

Comedy historian Robert Ross pays tribute to some of the finest and funniest, but often overlooked, names in showbiz

# Forgotten Heroes of Comedy...



Invariably sporting a raffish moustache and a petulant scowl, Colin Gordon was frantically busy in that rich and varied terrain of post-war British film and television.

His eyes would forever dart with either disdain or distrust from behind those hard, horn-rimmed spectacles, be it playing men of medicine or of letters; cuckolded husband or desperate bachelor.

He was born in Ceylon, in April 1911. He made his West End debut, at the Savoy Theatre, at the age of 23. He was the hind legs of a horse in AA Milne's *Toad of Toad Hall*, and spent much of his subsequent career as an anxious ass opposite Britain's favourite comedians.

Writers Ray Galton and Alan Simpson loved him. Colin was the deadpan doctor in the classic *Hancock*, *The Lift* (1961) with his disdainful cry of, 'Has anyone pressed the button?'. He was another, rather more sympathetic doctor, in *Step toe and Son: The Holiday* (1962). With a regretful

shake of the head, this rueful medic scuppers Harold's plan for a continental break, seeing them off to Bognor... as usual. Colin was back at Oil Drum Lane, as a bemused tax man in *Live Now, P.A.Y.E.* Later, in 1972, transmitted just before his death at the age of 61.

Colin had been a frequent support for both Frankie Howerd and Peter Sellers too, notably playing the neurotic Noakes in *The Great St. Trinian's Train Robbery* (1966), and the officious owner of *Casino Royale* (1967).

**'His eyes would dart with disdain or distrust from behind horn-rimmed spectacles'**

His effortless skill was to play even the most absurd character with dignity, proving a perfect figure of bemused authority alongside Leslie Phillips in *Very Important Person*, and *In the Doghouse* (both 1961).

He was most fun when the script asked for his cool veneer to crack... rather dramatically. The student of Colin's cascade into sweating despondency should look no further than *The Green Man*, a murderous romp from 1956,

which cast him as that most solid pillar of restraint, the BBC radio announcer.

Throughout the film we see and hear his life falling apart, as he loses blonde bombshell fiancée Jill Adams to hapless door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman George Cole. Colin's performance is an essay in one man totally losing it.

Colin's cult television credits are strong, too, with a recurring role as bumptious civil servant John Alexander Templeton-Green in *The Baron* (1966), and as malicious chief administrator Number 2 in *The Prisoner* (1967). His humourless airport commandant in the Patrick Troughton era *Doctor Who: The Faceless Ones* (1967) has recently been animated – to fill in the gaps left by missing, believed wiped, episodes.

Surely enough of a reason for the other roles in Colin Gordon's lengthy curriculum vitae to be searched out, and thoroughly enjoyed.

■ Visit the website of Robert Ross, Britain's Comedy Historian, at [robertross.co.uk](http://robertross.co.uk)

Lena won *Opportunity Knocks* for a record-breaking five weeks running



LENA ZAVARONI...

# Bright star, dark struggle

Famous at just nine, Lena Zavaroni's life was blighted by an eating disorder that would contribute to her early death, aged just 35. Steve O'Brien tells the tragic story of one of the Seventies' biggest child celebrities... ➤

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Lena's cover of the 1921 standard *Mat (He's Making Eyes At Me)* reached No. 10 on the UK singles chart in 1974.

In the mid-Seventies, there were few singing stars bigger than Lena Zavaroni. She first exploded onto the entertainment scene in 1974, aged just nine, on the TV talent show *Opportunity Knocks*. Within the year, she'd released her first LP, *Ma!* (He's Making Eyes at Me), becoming the youngest person ever to have a record in the Top 10 of the UK Albums Chart. She even lived every kid's dream of appearing on *Top of the Pops*, singing that album's title song, amid a line-up that included Alvin Stardust, Stevie Wonder and The Hollies.

Yet by the Nineties, this one-time pop sensation who'd performed in front of a US President and the British royal family, was living in a council flat and, in 1999, was charged with stealing a packet of jelly worth just 50p. A few months later, she was dead.

The story of Lena Hilda Zavaroni is an especially tragic one as we, the public, were helpless witnesses to her worsening health from almost the beginning of her career.

Diagnosed at 13 with anorexia nervosa and clinical depression just a few years later, TV viewers could see the singer's rapidly diminishing weight. Pull up any clips now of her

BBC show *Lena Zavaroni and Music*, and they're hard to watch – aged 15, she's painfully thin, so much so that the BBC approached the singer's father to see if there was any way he could encourage her to eat.

At one point, her weight dropped to just four stone, and stories began to surface in newspapers about her eating disorder.

