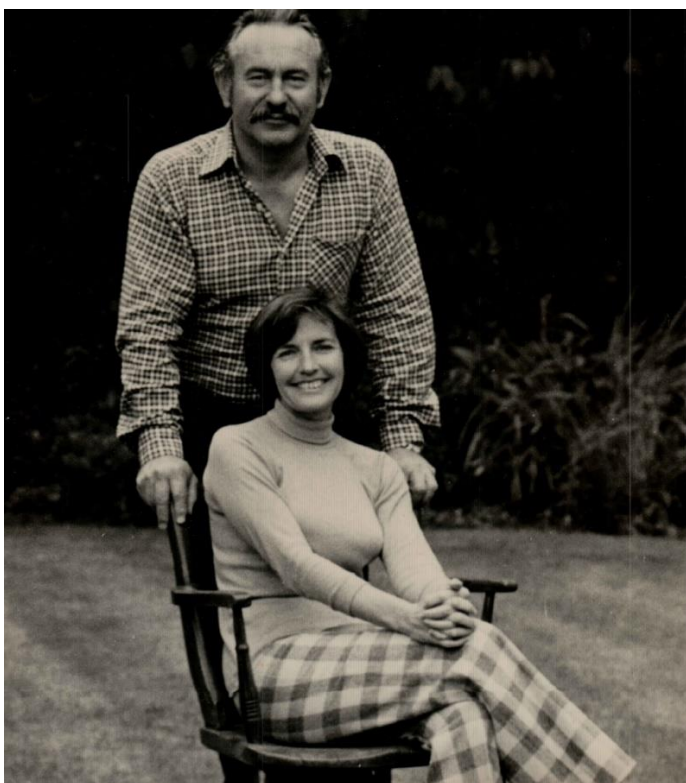


GILL FALSON: THE POCKET VENUS

by Donna Abela*

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If you live in Sydney, you might know Gill Falson as the presenter of “Playing Favourites”, a program on Eastside Radio FM which commemorates the jazz greats, and showcases her extensive knowledge of the history of jazz. However, if you listen carefully to Gill back-announcing the tracks, you will hear anecdotes that reveal that her deep love and knowledge of music was not acquired from the sidelines.



Ron & Gill Falson, snapped in England in 1978: the Falsons were immersed in the Sydney music scene and studio system for the better part of 50 years... PHOTO CREDIT ROSEMARY SWINFIELD

In partnership with her husband Ron Falson, Gill was immersed in the Sydney music scene and studio system for the better part of 50 years. Unlike Ron - a renowned trumpeter, composer and arranger with no musical forebears - music had been an integral part of Gill's family for generations.

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Gill's grandmother, Ruby Daniels, was a World War I widow who provided for her family by playing piano in a silent movie theatres in Kempsey. Her mother, Gill Jeffrey, had "an extraordinarily good voice", and won a scholarship to the Conservatorium which her parents would not allow her to take up. However, after marrying Ruby's son Jack, a music teacher who worked at Newcastle and then Cessnock High Schools, and had a dance band which played from Maitland to Muswellbrook, Gill senior was able to keep singing.

"Wherever they were, they were very much involved in choirs, in performing", Gill said of her parents. "Each of them could get up and do something. That was the best gift that a one-man school could have because in those days the school teacher's wife had to teach sewing as well - unpaid!"

As a child in Cessnock, Gill remembers the grinding poverty caused by the nine-year mine lock out, and the stones that Catholic and Protestant kids threw at each other. However, being born to "very talented" parents, Gill learned how to perform and write music, and fell in love with the 78s of Ellington, Basie and Goodman.



Two of the jazz artists Gill fell in love with were Duke Ellington (left) and Count Basie...

At the age of eight, Gill danced Scottish jigs in Maitland prison. At ten, she stood on a box and sang *Tuxedo Junction* live to air on her parent's 2CK radio programme. By 14, Gill was riding the daily workers' train to Newcastle to study dance full time in a troupe taught by Jesse Brownley who was "a great teacher, absolutely brilliant"; even though her Dad had "carried on", her Mum, who "had been thwarted in so many ways", was not about to let her daughter miss out on this opportunity.



Dancer Gill Falson: by 14, Gill was riding the daily workers' train to Newcastle to study dance full time in a troupe taught by Jesse Brownley... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

By the time Gill was 18, she “just wanted to get out of Cessnock like you wouldn’t believe”. Fortunately, Jesse Brownly had taught her pupils “how to perform really really well”, so when teenage Gill moved with her parents to Sydney, her versatile ability to dance and command the stage enabled her to sail through any audition, and establish herself as a singer and dancer in the city’s flourishing nightclub scene.



Gill Falson as a soubrette: she was able to establish herself as a singer and dancer in Sydney's flourishing nightclub scene... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

Gill danced at Chequers - described by *Variety* as one of the top nightclubs in the world - and earned a good wage of twelve pounds a week. "Mind you, you worked at six o'clock at night, you did your first show. You did the second show at ten o'clock at night", Gill recalled. "You'd have one week off in the daytime, and then the next three weeks you had to get ready for the next show, so you had to be in there at ten or eleven o'clock in the day", and then stay to perform two shows at night.

