

My Life, My Way

Cliff Richard

Published by Headline Review

Extract

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First published in 2008
by HEADLINE REVIEW

An imprint of Headline Publishing Group

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

Hardback 978 0 7553 1588 8
Trade paperback 978 0 7553 1835 3

Typeset in Garamond 3 by
Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford on Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from
wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are
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HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette Livre UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachettelivre.co.uk

PREFACE

This is my book, by me – not to be confused with any number of books *about* me. Maybe I'm naïve, but I have always found it very curious that people have been able to write and sell books about me and to make money out of my name without having had so much as the courtesy to ask. I am fed up with being portrayed by people who assume they know what I feel.

If you want to know what I really feel about things, this is the book to read.

I can't promise that my memory of dates is going to be all that accurate because I have never kept diaries. I don't keep anything much, believe it or not; I don't even have a complete collection of my records. And this is not an encyclopaedic account of every last concert I've played or album I've made. Plenty of other people have already done that, and the internet is teeming with sites that fans have put together.

What this is, is an attempt to put the last fifty years into some sort of context, to make sense of some of the extraordinary things that have happened to me and to explain, as best I can, what it has felt like being Cliff Richard.

INTRODUCTION



I was sitting in a scruffy transport café in the depths of the Brazilian countryside. The electric fans whirring overhead did nothing to alleviate the heat. We had stopped for a late lunch – along with most of the flies in South America – and the uncovered tin trays of cooked meats, beans and rice that had obviously been sitting there since mid-morning looked particularly unappetizing. Our guide, a Brazilian charity coordinator named João, had said a prayer when we set out on our journey in the bus from Recife six hours earlier. He had asked God to protect us on the road and make our journey profitable. He had said nothing about lunch, so I was playing safe. While a few of the others round the table flicked flies from their plates and diced with salmonella, I ate a granola bar I had bought passing through Miami and thought wistfully about what I could have been eating at home in Barbados. Some lightly grilled fish, maybe, with a crisp salad

and a glass of Vida Nova Rosé, from my vineyard in Portugal . . .

It has been a long journey from Cheshunt, and the council estate where I lived with my family in the fifties. I don't live in any one place now: I am a gypsy, with homes in England, New York, Portugal – and Barbados, where I spend four months of the year when it's cold everywhere else. Not all of it has been red carpets and Rolls-Royces – although I must admit to having owned a Rolls for a while. I was talked into buying one in the seventies by Bruce Welch, the Shadows' guitarist. 'I can't spend more on a car than my sisters spent on a house,' I protested, but I did it anyway and I can't pretend I didn't enjoy it. Altogether, it has been a wonderful voyage – but one that still, in so many ways, puzzles me.

At seventeen, when it all began, my ambition was to be like Elvis Presley. I wanted to be a rock 'n' roll star, to stand on stage and have girls scream at me. Miraculously, it happened; it happened to this unexceptional teenager from an unexceptional town in Hertfordshire. The question is: How?

I had no background in show business, I'd had no piano lessons, no guitar lessons, no singing lessons and I still can't read music. I just went out there and emulated what I heard Elvis do on the radio; I formed a band and played in pubs and clubs for a year, and at the end of that year – almost to the day – I made my first record. A lot of that was luck.

But the real mystery is how, fifty years later, I am still performing when so many others who did the same thing – some of them truly great musicians – fell by the wayside. I look at other people who frankly could sing me under the table, yet never managed to get their careers off the ground. I have backing vocalists today who individually, and technically, could sing me off the map, but they have never made names for themselves as solo artists. They have tried and they've failed, and it's nothing to do

with their talent because they work constantly. I can only conclude that I was lucky enough to have been born with that indefinable X factor. Alternatively, that someone somewhere had a purpose for me.

My father would have liked me to go to college or university. He would say, 'Get an education and then go for it, if singing is what you want to do,' but time goes so quickly and opportunities don't always come again. If I had followed his advice, I might have missed out on the success I've had in show business; so I have no regrets about the path I took.