Yet little was really understood in the Seventies about what was referred to as the 'slimmer's disease'. It's evident in the way TV interviewers would question the teenager about it, with talk show host Russell Harty commenting that her eating disorder must save on restaurant bills and Terry Wogan telling the vulnerable-looking teen that she'll soon be back to her 'chunky self'.

**A RAPID RISE TO FAME**

Yet that frail-looking body housed a voice that was preternaturally powerful. Described as 'the little girl with the big voice', she was belting out numbers such as *River Deep Mountain High* and *The End of the World* when most sweet-voiced 10-year-olds are singing *All Things Bright and Beautiful*. No wonder she won *Opportunity Knocks* for a record five weeks on the trot.

Lena's fame through that show was so instantaneous that before long she was being whisked to America. Born in Greenock, Scotland, and raised in the small town of Rothesay on the Isle of Bute, suddenly this smiley-faced pre-teen was an international star, performing alongside A-listers such as Frank Sinatra, Lucille Ball and Barbra Streisand and signed by Stax, the uber-cool record label that was home to artists such as Otis Redding and Isaac Hayes. She even performed at the White House in front of then-US President Gerald Ford.

Here at home, she was rarely off the screen. There were appearances on such programmes as *The Morecambe and Wise Show* and *The Little & Large Show* and an ITV special, *Lena and Bonnie*, which teamed her with fellow child prodigy Bonnie Langford.

In 1976, she performed on the *Royal Variety Show*, and the next year released her fourth album, *Presenting Lena Zavaroni*.

Despite telling interviewers about how she was conquering her eating disorder and depression, the truth is she was struggling. 'She was losing more weight and I was trying to make

her eat night after night after night, but it was seemingly getting worse,' her father Victor recalled to the BBC earlier this year. 'I went everywhere for help, specialists, psychiatrists, hypnotherapists, psychoanalysts, it was all trial and error and it just wasn't working – even with the doctors she was seeing.'

'When they tried to fit me into these costumes, they would talk about my weight,' Lena said years later. 'I kept wondering how they expected me to fit into these dresses. I was a plump little girl and I was also developing into a woman. I wanted to be just right for them, but I had to go to all these breakfasts, dinners and lunches. I only became fanatical about not eating when the pressure got too much. I just wanted to have a nice shape.'



Lena was a familiar face on TV in the Seventies and Eighties appearing with Bruce Forsyth, Des O'Connor and Morecambe and Wise



By the time Lena married in 1989 anorexia was already threatening her health

As Lena entered her 20s, there were fewer TV appearances and concerts and she released her last album, *Hold Tight, It's Lena*, in 1982. In 1989, she married computer consultant Peter Wiltshire, only to separate 18 months later. That same year, her mother Hilda died of a tranquilliser overdose.

During the Nineties Lena's weight became so perilously low that performing became impossible. With no work coming in, she was

reduced to living off social security and, in 1999, was accused of stealing a packet of jelly from a supermarket (the charges were later dropped).

Yet there was often talk of a comeback. In 1999, she read about a pioneering, but risky operation that might rid her of her anorexia and in September, she was admitted to the University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff. The neurosurgery was successful, but while in hospital the singer developed bronchial pneumonia. Weighing just 70lb (32kg), her body was simply too weak to fight off the infection and she passed away on 1 October 1999. Speaking at the time, her friend Bonnie Langford said, 'She was an incredibly gifted and very sweet person. It is a tragedy that she has died so young.'

**HER LEGACY LIVES ON**

Lena was just 35 when she died, yet her very public battle with anorexia helped to foster awareness of this misunderstood disorder. Her story continues to educate people. In 2022, she was the subject of a biographical musical written by BAFTA and Olivier award winner Tim Whitnall. Lena won rave reviews, with *The Stage* writing 'the essence of Zavaroni's rise and fall is given a sensitive treatment', singling out 'Erin Armstrong's heartbreaking performance'.

Lena may have died 25 years ago, but thankfully we still have those albums and TV appearances to marvel at. Few adults have a voice as dynamic and as full-bodied as she did when she was just a kid. Though her name is synonymous with the disorder that blighted her life, we mustn't ever forget the raw, unbridled talent that made Lena Zavaroni one of the most famous child stars of all time.

**DID YOU KNOW?** Lena's managers Phil and Dorothy Solomon also looked after fellow child performer and *Opportunity Knocks* winner Neil Reid.



Lena and Bonnie Langford became friends when studying together at Italia Conti Academy stage school



Lena's parents Hilda and Victor owned a chip shop in the small town of Rothesay on the Isle of Bute