boots and shoes, because I was convinced that the required labour would, sooner or later, impede any hopes I had of becoming a successful bandleader. This bout of nerves had come about when I heard that another bloke had left the factory early one afternoon because his hand was so badly mangled – reduced to mincemeat – after becoming trapped in one of the machines, and he had needed to be hospitalised. That was a fate I didn’t want to share. How could a saxophone player play if he only had half his fingers – or was missing a hand?

Having left the factory – and seeking to earn more money in a less hazardous way – I tried my hand at selling televisions. That didn’t last long. I wasn’t very good at convincing people they should let me enter their homes with this still comparatively new amusement box and show them how I could plug it in and provide instant entertainment.

Who could have known then that, in the oncoming years, I would enter their living rooms on those television screens? But if any of my ex-customers did witness their former salesman performing when they were gathered around the television, this must have taken place at a neighbour’s home, because I never sold a bloody TV in my life.

What little money I had in those days, I spent on sheet music, which I then took to a piano player called Kathy Boonham, and had her instruct me in what key to sing the

song in, how to go from here to here, and how to get back to the coda.

'I'm *not* in the business,' I had warned her when we first met, wanting her to realise that she needed to be very explicit in her directions.

Once I felt I understood a number, I would carry the pages to a local club and ask the pianist to read the notes in the margin, and then accompany me in the one way, the only way, I knew how to sing the song. By then, 1953, I'd practised the songs and singing styles of the hit-recording artists of the day that I'd heard on radio, and, among others, I was endlessly singing Frankie Vaughn's hits of the day, gaining comfort from singing that even more loudly whenever I got the chance to stand on a stage, however rough the surroundings.

Lo and behold, at the age of seventeen, something at long last had started to happen to my looks! My nose began to unflatten itself and stand up on its own accord, and my Bugs Bunny teeth retreated to a more proper place behind my lips. As a result, I was becoming much more self-assured. So much so that, when I went out on my very first date, and the girl asked 'What do you do, Arnold?' I replied, 'I'm a singer,' testing how it would feel to say such words with a modicum of confidence.

'*Really*?' Her lovely blue eyes with long black lashes gazed into mine and she was obviously impressed. 'Sing something for me,' she added.

I could have kicked myself! I should have anticipated such an obvious request and planned how I would deal with it, but I hadn't.

'*Sure*,' I said, trying to sound cool, but suddenly overcome by my usual shyness and having to resort to my usual solution. 'But I hope you won't mind if I turn my back on you.'

She didn't protest, but her eyelashes ceased to bat and her flirtatious smile faded and turned a wee bit wary.