

BROKEN-HEARTED CLOWN

Dick Moore

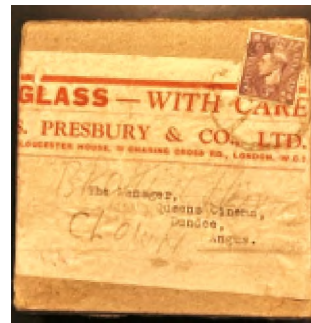
Broken-Hearted Clown was a song written in 1937 by Art Noel and Don Pelosi. Both songwriters lived and worked in or around Denmark Street, London – London's 'Tin Pan Alley'. The song was published by Southern Music Publishing Co., also of Denmark Street. When I received the set of illustrated slides for the song, they were in what appears to be the box in which they were originally posted, labelled: "The Manager, Queens Cinema, Dundee, Angus". There is no maker's name on the slides but they were sent from S. Presbury & Co. Ltd of Charing Cross Road, London WC2.

Dundee in Scotland has been known as a 'cinema capital' with several theatres using the name 'Queen's'. These slides were most likely shown at the Queen's Cinema located at 3-5 Wells Road. It was one of a group of cinemas then owned by Arthur Henderson. The building was constructed between 1898 and 1901 when it opened as St Mary Magdelene's Church Hall and Rectory. In 1922 it became the Queen's Cinema and showed films from that time onwards. During the 1930s several seasons of repertory theatre were also performed there but from 1939 to 1947 it became exclusively a cinema. After that it had several uses including as a ballroom, British Legion Club, and University of Dundee Law School, before being demolished in 1996 to make way for the University's Wellcome Trust Biocentre.

The singer on a well-known recording of *Broken-Hearted Clown* is Master Joe Petersen – who was in fact Mary O'Rourke (1913-1964). She was born in Helensburgh, Scotland, to a large family of 14 children that moved to Glasgow two years later. Singing was a family pastime and Mary with her older brother Joe became known as nostalgic song experts performing at concerts, parties and talent shows – which they often won. In 1930, aged 17, Mary moved to London to join her uncle, Ted Stebbings, an entertainer and impresario.

At that time boy singers were all the rage but of course their voices would break as they got older. Her uncle, frustrated with constantly having to get new boys for his groups, convinced Mary that she could be passed off as a choirboy singer. To achieve that, he taught her to sing at a slightly higher pitch than her normal alto voice. So, complete with Eton collar, trousers and bow tie, she became Master Joe Petersen – Phenomenal Boy Singer.

She soon joined Harry Bidgood's Dance Band (a.k.a. Primo Scala's Accordion Dance



1. The slide set packaging



2. The Master Joe Petersen record

Band) and started to make recordings. By the late 1930s she had top billing in theatres and she made over 50 recordings for Crystalate Records under the Rex Records label. Her own name never appeared on the records or in catalogues. She performed at least twice in Dundee in 1935, once at the Caird Hall and once at the Broadway Theatre with her brother Joe. However World War II took a toll on the recording industry and Mary's career – her last recording was made in 1942.

Her private life was less successful. In 1933 she married violinist George Lethbridge, who later became a major in the army, and they had a daughter, Margo. I suspect the strain of being female and yet performing as Master Joe Petersen took its toll. She wanted to sing on her own but her uncle Ted Stebbings kept convincing her to stay as Joe Petersen – a battle she always lost. Mary became an alcoholic, separated from her husband and daughter, and in 1952 returned alone to Glasgow. She continued to perform and to be a local star in Scotland for the rest of her life. As late as 1963 she was still performing as Master Joe Petersen.

According to an artist biography at AllMusic referring to the 1930s (see www.allmusic.com/artist/joe-petersen-mn0000210953): "Her career also suffered when the BBC, in those years a self-appointed arbiter of the nation's musical morals, decided that a woman, now in her twenties, dressing up as a boy soprano was improper. Never mind that this was radio, and the offender could not be seen, a ban (from broadcasting on the BBC) was imposed." A book about her life was written in 1994 by BBC North presenter and music historian Frank Wappel (*Master Joe Petersen*, published by FWM Publishing, North Shields). Mary died on Christmas Eve 1964, aged 51. However, her voice on the recording is phenomenal and a wonderful accompaniment to the slides.



Slides from the illustrated song set