"I got to be the front end of a horse once. Joe Martin was a very famous comedian at the time, and I was in the front of the horse, and got to paw in time!"

Gill met her future husband Ron while he and Don Burrows were playing in the band at another famous establishment - Joe Taylor's Celebrity Club. "They had the best band. Every time Buddy Rich or someone came out from America that's where they'd go to listen to the band. The band was fantastic."



Trumpeter Ron Falson (left) with Don Burrows (clarinet) at the Celebrity Club in the early 1950s... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

Gill remembers being “stunned” when she saw Ron sitting in the middle of the floor, warming up. Her friend said “he’s married, forget it”, but Gill later learned that Ron was getting a divorce - something “huge” back then that had to be lied about.



A young Ron Falson: he’s married, forget it... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

One fateful night, after Gill had been “moved up” from dancer to singer with the Celebrity Club band, Ron asked a question. “Can anyone copy?” “I can do that!” Gill said. “I went home, and I ruled everything, and everything was perfect ... So I was very useful from then on.” However, like her mother’s sewing lessons at Cessnock High, Gill’s copying labour was initially done without payment. “I just did it”.

Before marrying Ron and - like her parents - starting a family that would live and breathe music, Gill had a taste of total freedom. After telling Ron and her mother that she had declined a job in Singapore - to which their response was “Well you couldn’t possibly do that! She couldn’t, could she?” - Gill promptly left the room to call her agent back and ask, “When would you like me to go?” Gill remembers her three months singing and modelling in Singapore as “the best time I have ever had in my life because you were totally free of everybody. It was just wonderful to be away”. Around this time, in her element, Gill became known as “the Pocket Venus”.



Gill, pictured in Singapore in 1956: she describes her three months of singing and modelling in that city as “the best time I have ever had in my life”... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

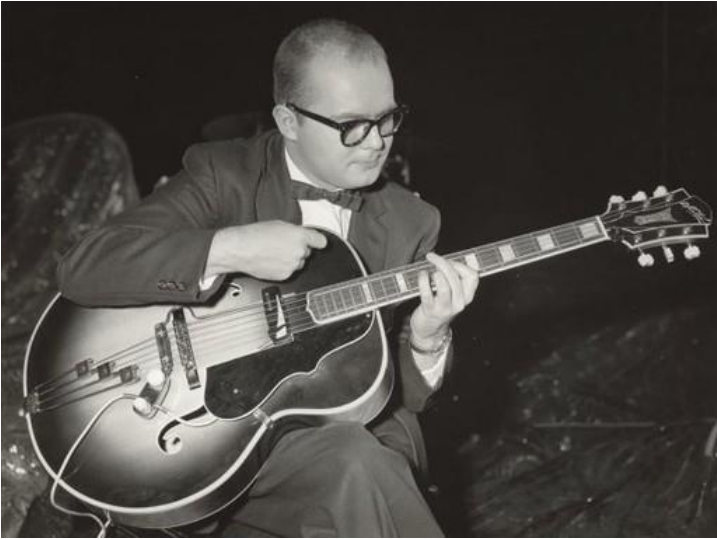
Back in Australia, like most dancers who had married musicians in the 1950s and 1960s, Gill's own career soon took a back seat. "It was tough being a musician's wife in those days", she said. "Musicians' wives had to stay home because there were no mobile phones or anything like that ... and if someone wasn't there to answer the 'phone ... they would ring another trumpet player, or another saxophone player ... so we all had to stay home, which broke up a lot of marriages."

For the musician-husbands, there was "so much work in Sydney". There was regular employment playing in bands that performed in night clubs, toured with international celebrities, or were featured on radio or TV tonight shows. Gill remembers that Bob Gibson's band had a big radio audience. "There used to be radio shows in the day time when musicians would be on stage, and the singers would be on stage as well ... All live with audiences there. Yes, women, all women, women, you know, with hats on. Because no woman worked in those days, at all ... It wasn't the done thing."



The bandleader/arranger Bob Gibson: his band had a big radio audience... PHOTO COURTESY STATE LIBRARY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

There was also plenty of employment in recording studios. "There was so much work. People were running from one place to the other because, in those days, all the commercials had to be made in Australia. You couldn't make them overseas. And whoever decided not to keep on doing that, I don't know." Gill remembers a time when George Golla recorded six radio commercials during the day, and went on to do a TV show that same night.



Guitarist George Golla: he recorded six radio commercials during the day, and went on to do a TV show that same night....