But I don't doubt that in the 1950s it was an easier path than it is today. At that time the record companies said, 'Please sign here,' and then they would support their artists and help us improve. Bands today might sell ten million CDs but one failure and those same record companies will be debating whether it is worth their while going for another album. I have never sold ten million copies of one album in my life. My first record went to number two in the charts, my second was number seven, the third was number twenty. It was the fifth one, 'Living Doll', that reached number one, but in the meantime the record company was saying, 'Don't panic; we will find the right song for you.' They were supporting me in a way that doesn't seem to happen today. Today it's, 'Wheel them in and wheel them out.' So who knows whether some of the wonderfully talented singer-songwriters who are just starting out will be around in the years to come?

I was thrilled by my success in those early days, but I never expected it to last. I reckoned on five years at the most. Never, in my wildest dreams, did I think that I would still be rocking 'n' rolling, still filling arenas all over the world, and that girls would still be screaming at me, when I was old enough to have a bus pass. I have the odd grey hair – and so do many of the girls who scream – but so what? I have never

stopped loving what I do, and while there are people out there who still enjoy listening to my music – no matter what age we all are – I shall continue to sing for them.

People have described me as an enigma, but when it comes to how I achieved all this I'm as puzzled as anyone. I do have a few theories, however – and I *have* been lucky. I was lucky to have been born into a strong family, who have sustained me through the years and never allowed the fame and fortune to go too seriously to my head. My father, Rodger Webb, died, sadly, when I was twenty and my mother died, after many years of dementia, three days after my sixty-seventh birthday in 2007. But my sisters, Donna, Jacqui and Joan, are very close. They are probably my greatest fans, though they're not afraid to criticise me.

CHAPTER ONE

BACK TO THE FUTURE



We were brought up in a loving but highly disciplined, God-fearing household, with a very strict Victorian father whose word was law; and I guess, subliminally, his values became my values. He believed in hard work, good manners and honesty, and he took great care of the little money we had. ‘Look after the pennies,’ he would always say, ‘and the pounds will look after themselves.’ And he needed to look after the pennies. We were impoverished. I am certainly not impoverished today – yet I still can’t leave a light on in an empty room, or let air-conditioning blast away when someone’s opened a window. I can’t bear it; I have to go in and turn it off. He instilled in me that nothing should be wasted.

He was quite aloof; I don’t remember many fatherly hugs, but that may have been because I was the eldest – and a son. I was the only surviving boy: I had had a younger brother, Freddie, who was born in

India, as I was, but he didn't live for more than a few weeks. I was only about twenty-one months old at the time so don't remember anything about it really, but my parents must have suffered terribly and I have often speculated what it might have been like to have had a brother.

Dad worked as a manager for Kellner's, a big catering business in India that serviced the railways. The job took him all over the country, so he was away for long periods at a time, but we lived very comfortably in a flat provided by the company in Howrah, a town outside Calcutta. We had servants to cook and clean, as most of the British living in India at that time did, and they too were paid for by the company.

I don't have very many memories of India. I remember it could be cold at night in winter, and if it rained, it flooded and we used to go out with our trousers rolled up, thinking: This is wonderful! Knee-high water was fun. The rest of the time it was swelteringly hot. We were not wealthy, but our life there was fantastic compared with what awaited us in England.

We came to England in 1948 when the British all flooded back home after India won its independence. My parents were British, but both of them had been born abroad and neither of them had ever been to England, so they had no 'home' to come to. My father was born in Burma, and my mother, Dorothy Dazely, in India, which is where they met. She came from a military family. My father wanted to take us all to Australia, but my mother's mother had recently gone to England with her second husband and seven children, and Dorothy wanted to follow her. She won the day. So after five weeks at sea we arrived at Tilbury Docks in Essex in September 1948. I was almost eight, Donna was five and Jacqui just ten months old.

My grandmother was living in a three-bedroom, semi-detached house in Carshalton in Surrey, and so it was to Carshalton that we

went; but the house was scarcely big enough for my grandmother's family, let alone the five of us as well. Her neighbours agreed to let us rent their small front bedroom until we found a home, and so we slept in the house next door on mattresses on the floor and covered ourselves with blankets in an effort to keep warm.

We were destitute. My father had sold everything he had in India to raise enough money for our passage, but because the flat we lived in belonged to the company, he had very little to sell. We arrived in Britain with £5. That was it. Worse, my father couldn't find work. He was sixteen years older than my mother, so already in his forties; it was just after the War, rationing was still in place and there was very little work to be had, particularly for someone of his age.

