

YOGI

The boy who would grow up to become George Michael had an unruly shock of black curly hair, a sensitive nature and the weight of parental hopes on his shoulders. He was much loved and indulged, in keeping with his status as the only male child in a Greek-Cypriot household, but was aware of his responsibilities from a young age. He needed to make something of his life.

His mother and father toiled long hours to give their family the best possible life. He witnessed his beloved mum endlessly scrubbing her hands to rid them of the smell from the local fish and chip shop where she worked extra hours to help provide for her son and his two elder sisters. Their labours eventually paid off and by the time George was a teenager, they lived in an affluent neighbourhood and he could treat his girlfriend to a drive in his dad's swanky Rolls-Royce. That luxury had been a million miles away when he was born Georgios Panayiotou in a modest house in Church Lane, an unprepossessing street in East Finchley, North London.

His beginnings were only relatively humble, however, especially when compared to his father's start in life as one of seven children sharing a house in the rural Cypriot village of Patriki on the north-eastern Karpas Peninsula of the island, about twenty miles from the fishing port of Famagusta. In 2004, George released a song called 'Round Here', a nostalgic contemplation of his origins. It began with the memorable line: 'My daddy got here on the gravy train', which suggested his father had an easy time of it, making lots of money for very little effort. Perhaps he was having a gentle joke at his father's expense, because that certainly wasn't the case.

Patriki was not a place for an ambitious young man like Kyriacos Panayiotou to make his fortune. There was no easy money to be had in Cyprus where, traditionally, the men rolled up their sleeves and worked as farm labourers and fishermen while the women stayed home and raised often very large families. In this conventional community, the father of the house was very much the boss.

Nowadays, Cyprus is a wonderful destination for tourists, thrilled to sample its rich history and legends, its fabulous Mediterranean cuisine, to gaze at calm seas, olive and lemon groves and bask in the countless hours of warm sunshine. This, as the tourist guides will tell you, is Aphrodite's island, where in Greek mythology the goddess of love was born in the sea foam and drifted to the eastern shore in a seashell. One of the most famous paintings of all, Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, depicts her arrival.

Cyprus, historically, had always been vulnerable to military aggression. It was a gateway to both East and West and therefore of great strategic value. The island was still part of the

British Empire when Kyriacos was growing up. In the early 1950s, when he left school and started trying to find work, tensions were tightening between the majority Greek population and the Turkish communities.

When he was eighteen, Kyriacos took the bold step of seeking to establish a new life overseas. He chose to try his luck in Britain. In the post-war years, the United Kingdom was suffering from a chronic labour shortage and sought to recruit workers from Commonwealth countries by encouraging immigration with promises of a better life.

He found an ally in his cousin, Dimitrios Georgiou, known to his friends as Jimmy, who was an apprentice tailor and looking to build a career abroad. Kyriacos had little training to fall back on – just the work he had been able to pick up as a waiter back home. Jimmy's son, Andros Georgiou, explained, 'Our fathers came off the banana boat together. Though they didn't admit it, part of the reason they came was to flee National Service. They arrived in London with less than a pound in their pockets.'

Although the comment is slightly tongue-in-cheek, it's true that the young men avoided being called up for two years in the military, which was the law at that time. Leaving such a tight community was a wrench for both of them, and they would always try to send a few pounds back to their families from the little they earned in London. They arrived in Britain in 1953 at a time of some optimism that a new age was beginning, best epitomised by the Coronation in June of the new Queen, Elizabeth II. At Epsom, Gordon Richards finally won the Derby and in August the Ashes were regained. And rationing was coming to an end at last.

The cousins headed for the burgeoning Greek-Cypriot community in North London where they could find cheap lodgings. Jimmy found work as a tailor's assistant in South London while Kyriacos made do with menial jobs in shops and restaurants. They both enjoyed the freedom of their new adventure. Aware that his name was a mouthful for prospective employers, neighbours and, most importantly girlfriends, Kyriacos Panayiotou decided to call himself Jack Panos. He worked hard and played hard, having no shortage of female admirers around the coffee shops and dancehalls of North London.

The age of rock and roll was just beginning, when the sound of Bill Haley & His Comets and later Elvis Presley made going out so much more fun than it used to be. Jack revelled in his new freedom, far away from the disapproval of his father. He also looked the part with a fifties-style quiff and chiselled movie-star looks. 'When he was very young, my dad was very handsome,' recalled the adult George in his autobiography, published when he was still in his twenties.

