

COLOUR MY WORLD

Her first single was issued *71 years ago* – her career predates that of rock'n'roll itself. But **Petula Clark** doesn't just belong to the monochrome pre-rock era. She has been a successful recording artist for decades, with forays into everything from country to cabaret, and sojourns in London, America and Paris. **Bob Stanley** meets the grande dame of pop.

Petula Clark's career has been the widest-ranging and longest-lasting of any major pop figure I can think of. In the mid-60s singles such as *Downtown*, *Don't Sleep In The Subway* and *I Couldn't Live Without Your Love*, all written by her producer Tony Hatch, made her an international star. A group of British female solo stars had broken through in 1964 – Dusty, Cilla, Sandie, Lulu – and, to British teenagers, Petula seemed to join them when *Downtown* became a US No 1 and UK No 2 at the end of the year. But she was 15 years older than Sandie Shaw; her first single, incredibly, had been a full 15 years earlier in 1949. And she's still recording today. Petula Clark has been making records for so long that her debut – *Put Your Shoes On, Lucy* – was a swing record, backed by a big band, more than 70 years ago. It's mind-boggling.

Petula was a nine-year old kid who just happened to be at the BBC in 1942, about to read out a message to her uncle who was stationed abroad, when there was an air raid. She sang *Mighty Lak' A Rose* to try and keep everybody in the studio calm; when the raid was over, the BBC allowed her to sing it on air and very quickly Petula Clark became "the nation's sweetheart". Within a couple of years, she was an actress at Rank, appearing in Powell and Pressburger's *I Know Where I'm Going!* before starring alongside Jack Warner and Diana Dors in the Huggetts films, and with fellow child star Anthony Newley in *Vice Versa*. She knew how to act – given the radical leaps to come, this skill would serve her well.

After the war, Clark first recorded for Columbia and Decca, then the independent Polygon (set up by her father with producer Alan

A Freeman), scoring Top 20 hits with novelty songs (*The Little Shoemaker*), exotic travelogues (*Majorca*), family-friendly ballads (*Suddenly There's A Valley*, *With All My Heart*) and the lighter end of rock'n'roll (*Alone*, *Baby Lover*). Throughout this period her father Leslie was her manager and guided her choice of material.

An unexpected headline show at the Paris Olympia in 1958 led to her meeting future husband and manager Claude Wolff – out of the blue, Petula was living in France and effectively starting her career over. The French had never heard of the Huggetts; instead, they saw her as an English rose with a unique voice, singing French with a strong English accent, and they took to her immediately – she would end up working with Sacha Distel, Charles Aznavour, and singing Serge Gainsbourg songs. Moving to France had given her an unexpected freedom, and she took the chance to re-invent herself, her voice, and her public image.

The French had known nothing about her British childhood career; the Americans knew nothing of either her British or her French careers. When *Downtown* took off in late '64, Pet became a central part of the British Invasion, an elegant English lady who made sense to a post-teenage, pre-middle age America that quite liked The Beatles but

were scared by The Rolling Stones' hair. As in France seven years earlier she was starting at the top, and from a standing start. Incredibly, she scored way bigger hits in the States than she managed at home – songs such as *I Know A Place* and *Don't Sleep In The Subway* went Top 10, UK flops like *A Sign Of The Times*, *Colour My World* and *Kiss Me Goodbye* were Top 20 US hits, and TV appearances seemed weekly. Not even Dusty came close to Petula's Stateside fame.

The end of the 60s saw her back on screen, only this time in Hollywood (starring in Francis Ford Coppola's *Finian's Rainbow* with Fred Astaire, and *Goodbye Mr Chips* with Peter O'Toole), and also parting with Tony Hatch in 1969 after the wonderful, at-the-time unreleased album *Conversations In The Wind*. It was followed in 1970 by one of her personal favourites, *Memphis*, produced by Chips Moman (check out *Goodnight Sweet Dreams* and *I Wanna See Morning With Him*), and the aptly-titled, Arif Mardin-produced *Warm And Tender* a year later. This was a golden run, but commercially the albums didn't do anything like the business of Pet's mid-60s records.

