

Percy Chandler - Revisited

By Terry Brown

Since my first attempt to write an article on the elusive Mr. Chandler some four years ago, I've now managed to plug some of the gaps in his story and thought it worthwhile to share my research with readers by updating and adding the new information to my original article, as below. I've even tracked down a photo, which at least puts a face to the name. I'd also like to thank long-time *Memory Lane* subscriber, Mike Langridge, for coming up with Percy's probable dates, which subject to a bit more checking are 25th November 1902 to sometime in April 1986. Mike also has evidence that Chandler was born in St Leonards, near Hastings, where he performed as a youngster and to where he eventually retired.

Percy Launcelot Chandler, is probably best known as the band leader who made records for the Piccadilly label in 1931, which included a session at which Al Bowly sang the vocals. Chandler split his time between sailing and popular music, until eventually the lure of the sea completely took over. Around 1936/7, Percy left the music scene completely and joined the Royal Navy, to retire much later from the Admiralty as a Third Commander to live in Hastings. Information on Chandler's early years on the music scene had been lacking, and was conspicuous, by its absence in my original article, but fortunately a recently discovered edition of the theatrical broadsheet *The Era* has proved very helpful in filling out this part of his story. In an issue dated 6th January 1926, *The Era* reported the creation of the Selma Five, an instrumental combination which would go into the Berkeley Hotel, primarily as a daytime and relief band. (A similar band, the Selma Four, had been doing the same at the Savoy Hotel, which was co-owned with the Berkeley). *The Era* named the personnel of the new Selma Five as Fred Dunk - trumpet, Reginald Head - saxophone, Dick Cawley - banjo, Fred Coleman - drums and Percy Chandler – leader and piano. The same article noted that both Chandler and Coleman had been previously performing with others on Hastings Pier for five years. This has now put Chandler's professional debut back to at least 1921.

The Selma Five established itself as a versatile and polished outfit and remained at the Berkeley for 4 years into 1930. Chandler himself gained a reputation as an innovative and rhythm-orientated pianist and in the spring of 1930, he was asked by the 'trendy' (to use today's parlance) Quaglino's Restaurant, in Bury Street, London, to provide suitable background and dance music for its up-market clientele. Chandler formed his Quaglino's Quartette, which included Alan Ford, on sax and Fred Everett, on clarinet. His band was certainly good enough to broadcast and did so, on the BBC London Regional Programme. 'Percy Chandler's Quaglino Quartette' appeared at 8.20 on August 29th 1930 as part of 'Prunes and Prisms - One Of These Musical Things' and was repeated on the National Service at 9.00 on the following day. The Quartette broadcast for a second time in a variety show on the London Regional Programme on 2nd

September 1930. They were billed as a 'vocal and instrumental act' and performed with Stuart Ross and Joe Sargeant in their 'syncopated harmony' and Norman Long, 'a song, a joke and a piano'. By the time of his next broadcast on the National Service on 8th September 1930, Chandler had become 'Percy Chandler and his Band from Chez Quaglino's'.

Following a change of music policy at Quaglino's in December 1930, Chandler's Quartet was disbanded. But Chandler had built himself a sufficient reputation to be invited by the famous 'Sovrani' (as he was known), of Sovrani's Restaurant in Jermyn Street, Mayfair to form a band for his new enterprise, the Malmaison Restaurant, which had just been built in Stratton Street, Mayfair. Chandler pulled together a very classy band with Reginald Pursglove on violin, Alan Ford and Douglas Foss on saxes, Fred Everett on clarinet, Sid Price on string bass, Al Fenton on guitar, Arthur Lilley on drums and vocals, with Chandler and no less than Bert Barnes on two pianos. Although Chandler didn't open at the Malmaison until 27th May 1931, just prior to this in late April, Sovrani arranged for the new band to record for the Piccadilly record label. Al Bowlly was used as vocalist for this session. Chandler completed three more sessions in May, June and August 1931, using Harry Bentley and Jimmy Mesene for his vocals. Later in October 1931, Chandler appears to have handed over the Malmaison Band hook line and sinker to Reginald Pursglove who became leader. It's unclear why this happened, but it may have had to do with Percy's yachting commitments.

At the beginning of 1932, as announced in advertising material, Chandler began what would become a long on/off association with the Ace of Spades, a so-called 'Roadhouse' on the Kingston By-Pass, in outer London. This enterprise consisted of an all night restaurant, dance floor and open air swimming pool with prices clearly aimed at the well-heeled. During 1932, adverts show Chandler not only leading a band but also playing piano in the afternoon at the Ace of Spades. Confusingly the music press also reported the presence of Vic Filmer's Band at this time and I can only assume alternated band leading duties, for a period until Filmer moved on to the 'Showboat' in Maidenhead, a little later in the year. In January/February 1932, what would have been Chandler's Ace of Spades Band, may have made some further sides for the Piccadilly label under the pseudonym, the 'Cunard Dance Band', as some of the sides concerned were issued on the Mayfair label actually under Percy Chandler's name. But this remains debatable. Alongside his music, the Ace of Spades probably attracted Chandler because it was close enough to the River Thames for him to enjoy his yachting activities. Chandler became a member of the nearby London Corinthian Yacht Club and undertook regular competitions over the next few years. In 1933 for example, he was competing on his yacht, 'Sancho Panza', on the River Crouch for the British Championship Trophy. He was unplaced. Interestingly a number of references to Chandler's yachting activities make it clear that many of the yachts he owned and sailed were self-built, although it's unclear as to how and where he acquired the skills required, unless there was something in his family background. Further adverts for the Ace of Spades venue for 1933/34 show Chandler's Band

providing 'dance music in the ballroom, till 3.00am each night (Sats. 4.00am)'. Fascinatingly *Flight* magazine for 6th July 1933 reported on a celebratory event to mark the opening of a 400 feet landing strip, built adjacent to the Ace of Spades, for the use presumably of its wealthier clientele! (Adverts noted 'no landing fee for visitors'.) The magazine noted the 'enjoyable piano duets' provided by Percy Chandler and H. Howard at the event.

As the 1930s progressed the few references to Chandler I've tracked down continue to confirm his mixing of yachting and music as a way of life, as well as a continuing association with the Ace of Spades. In March 1934, Chandler's yacht, 'Echo' retired from the International Class competition at Raneleigh Sailing Club. The same happened in April 1934 at the Thames Club Easter meet in Teddington. On 18th January 1935, society pages reported on the High Sherriff of Surrey's Appeal Fund 'Jarrow Ball' at the Ace of Spades with Percy Chandler's Band providing the music. In July 1935, Chandler's yacht the 'Ace', which was sponsored by the Ace of Spades, was competing in the Prince of Wales Cup, which again seems to confirm Chandler's continuing association with the Roadhouse. On 20th May 1935 Chandler was mentioned in a *Daily Express* news item, which reported his winning the Shackleton Cup for 14 foot Yachts. The story noted that the boat had been built by Mr. Jack Holt, 'a cabinet maker', of Hammersmith and Mr. Percy Chandler, 'an orchestra conductor', of Barnes. One of the last references I've been able to trace involving Chandler and his Band was his appearance at Lady Malcolm's Servants Ball in aid of the West End Hospital for Nervous Diseases at the Royal Albert Hall on 17th November 1936, probably a 'gig' event. Chandler disappears from the dance band scene completely about this time and this is probably due to Royal Navy commitments and his subsequent career.

As when I first attempted to put some flesh on the bones of Percy Chandler, any further information anyone has would be greatly appreciated.

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