At one dance, Jack met a radiantly pretty local girl called Lesley Harrison, who lived at home with her family in one of a labyrinth of then depressing and poor streets between Archway and Highgate. Lulot Street was a typical example, consisting of a line of Victorian terraced houses with outside toilets that George later described as 'very working class'. His grandfather, George Harrison, had worked for the Post Office as a telephone mechanic. The street itself was demolished in the 1970s to make way for modern flats. In 'Round Here', George was perhaps more accurate in his description of his mother, saying she had a 'real bad start to the game'.

Lesley was always well spoken with a soft and easy manner – she never sounded as if she should be behind the bar of the Queen Vic. According to George, it was only when her own mother – George’s grandmother, Daisy – died that she discovered she was half Jewish. Apparently, she had been disowned by her wealthy Jewish family for marrying a gentile.

The families who lived in her neighbourhood of North London were back then very old-fashioned in their views regarding immigrants. Greeks were placed firmly in the unwelcome category. George would later hear stories of those days from his parents: ‘There were places that would say, “No blacks, no Irish, no Greeks, no dogs” kind of thing.’ That attitude failed to deter Lesley, who fell in love with her dancing partner. ‘My parents were rock and roll dancers,’ George explained. ‘They met at a dance and my father used to throw my mother all over the show.’

They were good enough to enter competitions, and one teenage girlfriend of George remembers him showing her an old black-and-white photograph of his parents dancing. She recalls, ‘They looked amazing, with glamorous hairstyles and clothes like something out of the movie *Hairspray*. I remember wishing that we learned how to dance like that, proper couples dancing, not just disco.’

Lesley was clearly very proud of her darkly handsome boyfriend. She even entered his picture in a competition run by the now defunct *Reveille* magazine called ‘Search for a TV Star’. He reached the final and his photograph was published with the memorable caption: ‘Jack Panos is chased down the street by girls wherever he goes’. That may have been a slight exaggeration, but his son would be very impressed by his

dad's achievements, which were kept hidden when he was growing up.

Jack and Lesley were married in 1958. Her father didn't attend for the simple reason, according to George, that the groom was Greek: 'In those times, he saw that as absolutely the same as marrying someone of a completely different colour.' One unavoidable fact was that Lesley from Lulot Street was now Lesley Panayiotou. It was a bold and strong-minded thing to do at the time, following your heart and hoping for a better life.

Jack was twenty-three and his new wife twenty-one. Their prospects didn't look good as they settled down to married life. The young couple's carefree dancing days ended to a certain extent when they faced up to the responsibility of raising their first child, a girl they named Panayiota but who everyone called Yioda. Their first daughter was born that October in the maternity annexe of the Royal Free Hospital in the Liverpool Road. At the time, Jack was working on the counter in a grocer's and they were living in Kentish Town, one of a number of homes around North London in which they had rooms before they managed to buy their own house.

Almost exactly two years later, in October 1960, Lesley gave birth to a second daughter, Melanie, which is a name that sounds very English but is derived from 'Melania', the Greek for 'dark'. Jack was now a waiter and they had moved a few neighbourhoods away to Muswell Hill.

The couple longed for a male child and their wish was eventually granted on 25 June 1963. They named him Georgios Kyriacos. The Greek pronunciation of Georgios is 'Yorios', which was a bit difficult for his elder sisters, so they

called their brother Yogi, a pet name that stuck with him during his early years.

By the time of his son's birth, Jack had worked his way up to be an assistant manager in a local restaurant. It would be many years before Georgios fully appreciated his father's work ethic and commitment to improving the status of his family. 'The honest truth is that the average Greek-Cypriot is a lot more hard-working than the average English man,' he observed somewhat controversially. He described his father as the 'absolute archetypal 1950s immigrant from Cyprus – very determined and every single member of his family made something of themselves. They were typical immigrants that worked their arses off and reaped the rewards.'

On his mum's side, Georgios never knew his Uncle Colin, her elder brother. He died, aged thirty-eight, in January 1964 from an overdose of barbiturates at the house in Lulot Street when his nephew was six months old. His death certificate grimly contained the words 'schizophrenia' and 'did kill himself'. The tragedy was hidden from Georgios growing up, but much later, as George Michael, he wrote a very personal song, 'My Mother Had a Brother', in which he revealed that his uncle was a gay man who had been unable to declare his sexuality because of the times in which he was born. He also said Colin killed himself on the day he was born, but this was dramatic licence.

The family moved yet again, to a small flat above a launderette in Holmstall Parade in Edgware, which was a small group of shops on the main A5 road with a bingo hall on the corner. The flat had a view of a dusty and shabby backyard on one side and the busy road on the other. It was hardly a step up

from the familiar streets of North London that Lesley had been loathe to leave, but it better suited Jack's ambitions.

