

THE SOUND OF MUSIC... TURNS 60

As she celebrates her 90th birthday, Steve O'Brien looks back on the life and career of one of the UK's most beloved national treasures

Darling JULIE...

History doesn't recall the precise reaction of King George VI and the teenage Princess Elizabeth on witnessing, in 1948, the youngest artist ever to grace the stage of the Royal Variety Performance, but it's likely they were blown away. Yet not even the royal family could have foreseen how stratospheric the career of this 13-year-old wunderkind would go, let alone that she would still be performing an incredible 77 years later.

Julie Andrews is, nearly eight decades on from that show-stopping turn, a bona fide national treasure, so much so that in 2000, when she stood in front of Queen Elizabeth II to accept her Damehood, the monarch told her, 'I've been waiting a long time to see you here.'

There are few celebrities more universally loved than Dame Julie Andrews, and not many actors whose career stretches to nearly 80 years. In fact, it's possible there are some viewers of Netflix's hit show *Bridgerton* who don't realise the voice that carries them through



Aged 13, Julie sang the first verse of the National Anthem solo at the Royal Variety Performance



the series – that of the elderly Lady Whistledown – is the same one that, six decades earlier, told them that 'a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down' and that 'the hills are alive with the sound of music'. And there can't be many actors who can say they've performed alongside names as wildly diverse as Bing Crosby (1956's *Ford Star Jubilee*) and Jason Momoa (2018's *Aquaman*).

Though she can no longer sing professionally due to surgery on her throat in 1997, Dame Julie shows little sign of slowing down as she nears her 90th birthday (she becomes a nonagenarian on 1 October), telling *Forbes* in 2023, 'I think I would go completely mad if I didn't have some lovely thing to work on.'

That dogged work ethic manifested early. A gifted singer (her vocal teacher, concert soprano Lilian Stiles-Allen, once said of her, 'The range, accuracy and tone of Julie's voice amazed me... she possessed the rare gift of absolute pitch'), she was performing on stage from the age of 10, often alongside her stepfather, with ➤

Aged 15, Julie stands outside the caravan she lived in with her nanny while starring in the panto *Red Riding Hood* in Nottingham



She had an incredible five-octave vocal range until throat surgery ruined her voice

her mother on piano. Making her professional solo debut aged just 12 at the London Hippodrome, within a year she was singing in front of the King.

TV and radio appearances followed, with the teenage sensation popping up on everything from *Up the Pole* to *Educating Archie*, before she made her first appearance on Broadway, aged just 19, in the musical *The Boy Friend*.

It seems fitting that, considering her big-screen career today is mostly devoted to voice work in a multitude of animated features, her first job in movies was performing an English dub of the Italian cartoon *La Rosa di Bagdad* (retitled *The Singing Princess* for British audiences in 1952). It wasn't a big job, but it was enough for its makers to re-release the film 15 years later, this time with the newly famous Andrews' name front-and-centre on its poster.

SPREADING HER WINGS

Cinemagoers would have to wait until 1964, however, to see Julie in action. She'd devoted most of the Fifties and early Sixties to the stage, heading up runs of such popular shows as *My Fair Lady* (as Eliza Doolittle) and *Camelot* (as Queen Guinevere). In fact, she'd been expected to reprise her *My Fair Lady* role in the 1962 movie adaptation, until Warner Brothers boss Jack Warner announced he wanted a recognised name, with the part eventually going to Audrey Hepburn.

Andrews didn't have long to wait for her big-screen breakthrough. Walt Disney himself hand-picked the singer for his film adaptation of PL Travers' children's novel *Mary Poppins* (1964), having been wowed by her turn in *Camelot*. On Andrews' casting, Travers told the then-27-year-old, 'Well, you're much too pretty of course, but you've got the nose for it.'

The role would, of course, be a star-making one for the actress, hurtling her into Hollywood's A-list.

But she was always canny about her movie choices. Though it's Andrews' song and dance features that have often been her greatest hitters, from the very beginning, she has been aware of the dangers of typecasting. Typical of the contrariness that would define her career, she'd followed up the wholesome *Mary Poppins* with a bruise-black anti-war satire, *The Americanization of Emily* (1964), opposite James Garner.

