

# ROCK 'N' ROLL TO COMEDY

## REMEMBER WHEN

IN the latest of his profiles of figures from Bradford's rock 'n' roll years, DEREK AJ LISTER looks at the career of JOHNNIE CASSON:

Johnnie Casson appeared on numerous occasions on British TV in his early days, an outstanding local rock 'n' roll drummer who later created a second show business career as a highly rated comedian.

Johnnie Dorsey Casson was born in Halifax in 1943 and lived at Carlton House Terrace in the Kings Cross area.

Coming from a musical background, his father had been the Melody Maker champion Trombone player who later tried to teach Johnnie to play. The young Johnnie found the trombone too cumbersome an instrument for a small lad and, who really fancied the drums.

Later, whilst at St Bede's Grammar School in Bradford, his father bought him a drum kit, so Johnnie, with a few local lads, formed a skiffle group.

They played at local dances and went everywhere by bus. The journey to Bradford on the Hebble bus was ideal for storing a drum kit under the stairs (the same bus was used by drummer Keith Artist, of Dal Stevens' group, to transport his drum kit).

As time went on Johnnie set his sights on rock n' roll after seeing top stars at the Gaumont in Bradford, including Buddy Holly, Bill Haley and the Comets,



Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent. Moving on from skiffle, he started playing at The Sportsman's Inn in Ploughcroft with local lads and at a booking at Southward Working Men's Club, he was approached by Jimmy Boocock from one of Halifax's premier groups, The Avengers to join the band.

Johnnie accepted.

In 1961 they auditioned for Butlins but were turned down, however a year later they landed a five-month season at Butlins Bognor Regis. After a short time with local group Ray Kennan Combo in 1963, Johnnie joined The Cresters,

replacing Colin Houghton. He was with them for around 20 years, playing at practically nearly every dance hall, cabaret and rock 'n' roll venue in country. Whilst on the cabaret circuit Johnnie not only played drums but started performing comedy - in fact, the comedy became more popular than the

The new line-up of The Cresters in 1963: Back row, left to right: John Harding, Malcolm Clark and Richard Harding. Johnnie Casson is in front

music.

In 1983, on holiday at Butlins, his wife entered him in the Star Trail Talent Competition as a solo act. He won a place in the regional finals, which he also won. The final was at the London Palladium and Johnnie was the judges' choice.

This encouraged him to leave The Cresters and set off as a solo performer. Television followed, and an appearance on Opportunity Knocks prompted Bob Monkhouse to say: "Johnnie is one of the top four comedians in the country".

A chance to take part in Granada TV's remake of the popular Comedians show saw Johnnie featured on all six shows and was critically acclaimed as the find of the series. His first appearance on ITV's Des O'Connor Tonight was so successful it was followed by a further four: On daytime TV's Des and Mel, Johnnie was booked four times.

Johnnie is a tireless charity worker and still works theatres of the UK, with a following of all ages. The great Johnnie Casson's comedy style is reminiscent of those other great comics, Les Dawson, Eric Morecambe, Benny Hill and Frankie Howerd. Like Haley's Comet, such comedians are with us rarely. Johnnie lives in Brighouse, 'Las Vegas of the North'.

\* Derek AJ Lister, who was resident DJ at the Gaumont and Majestic, and musician Reuben Davison profile Bradford groups on their website [whenbradfordrocked.co.uk](https://www.whenbradfordrocked.co.uk)

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