While still very much London, Edgware had a more suburban feel to it than the old haunts of Archway and Kentish Town. The media liked to talk of 'Swinging London' and the 'Swinging Sixties' in terms of young Britain finding a new and exciting culture, finally free from the shackles of the Second World War. Jack and Lesley, however, were faced with a much more uninspiring life, trying to save enough to drag themselves out of their working-class monotony while keeping three young children clothed and fed.

At least now they were in the catchment area of a good school. Roe Green Infant and Junior Schools were in Princes Avenue, Kingsbury, less than a mile away from the flat. The junior school boasted the motto 'Be The Best You Can Be', a sentiment that resonated in the Panayiotou household and one that, professionally, George Michael was destined to follow.

In the summer of 1968, just before Yogi was due to start school, Jack took his family to Cyprus for the first time. He had not been back there for fifteen years and much had changed. The country had achieved independence in 1960 and joined the Commonwealth a year later. But it was not a stable time and the year of his son's birth had seen the beginning of violence between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. Greece wanted to absorb Cyprus back into the motherland – a policy known as Enosis – which inevitably led to bloodshed and the destruction of property on both sides. The adult George Michael would remember standing in front of the gates that led to the Turkish sector in Famagusta and being warned by

his dad not to go in there because he might legally be shot by the armed patrols.

Jack's cousin Jimmy and his young family went along on the holiday as well. The two men would still try to see each other in London at weekends despite their work commitments and Georgios became particularly close to Jimmy's son, Andros, a friendship that would continue into adulthood.

During his time away, Jack's father had died. The adult George would later comment that he was in little doubt that the grandfather he never knew was extremely strict with his children. He had a very old-fashioned Greek attitude that almost certainly included a degree of physical punishment: 'I never met my grandfather because he died before my parents met, but everything I have heard points to the fact that he was loved and respected but feared.' Jack, too, expected his children to be well behaved and respectful of elders, but he didn't rule by fear. 'He's in no way a violent man – he's a very gentle man,' said George. Young Georgios received a clip from his father on just two occasions growing up. On the first, he was whining to his tired and overworked dad about a torch he wanted. He was, he admitted, like a dog with a bone and wouldn't stop going on about it. The second would be a few years later while on another family holiday to Cyprus.

On his return from his first Cyprus trip, Georgios, aged five years and three months, faced his first day of school. To a small boy, Roe Green seemed enormous and forbidding. By a stroke of luck, he walked through the gates at the same time as another Greek-Cypriot boy, Michael Salousti. They were both terrified, leaving their mums watching anxiously as their teacher gathered together her small charges to take them into

class. The two boys quickly hooked up with a couple of other Greek-Cypriot children, including George Georgiades, whose parents were also in the catering trade and knew Jack: by coincidence, the two best friends Georgios had at primary school were called George and Michael.

They asked him if his mother was Cypriot as well and he was quick to correct them: 'No, she's not. My dad is only.' He also told them he was 'special' when they asked him about the flaky eczema on his legs. His mum had thoughtfully told him to say that so he wouldn't worry about the condition, which he endured as a youngster.

His new friends called him Yogi and, though he was shy at first, Georgios soon settled into a happy daily routine. Often, if his mother was working in the fish and chip shop, he would go round to the Georgiades' house after school for his tea and a play before Lesley came to pick him up. The boys would enjoy fish fingers or beans on toast and then sit round and sing along to an LP of *The Sound of Music*, which they loved. The soundtrack to the popular Julie Andrews film was the second-biggest-selling album of the decade and every home seemed to have a copy. The Georgiades household was no exception, and Yogi would happily join his pal at the coffee table in the lounge to sing 'Do-Re-Mi', their favourite tune, which so memorably began with 'Doe a deer, a female deer'.

The year after Georgios began at Roe Green proved to be a turning point in the fortunes of his family. His father went into partnership with two others in his first restaurant, called Angus Pride, in Station Road, a busy and cosmopolitan street the other side of the Edgware Road. He also had his eye on buying a house in one of the tidy streets that ran between the

school and the flat where they were living at the time. He found a three-bedroom, semi-detached house in Redhill Drive, Burnt Oak, which he secured with a mortgage of £4,000. Nowadays it would cost more than half a million.

Redhill Drive is a wide and quiet residential street and a good location to bring up a young family. While the brown, slightly drab-looking house was quite modest at the time, it represented a huge step up the social ladder for his family, in effect from working class to lower middle class. The improvement in status didn't mean they had an easier life. Lesley was permanently exhausted as she juggled looking after three children with various jobs that included shifts at the restaurant. Jack was mostly absent because of the long hours he spent at work turning the business into a success. He may not have been at home as much as his young son would have liked. He may not have been there to take Georgios to the park as often as the other dads. But he set an example that would prove invaluable. He gave his son the gift of determination.