The late Sixties would be Julie Andrews' 'imperial phase' as an actor. There was another nailed-on classic with 1965's *The Sound of Music*, and other musicals with the more adult-oriented *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967) and *Star!* (1968), but there were also many dramatic roles. She starred alongside Paul Newman in the Alfred Hitchcock thriller *Torn Curtain* (1966) and was the co-lead of George Roy Hill's gritty war drama *Hawaii* (1966).

Personally, however, it was a time of turmoil for Julie. Her first marriage to set designer Tony Walton was crumbling, ending in the couple's divorce in 1968. 'The worst of it was you feel such a failure because it's certainly nothing that one anticipates going into a marriage,' she explained to journalists in 2019. 'I did feel I'd failed at it miserably and blamed myself for a great deal.'

FALLING IN LOVE

The greatest love of Andrews' life, however, would come about after a series of coincidences on the streets of Los Angeles. One day in 1966, she was travelling to her analyst on Sunset Boulevard, when she passed a Rolls-Royce. A few days later, it happened



Julie returned to work four months after having her daughter Emma to start filming *Mary Poppins* (1964)



At the 1965 Academy Awards with her Oscar for *Mary Poppins* and good friend Audrey Hepburn

again. And then again. On that third meeting the driver of the Rolls wound down his window and asked, 'Are you going to where I just came from?' 'I... think so...' Andrews replied. 'Well, it's a pleasure to meet you,' the man said. 'I'm Blake Edwards.'

One of Hollywood's most successful and in-demand filmmakers, Blake Edwards had helmed such box office successes as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) and *The Pink Panther* (1963). A few weeks after that encounter at the intersection of Roxbury and Sunset, Andrews received a call telling her that Edwards wanted to speak to her about a new project.



Chatting with Princess Margaret, Lord Snowdon, Paul Newman and Alfred Hitchcock on the set of *Torn Curtain* (1966)

That movie, *Darling Lili*, which was released in 1970, would flop, but it was the film on which Andrews and Edwards fell in love.

The couple would marry in 1969, and go on to make a further six movies together, often features that challenged the public's perception of Julie Andrews as a clean-cut family entertainer. Her role in the Dudley Moore sex comedy *10* (1979) was a universe away from the innocence and gaiety of *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music*, but it was nothing compared to

the controversy generated by the couple's next movie. *S.O.B.* (1981) which was a savage take-down of the film industry and featured Andrews as a thinly veiled version of herself, an Oscar-winning actress with a squeaky-clean image who's convinced to perform in a pornographic musical, with its most headline-grabbing scene featuring the actress topless. Reflecting on the film in 2001, she said, 'It was a big deal because it was me, but it was valid for that movie, and it was done with enormous, good taste.'



Filming *Darling Lili* with her beloved Blake. They were together for 41 years until his death in 2010



Julie and Dudley Moore starred together in *10*, directed by Blake Edwards

FULL OF SURPRISES

S.O.B. was a bold move professionally, yet in many ways it was typical of Julie Andrews. So many actors play it safe in their careers, wary of going outside of what the public know and love them for. Yet the actress has continually tested herself and the expectations of her audience. A couple of years later, she'd be nominated for an Academy Award (she had already been nominated for *The Sound of Music* and won for *Mary Poppins*) for yet another provocative role, as a hard-up opera singer in 1930 Paris forced into a life of cross-dressing in the comedy *Victor/Victoria* (1982). And who could have predicted that the woman who once danced through the Bavarian Alps would one day be voicing a colossal, ancient sea beast in a blockbuster superhero movie (that'd be 2018's *Aquaman*)? Even today, it seems, Dame Julie Andrews is still able to surprise us.

In 2002, Julie Andrews was listed as No.59 on a BBC-organised and public-voted poll of the 100 Greatest Britons. And, while there's no doubt the enduring popularity of *Mary Poppins* and *The Sound of Music* are what most people remember her for, we must never forget how relentlessly brave the actress has been in her long and varied career, and how hard-working she remains, even as she approaches her 90th year. To the nation's favourite nanny, we salute you and wish you a very happy birthday.

She's written two bestselling volumes of autobiography – *Home: A Memoir of My Early Years* (2008) and *Home Work: A Memoir of My Hollywood Years* (2019).

DID YOU KNOW?