The rest of the 70s was a time for trying new directions – club shows, cabaret, Vegas – and Clark remained an international star even as the hits dried up. The albums drifted towards MOR, except for a second session with Chips Moman, which produced 1975's country-soul flavoured *Blue Lady*. Although she performed the potential lead single *Give Me A Smile* on *The Bobby Vinton Show* and *Perry Como's Hawaiian Holiday*, the album was shelved thanks to management changes at ABC-Dunhill (it eventually appeared on a Varese Sarabande CD in the mid-90s). She even went



into semi-retirement for a couple of years.

Eventually, in 1981, her kids persuaded her to go back onstage as Maria Von Trapp in *The Sound Of Music*, performing alongside Honor Blackman – she had begun the fourth distinct phase of her career. By the end of the decade, Pet had written the music for her own show, *Someone Like You*, a dark story set in the aftermath of the American Civil War. The 90s would see her in *Blood Brothers* playing David Cassidy's mum, and then as Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* – she wasn't afraid to act her age.

When she's wanted to, she has jumped back into contemporary mode: there was the 1982 US Top 20 country hit *Natural Love*; the 1984 single *Mr Orwell*, which sounded like a Francophile Kim Wilde; and in 2013 the impressive, minimal electronica of *Cut Copy Me*, from the Top 30 *Lost In You* album.

Much of her catalogue is now frustratingly unavailable. A hat tip, then, to David Hadzis of United Music Foundation in Switzerland for his recent restoration of the 1974 *Live In London* album, which now includes the complete Valentine's Day show at the Albert Hall rather than Pye's single album edit. Recorded by the BBC, the master tapes are long gone; the only surviving tapes of the unreleased material were rough mixes loaded with dropout and crackle, while the Pye reel had faulty Dolby A encoding. You wouldn't know it. Given that there are rumours of unissued Chips Moman productions, you have to hope the beautifully restored Valentine's Day CD is the tip of the iceberg.

Sat backstage at the Prince Edward Theatre (this is before the lockdown), Petula Clark looks and sounds at least 20 years younger than her 87 years. She speaks in a precise, clear voice that is instantly familiar – she may say “you know?” at the end of sentences, but it's never “y'know?” The venue for her current show, *Mary Poppins*, has rather messed with her head: “I sang here when I was eight or nine,” she says, “when it was the Queensberry Club, a place where the troops could come and be entertained.” She's talking about the very beginning of her career, almost 80 years ago. “And I sang here... isn't that weird?”

Your recording career started with a swing song, *Put Your Shoes On, Lucy*, in 1949 when you were 16. Can you remember what it was like to make your first record?

I remember going into a recording studio in the 40s, I think it was Decca... it was quite something in those days. You weren't allowed to go into the control room, that was out



Growing up in public (clockwise from below left): on the BBC aged nine, in 1942; at home in 1951; with Jacques Brel, 1964; a TV duet with Sacha Distel, 1966; backstage with Cilla Black and Sandie Shaw, 1965



of bounds. And I remember there were two gentlemen in white overalls at the controls... standing up at the controls. I thought, Ooh, you don't go in there! It's in the control room that things really happen. The first time I heard the orchestration for *Downtown*, I couldn't wait to get to the microphone and sing it. It was just so exciting. You don't get that now, because you build the track: it ALL happens in the control room. And that's interesting, too, I like that, too. I find it very creative, actually.

Though your records and your voice seemed quintessentially English, you become a huge star in France in the late 50s.