Eventually he found a menial job in Essex. It involved a two-hour commute each way with several changes of bus, but he took it rather than accept hand-outs from the government, which he regarded as charity. 'While I can work, I will work,' he would say, and that is the work ethic that he handed down to me. In order to feed the family, my mother also had to find a job, and for a while was working night shifts. She and I shared a pair of shoes. I wore them to school in the day and she wore them at night. She had never worked in India – it would have been out of the question – but in England, as soon as my youngest sister was old enough to be left, it was essential. It was the only way my parents could hope to make ends meet.

Dad was the dominant force in the family. He was the decision-maker, and he was the one who handed out the punishments. I remember coming home from school one day and telling him that I had been caned unfairly. I insisted I had done nothing to deserve it. He picked up a cane and whacked me again on the back of the legs, which hurt even more than the caning I had had from the teacher. His

explanation was that I wouldn't have been caned at school for no good reason. I had let the family down, he said. 'Remember, you are my son and they know that you are my son. They are probably thinking, Mr Webb can't bring up his child properly. This is a slur on me.' I'll never forget it. That was the last time I told him when I'd been in trouble at school. Thereafter, I just didn't tell him. But overall, I think he was probably right, and maybe as a society we are suffering today because we have not been strict enough with children and have allowed them to do their own thing too much. He didn't beat me, he hit me – there's a big difference; I was not abused, but what mattered most was that I didn't like incurring his displeasure.

My mother was the opposite. She was the one to whom we would run when Dad had walloped us. She was never disloyal to him; she never tried to score points. She managed to console us without taking sides. She would always ask what we had done to warrant the punishment, and when we protested that it had been nothing serious, she would say, 'Well, you shouldn't have done that. Don't do it again.' Then she would give us a big hug. So she was a perfect balance to him. She wasn't weak – and she had her own opinions about things – but at the same time she was the subservient wife.

I adored my mother and as a child I was closer to her than I was to my father. It wasn't until he became ill in my late teens, shortly before he died, that he and I developed any real relationship. And yet I don't remember ever feeling rebellious or resentful about his heavy-handedness.

My youngest sisters, Jacqui and Joan, have wonderful memories of my father. They remember how funny he was, how quick-witted, and the harshest punishment they remember was being made to sit on a chair for five minutes if they overstepped the mark. I think he had

softened by the time they were born. Joan, the youngest of us all, doesn't remember being frightened of my father at all, nor that he was that much of a disciplinarian; but she was only eleven when he died, and as he had been sick for some time before that he had no doubt lost some of his fire. At times, as a kid, I was terrified of him.

One evening Donna and I wanted to go to the pictures. I was mad about the cinema and still am. My father took me aside and said, 'You can go on one condition: you have to look after your sister and you must both be back by ten o'clock.' The film was longer than usual, so we missed the bus and arrived home half an hour late. I shall never forget walking up the road to our house, panic rising as I saw it in darkness. The house was never dark. My father always left lights on. We knocked on the front door: nothing. We tried to look through gaps in the curtains but they were closed tight. We felt our way in the darkness round to the back and looked in through the kitchen window. There was nobody there. It was black inside. They had gone to bed, they couldn't be roused. There was nothing for it but to spend the night in the coal shed.

There wasn't much coal in the shed – there never was, we always had to eke it out – and my Dad had stored a big old-fashioned pram in there. So I put my sister in the pram and I sat in the coal dust by the wheels thinking I was in for a very miserable, cold, uncomfortable night. After what felt like an age, although was probably only ten minutes or so, the door opened and my father stood silhouetted in the doorway. 'Where have you been?' he demanded. I blurted out that we'd missed the bus and had to wait. 'When I say you have to be in at ten you must trust me that that's the right time for you to be home. If you're not back by then, the door will be locked. Now come inside.'

We all went into the kitchen where my mother was waiting; there

was much hugging and I think she probably made us some cocoa. They hadn't gone to bed at all. They had watched us and decided to leave us just long enough to teach us a lesson. Years later my mother said, 'I remember that incident, but I don't think you ever realized how much we worried about you. The minute you were not back at the time you said you would be, we started to think of all the worst things that could possibly have happened to you.' My sisters, of course, went through exactly the same thing when they had their children: everything in life repeats itself. But we were never late again – ever; and to this day I am a stickler for being on time.

