

POPULAR ROCK ‘N’ ROLLERS

REMEMBER WHEN

IN the latest of his profiles of figures on Bradford's rock 'n' roll scene, DEREK AJ LISTER looks at the life and career of Mel Clarke:

The Mel Clarke Four were always one of the top three popular local rock 'n' roll groups, the others being Mike Sagar and The Cresters ant the Dingos. So, it was in April 1958 that four young men entered a talent audition at Girlington Hall in Bradford: Mel Hogan, straight from Grammar School, on guitar and-vocals, Steve (Red) Williams on bass guitar, Colin Houghton on drums and Peter Williams on rhythm guitar. They were called the Unknown Four.

After this audition Peter Williams dropped out and joined the Royal Marines. He was replaced not by another rhythm guitarist but by a talented young pianist, Drew Charles. This turned out to be a step in the right direction. A pianist with a rock 'n' roll band in those days was indeed a rarity, as the usual line-up was three guitarists and a drummer, but what an asset Drew proved to be

He quickly introduced his raw boogie blues influence to Mel's Chuck Berry-style guitar playing, which set the band apart from most local groups' usual rock 'n' roll sound.

After about six weeks of rehearsing, a letter arrived confirming that the



group had passed the audition at Girlington and was to appear at the Top Talent Show at St George's Hall - a highly prestigious (if unpaid) venue, where top names in the pop world appeared.

The band performed three numbers: a

guitar instrumental called Haunting written for the occasion by Mel, a Chuck Berry number, Johnny B Good, and a brilliant rendition by Drew of the Jerry Lee Lewis classic Great Balls of Fire.

They came second and were no longer

unknown: the name Unknown Four was subsequently dropped! Mel Hogan became Mel Clarke, and the Mel Clarke Four was born. The group soon became very popular, and performed regularly at the Majestic, Gaumont and Gaiety ballrooms, and many times at the famous Students Club.

Mel Clarke of the Mel Clarke Four. Derek AJ Lister and Reuben Davison profile singers, bands and musicians from Bradford's 1950s and 60s music scene on their website

The band played continuously from the late 1950s well into the 1960s with almost the same line-up, except for drummers who were too numerous to recall - after they lost the very talented Colin Houghton in the early 1960s to the Cresters. Included from time to time was the talented vocalist Sandra Day, with her wonderful interpretations of the Connie Francis numbers Stupid Cupid and Lipstick on your Collar. Mel and the group cut three demo discs at Excel Studios, two singles and an EP. Mel and the group went on to support many of the top groups and stars who came to the area and travelled throughout the north of England, playing full weeks in cabaret at the Huddersfield Empire, then known as The Continental, the Imperial ballroom in Colne, Christie's in Selby, and many others. This was all despite their lack of agent: they preferred to accept work as it came up. Sometimes they worked five nights a week, alongside their daytime jobs.

The group broke up for some time, the members going on with their careers, but they still got together sometimes and were still in great demand at the rock 'n' roll venues at the Pile Bar and Hilton Hotel.

The Mel Clarke Four was a very well-respected group and it has given enormous pleasure over the years. It has to be said that Mel was at the forefront of Bradford's rock 'n' roll scene.

* Visit www.whenbradfordrocked.co.uk

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