France would have been the last country I'd have gone to out of choice. A lot of people thought I went to France to “escape” my image – it couldn't have been further from the truth. I went to France because I was in love with a Frenchman, simple as that. It would have been difficult for Claude [Wolff, her future husband] to come here. He was in the record business – he was PR for Vogue Records. They'd been calling me from France saying [affects Gallic mumble], “Oh, you have to come! This girl, she is copying your records

in French!” I said, “I don't care, good luck to her.” They said, “No, no, you have to come and defend your records.” *Defend?* Eventually, I said, “OK, OK, I'll go.” And I had a stinking cold, I could hardly speak let alone sing. So, we went to a pharmacy, and they gave me suppositories – I said, “What are you meant to do with these?” “Ah, you put zem...” I said, “I've got a *throat* problem!” Anyway, it worked. I did this show at the Olympia which was just a one-night stand. I sang a couple of songs which had been hits for me in England – *With All My Heart* and *Alone* – but couldn't even say “bon soir”; I was terrified. I couldn't speak a word of French. They adored it; God knows why!

So how did you end up recording so many songs in French?

Well, the next morning I saw Léon Cabat at the Vogue office and he said, “You must record in French!” It was one of those offices with no windows and Gauloise smoke, all that stuff. I really just wanted to go home. Then the light went out over his desk – he said something in French and this guy comes in and changes the lightbulb and I thought, Ohhh... It was Claude. Cabat said he's our PR

man – if you make a record, he will be taking you around... and that made me think. And *that* is the honest truth. I would not have gone to France otherwise. I couldn't speak a word of French; I didn't like it much. The women were very sexy and posy and the men were always grabbing at you... I thought, I don't want to be *here*. But I'm meant to be with Claude... it wasn't a career move at all. It just happened that the French people liked me – I did make my first record in French, which was very bad, but they loved it.

After recording things like *The Little Shoemaker* in Britain, did it feel like you were starting a completely different career?

It was almost like another life. It had nothing to do with my background, or my childhood. Little by little I started to understand the language and the culture. It wasn't just singing in French. It's a whole way of living you have to adjust to, and I found it really interesting. I suppose I was learning, too, without realising it. Assimilation of their way of doing things, which was very different to what I'd been used to. Once you've seen Piaf, you realise that it's all about coming from [points to her heart]. I was learning a lot.

Your career in Britain seemed to become secondary, until you began working with Tony Hatch around 1963.

I was recording in French, Italian and German, big, big records in those countries, but I would still record most of them in London at Pye Records. Tony would organise

the sessions, book the musicians, but he had nothing to do with the choice of material. I liked him, we got along well, and Ray Prickett was a wonderful engineer. We were getting ready for a new session in French so he came over to Paris, and he said, “You really should be recording in English again.” I said, Yeah, if I can find the right material. He said, “I've just started writing this song, it's not finished yet. Would you like to hear it?” So, I go into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, and that was the first time I heard *Downtown*... Tony playing it, and he has a very special way of playing. I came back in and said, *I love it!*

Did it feel like a third career, once you broke through in America?

America was different again. I was singing to an audience that really knew this kind of music – this, after all, is American music. I was loving it, because I was singing again in my own language, and songs that I absolutely loved, and working with people who were... well, working with legends, really. *Downtown* became a hit without me having to do anything. The Americans just loved it, it just touched them. I sang it on *The Ed Sullivan Show* after it had already been No 1 for some weeks. I was jet-lagged, didn't know where I was, and the place went mad. That was the beginning of the whole American adventure, really. Which was quite wonderful. And difficult, too, because I already had my career going on in Europe, which was huge. I don't think people realise... when you're a star in the French-speaking world, you're a star in

Belgium, Switzerland, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Canada. I was working in all those countries. And that, too, is an education.

You began writing songs with Tony Hatch and Jackie Trent, sometimes on your own. This was pretty unusual for British women in the mid-60s. Who encouraged you to write?

I hadn't thought about that... well, the first one that I wrote that was of any consequence was *You're The One*, which I did the music for. And Tony encouraged me. I was very timid about writing, I thought that was somebody else's job. I had to find the courage to do it. Yes, I started writing, not very successfully... I wasn't trying to write a hit, I was just trying to write *a song*, you know. And I enjoyed the process. There's something about singing your own songs which is very different to singing someone else's. It's so totally personal.

How did it feel when *The Vogues* had a big American hit with *You're The One*?