I learnt a lot from my father, from his approach to life, from the way he disciplined us and from his reasons for doing so. He was old-fashioned in his views about child-rearing – he was, remember, sixteen years older than my mother – and maybe some people would disapprove of the way he treated us: but although he ran our family with a rod of iron, and although this involved corporal punishment, it seems to me, with hindsight, entirely justified. I have no doubt that he loved us all and I think discipline, like criticism, is fine so long as it is done with love. I resented it at the time, of course, but looking back, he was never really wrong. We weren't two or three minutes late that night coming back from the cinema, we were thirty minutes late, so he was entitled to teach us a lesson. On another occasion, I remember being in the middle of a play rehearsal after school when, to my intense embarrassment, my father arrived and announced that he was taking me home. He apologized to the teacher for disrupting her group, but explained that I had been inconsiderate; I had failed to tell my mother that I would be late home.

The electricity in the house was coin-operated, as many domestic supplies were in the 1950s. You fed a meter with shilling coins and the

lights and power came on. Sometimes the lights would go off in the middle of the evening and my father would say, 'Well, we're going to bed in a minute, let's not bother now.' So we would go to bed in the dark and wait until the morning before feeding the meter again. Every now and again, the guy from the Electricity Board would come and read the meter and he'd say, 'There's a ten-shilling refund here,' and my father would exclaim, 'Yes! Fantastic!'

Ten shillings was a lot of money for us at that time; it would buy food for at least two days. Three times a week our main meal was two slices of toast each with tea poured over them and sugar sprinkled on top. On the other days we would get rice and occasionally chicken and sometimes vegetables. I don't ever remember eating fish as a child. And we certainly never had sweets or cakes and biscuits; I don't even remember there being much fruit. It was tough but it didn't do us any harm, and if anything I think it had a beneficial effect on me. It made me appreciate that money doesn't buy happiness – although it does make being unhappy a lot more comfortable. I made money quite quickly at the start of my career, when I was still very young, and that can be quite difficult to handle. Many people in my business have gone off the rails for this reason and never really recovered, but I don't think a day goes by when I don't thank God for all that's happened to me and that I had such a close and loving family – also that we're not still on toast and tea!

At the age of eight, soon after we arrived in England from India, I remember my father saying to me, 'If anything happens between your mother and me, you must side with your mother. This is your role in life.' And I thought, All right, I'll do that. When he died in 1961, one could say I did precisely as he had instructed. I was already the breadwinner but I became the head of the family, the capable one, the

man about the house and, to some extent, I suppose, the disciplinarian. I certainly kept a protective eye on my little sisters – and although one of them is now a grandmother, I guess I still do.

After just over a year we moved from Surrey to Hertfordshire, where my aunt Dorothy, my father's sister, and her husband had settled after leaving India. She offered us a room. Again it was a very small room, with two sets of bunk beds and mattresses on the floor. My parents slept on one of the bunk beds, two of us on the other and one on the floor, until my little sister Joan was born when there were two of us on the floor. We did everything in that room. We lived, cooked, ate, drank, slept – there was even a little latrine in one corner. And after Joan was born there was a washing line strung across the room with nappies drying. But by good fortune my mother made friends with the neighbour next door, while talking over the fence, and she invited Mum to have coffee with her one day. Then my mother invited her back in return.

'You live in this house?' said the neighbour.

'No,' said my mother. 'We live in this room.'

The neighbour was shocked. She happened to work for the council, so she took our case to the housing officer and persuaded an official to come and visit. He too was shocked, and as a result our application for a council house went to the top of the list. We didn't get one immediately, but within a year we had moved into a three-bedroom council house, 12 Hargreaves Close, in Cheshunt. The luxury. We had been in England for two years and this was the first time that the family had had more than one small room to live in.

We still slept on mattresses on the floor, though, and the first bed we ever had, my father made. He also made the first armchair. Both he built out of wooden packing cases which he bought from Atlas Lamps, where he had finally found a job that was no more than a cycle ride

away. The company sold electrical appliances like lamps and television sets, which often arrived from the manufacturers packed in wooden crates that were pulled open and left lying around the yard. They let employees buy them for five shillings each. He must have bought himself some tools, too – although they can't have been very good tools – also some screws, and I remember watching him plane the rough wood to make the armchair.

He was always a great doer; he couldn't delegate. I would be the one who held the screws or the tools while he did the work. Looking back on it, I wish he had sometimes said, 'You do it. I'll watch, and if you get stuck, I'll be here.' I find I am exactly the same as my father was – I don't delegate. I will do jobs myself even though there are people around far better qualified to do them than me.

Atlas Lamps was part of Thorn Electrical Industries and my father worked in the credit control office. My mother had a job on the production line, where she did an eight-hour day before coming home to cook for the family. It was dull, menial work and she was never very happy there. She would stand by a conveyor belt alongside other women, putting filaments into bulbs as they passed. It was hardly taxing work, so to relieve the tedium she started to work faster – but the other women objected. They were being paid for the number of hours they worked, not the efficiency with which they fitted the filaments, and when she refused to slow down, she was sent to Coventry. She came home in tears because no one would speak to her. But it didn't deter her. She felt the other women were cheating the company and she didn't want any part of that.

Slowly, as time went by, we bettered our conditions; but it was tough, and when I think back to what they did, the respect I have for my parents grows ever greater. They suffered great hardship, but

they never gave in and they never gave up hope; they did what they believed was right. Ours was the kind of hardship that either draws people more closely together or splits them apart completely; and our family became very close. Also, my parents were among the last of a generation that respected marriage and stuck with it through thick and thin. I think the secret was that they liked each other as much as they loved each other. That's not to say they didn't get annoyed with one another. If she was cross with my father, my mum would say, in front of him, 'Can you ask your father if he'd like a cup of tea?' and he would say, 'Tell your mother, "Yes please."' They would laugh about it later – we all did. Nowadays, relationships seem to be dependent on the good things, not founded on the expectation that there might be some tough times to weather; and when things start to go drastically wrong, we tend to think, Why live through this? Life's too short.

I have often said that I would like to 'fall in like'. Falling in love is OK, but the nature of love changes, the passion goes, and unless you have a strong friendship you are left with the things that inevitably annoy you about that person. I've never understood how two people could fall out so badly they had to divorce simply because of the way one of them squeezed the tube of toothpaste – a story I once read somewhere. Having said that, I do get driven demented when guests are staying in my house and they put the loo roll on the holder the wrong way round! Nobody's perfect. But a close friendship is going to survive everything – and even if you do hate the way they eat peas off their knife, there will be so many other things you like about that person that the imperfections don't matter.

My mother and father also balanced each other perfectly. They brought up four children, who were all very different from one another,

and despite the poverty, neither I nor my sisters ever remember being unhappy in our childhood.

Occasionally I would complain that our friends got pocket money, and Dad would say, 'We can't afford it'; but the minute he had some money he would give us something. 'OK, here's a shilling,' he would say. 'You may not get any more for a long time but this is your pocket money.'

I remember him winning £50 on the football pools one day. He said to my mother, 'I could put something down on a television set or we could have a radiogram.' We had had to sell the radio we'd had in India. My mother said, 'Radiogram,' so he bought one. It had a radio and a turntable and we loved it. Admittedly that came from winnings rather than earnings, but we were going up in the world; we had a radiogram and a couple of chairs and we were eating better.

Before the radiogram arrived we had a tiny crystal radio set with headphones, and we used to take it in turns to listen to Radio Luxembourg and occasionally the American Forces Network, which used to play all the doo-wop music. We loved messing around with it. Then my father bought a little portable radio, which my mother used to listen to while she was cooking, and I remember her writing down the lyrics of songs. She would have a pad of paper and pencil ready, and when she heard a song she liked, she would scribble away and catch as many words as she could. It usually took two or three playings before she had filled in all the gaps; and then she would sing along when those songs were played on the radio. I used to watch her; I was fascinated that she had the patience to do it. She would listen to people like Johnnie Ray, Dickie Valentine, Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, Bing Crosby and Dean Martin. Theirs was the kind of music I grew up with, and although I liked some of it – particularly Perry Como's and Bing

Crosby's – I didn't identify with any of those singers.

It was when I heard Elvis Presley for the first time that I thought: I can do that – and suddenly I knew what I wanted to do with my life.