Yeah, that was great! We were doing an album, Tony and I, and he was writing all the songs. He called me one night and said, “That's it, I'm written out. Why don't you write something and we'll take care of the lyric?” It must have been him and Jackie: “Just write a tune.” So, I wrote it, and we recorded it, and it was fine, not bad, actually. Then, when somebody else records it, that's kinda great, AND it was a hit! “Oh, hey, I can do this!” I enjoy writing. It's a different muscle, you know? But I enjoy it, I'll have to get back to it again.

“I COULDN'T SPEAK A WORD OF FRENCH. THEY ADORED IT, GOD KNOWS WHY!”

Photos: Getty

One of my favourites of your own songs is *The World Song* from 1971. Oh... with John Bromley? He was a sweet guy. Yeah, it's a bit peculiar! But we had fun writing it. I wrote a lot of peculiar songs... a bit funny, but they sounded okay in my head! Good, I'm glad you like that.

Though it was a huge hit, *This Is My Song* has always felt like an odd single for you to have made, right in the middle of all the great Hatch/Trent singles.

I didn't want to do it. I had no desire to do it whatsoever. The publisher sent it to us, this silly old-fashioned song, and I said, "Urghh, I don't like that!" I thought that's it, it's over. Warner Brothers in LA sent this arranger, Ernie Freeman, from LA to Reno where I was performing. Bless his heart, he arrived drunk... I mean *appallingly* drunk. My two daughters were there, they'd never seen anyone that drunk! The whole day we worked on the orchestration for *This Is My Song* and I thought, God, this is a disaster, let's just get this song out of the way. He left, still drunk. And the reason he was drunk is because he was terrified of flying – they'd sent this poor, gorgeous guy to Reno to see me. We had a nanny, a Dutch girl, and she could hear all this stuff going on. She said, "It's wonderful, that song." Ten days later, we recorded it in LA and it was just the right orchestration.

Aside from the Tony Hatch productions, my favourite album of yours is *Memphis*, which you recorded with Chips Moman. What are your memories of recording it?

I loved it, I loved it. I'd never been to Memphis before. Memphis is unique. I love the feeling of it. It's a funky place. A lot of poverty there, but it's got a soul to it, you can touch it. And, of course, in the studio with Chips... I adored Chips. I didn't realise he had left us not that long ago; I would have worked with him again, happily. He was off the wall. He found the songs, and he's pretty quirky – some of the songs he found for me were *really* quirky! And none of the musicians read music. I said, "How's this going to work, Chips?" Toni Wine [who wrote some of the best songs on the album] was there, too. And the musicians, you know [whispers], they were Elvis' musicians! The studio was a bit [screws up her face]... there were crumbs all over the desk, and Chips had his feet up on it, with his cowboy boots. Chips would play the songs, I'd sing, and the musicians were writing down what they called "the changes" – it was their own code, which doesn't look like music at all, but they understand the code. They'd play, and of course it was divine, different to any other musicians. And the way they played made me sing slightly differently, I think. Chips just encouraged me to do what I felt like I wanted to do. A lot of great producers are like that. Quincy [Jones] is like that, he'll let you do your thing. Coppola, the director, he lets you do your thing... unless it's really rad!



Heavenly and ivory: (above) at the piano onstage at the Forum theatre, Hatfield, Herts in January 1984; (right) flanked by celebrated songwriting pair Hal David and Burt Bacharach at London's Royal Albert Hall, November 2000; (inset, bottom-left) the evergreen Ms Clark in 2016

You've worked with some great producers and arrangers: Don Costa, Arif Mardin, Michel Legrand, Michel Colombier...

Legrand looked down on The Beatles, or anything that was "today", whereas Michel [Colombier] was really into it. He's a genius. Michel was my musical director for a couple of years. I met him in France. I loved the way he wrote and I was a *fan*, you know? When we went to do an NBC Special, a Herb Alpert special, Herb asked who I'd like to do the orchestration for my song. He said we can have Quincy, of course. I said I want Michel Colombier, and he says, "Who?" I said he's absolutely brilliant. And Herb said, "Well, if you think so, I guess he probably is." So, they met, and it was like they were meant to be, these two men. They were the same sort of men – brilliant, spiritual, gorgeous. They did an album together called *Wings*. And right up to the end, because Michel sadly died too soon, Herb was there the whole time, took care of everything for him. He adored Michel. I loved him dearly. The last time I saw him he was in London doing strings for Madonna.

Is it true that you introduced the Carpenters to Herb Alpert?

Yes! It was the first night of *Goodbye Mr Chips* in LA, and there was a big, big party afterwards. Everybody was there. Herb had a table. Now, when I'm eating, and there's music playing, if it's bad I can't eat, and if it's good I can't eat because I'm listening to

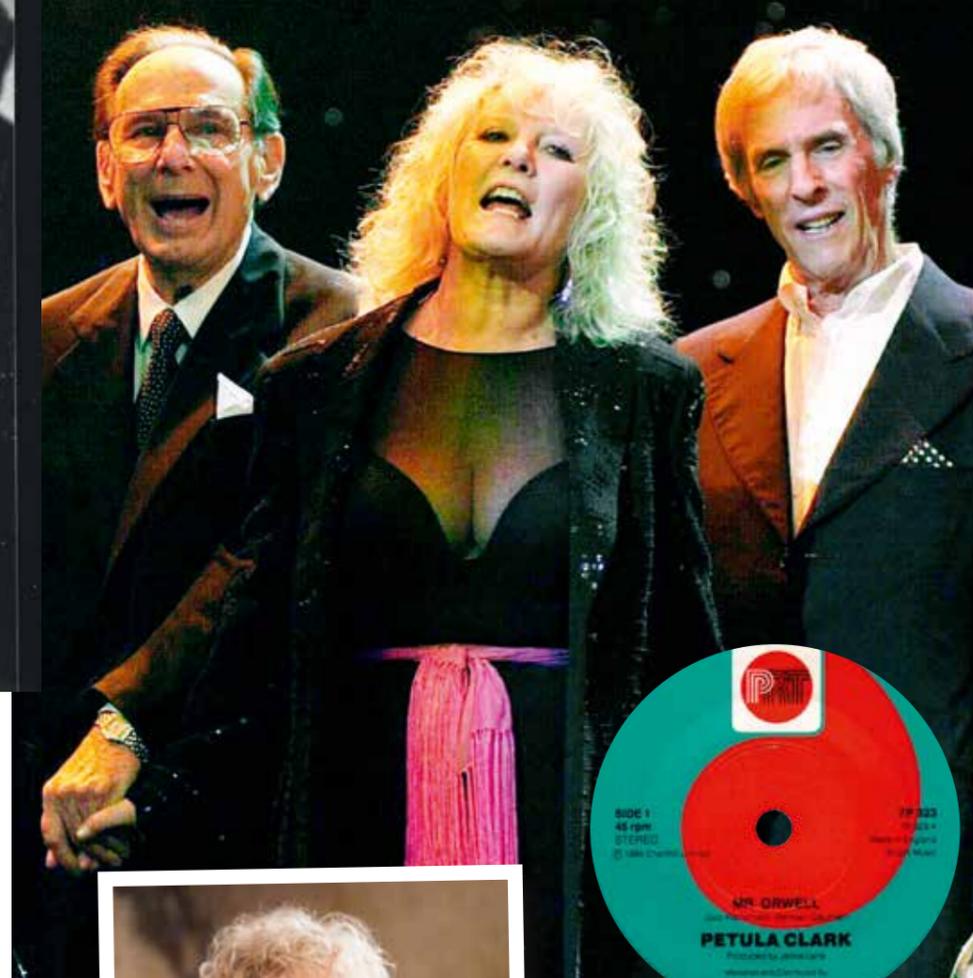
it! I thought, what's this live music, where's it coming from? Eventually I get up and look around, and there they were, Richard at the keyboard and Karen at her drums, singing. I stood there listening until they'd finished, and they were really fabulous. And I went over to Herb at his table and said, "You've got to listen to this." I left it like that, and next thing we knew... [claps hands and smiles]. I got to know Karen and Richard quite well. I recorded with Richard, actually... he's tough in the studio. I think he was looking for a sound in the studio, that sound he'd lost with Karen. But he'll never find it.

Was there anybody you would have liked to work with but never had the chance?

I never worked with Nelson Riddle, although there's a photograph of us together with Sinatra... it must have been on the session where Sinatra did *Downtown* or *Don't Sleep In The Subway*. They're not very good, no, no, no... those songs do not swing, it doesn't work. He knew it wasn't good.

But you did get to meet Elvis...

Yes! With Karen [Carpenter], actually. The first time was with Karen. I met him again, and it must have been near the end. I saw the show, and it was awful... nobody was going to tell him. But the first time I met him he was lovely. The show had been very good, he was right on form, everything was really happening. He was gorgeous, and charming,



Photos: Alamy, Getty

"I RESCUED KAREN [CARPENTER] FROM ELVIS. I THINK HE FANCIED US!"

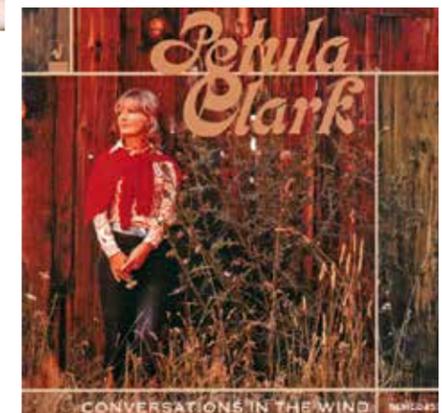
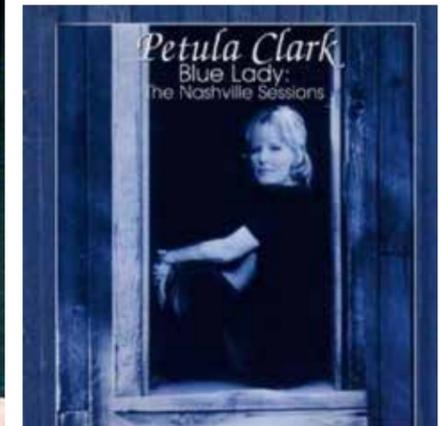
taken out little glitches. It was recorded by the BBC. I go back to the beginning... GI Jive and stuff like that.

There has never been a decent Petula Clark book, or a career retrospective box set. But I've heard that you're writing a book.

I'm supposed to be writing my book. That's it down there [points to reams of A4 paper on the floor]. I can't get my head into it. Listen, I don't know how many times I've been asked to write a book, I just hate the idea of it. I started it a few times, I started writing it with someone else, too, two different people who wrote very well, but it just didn't sound like me, you know? We worked with a cassette, chatting away, and it's been written out, but when you're talking like this it's all, "Umm... err... yeah"... all of *that* is there! What is *that*? And everything is misspelled, of course, all the French stuff. Here, I'll show you... [hands over wodge of very neatly written notes, all in capital letters] I'm writing it long-hand. That's the way I write. So, you can imagine, it's going

You famously don't enjoy looking backwards over your career, but United Music in Switzerland seem to be uncovering lesser-known bits of your archive. Recently they put out the 1974 *Valentine's Day Concert At The Royal Albert Hall*.

David [Hadzis, of United Music] has done a great job on it, he really has. He's spent a lot of time on it. He couldn't remix it, or anything like that – it is what it was. He's just



to take a long time! It's a formidable task, especially if you're going to go back to your childhood. I think some people are interested in my childhood, because I did start young. But you know [exhales], it could take forever. And there are so many more fun things to do. **RC**

A Valentine's Day Concert At The Royal Albert Hall (2CD set with 40-page booklet, limited to 2000 copies) is available now from www.unitedmusic.ch

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