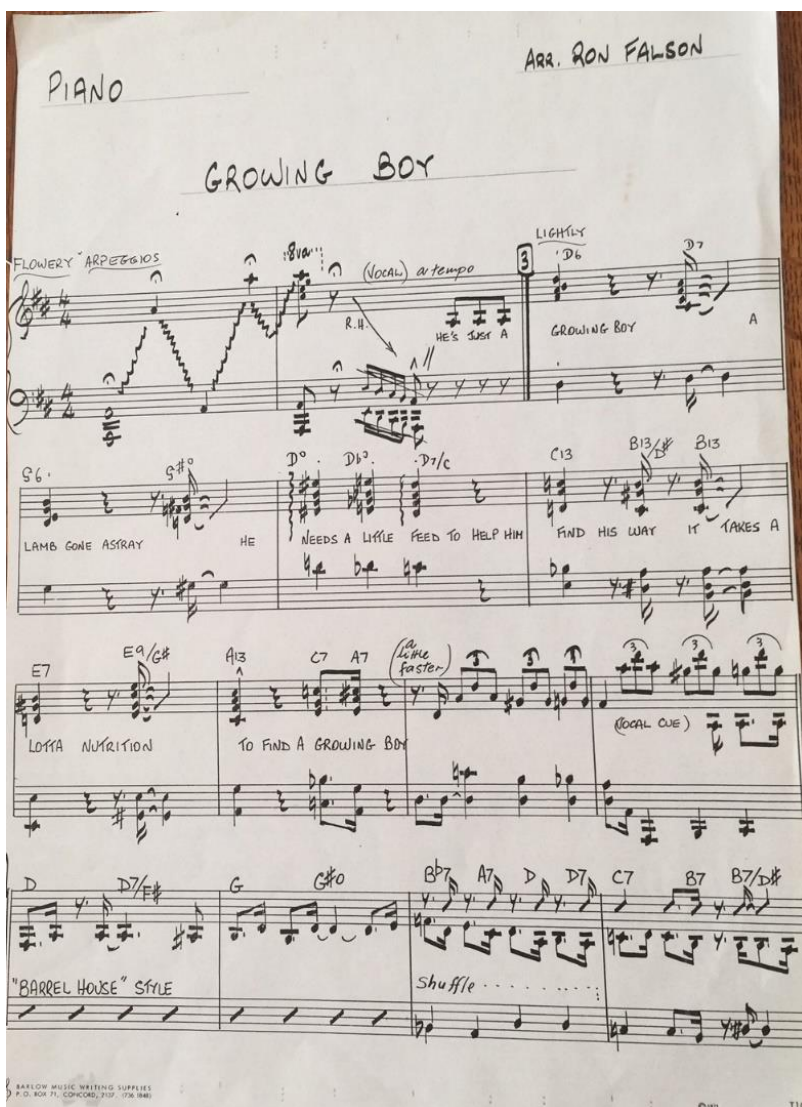
Because of her skills as a copyist, Gill did much more than sit by the 'phone. She and Ron formed a partnership which "worked really really well", and lasted the better part of 50 years. Ron arranged music, and Gill copied out the individual parts using pen and ink. 'When we first started, the copying was paid to me. And then we got clever and got a partnership, which stopped that pleasure of me getting my own cheque.'



Gill and Ron Falson on the dance floor before their marriage: a partnership which worked really well... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE

Taxis were constantly coming to their door to pick up sheet music. “Ron was writing for all of the shows that were on because he was so fast. At first, when we first started, there were no computers ... If you had a choir on, and there were 20 people in the choir, you had to write out 20 pieces of music ... but you had to write out the whole lot”. Pointing to her dining table, Gill said, “On that table there you see behind you, I used to be surrounded by paper with ink on it ... My father was copying for us as well, and another person used to come and copy for Ron because we had so much work. I just couldn’t do it. He was so quick at doing it, and he’d get up very early. He could concentrate better than anybody that I’ve ever known.”

Gill and Ron did “an enormous amount of commercials” with a Canadian “fellow called Ted Botley who was very important in those days”. Routinely, musicians had to wait three months to be paid for their work on commercials - unless they worked for Gill and Ron. “What we did was pay the musicians on the day they did the recording to ensure that you got the best musicians in Sydney. So they were always there on time and ready to go”, Gill said. “We got the best all the time.”

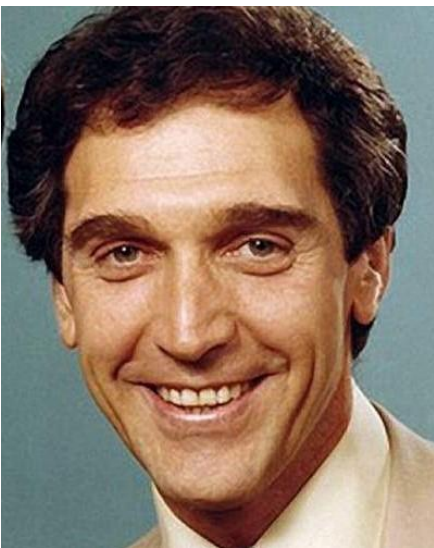


An example of Gill’s copying style (above)... Her husband Ron (see over page) was writing for all of the shows that were on because he was so fast... PHOTOS © RON FALSON ARCHIVE



Gill tells a story about how her persistence created opportunities for her to return to singing. “Ron didn’t want to be seen to be pushing me, which was fair enough, but he also denied me doing things”. Despite having other singers in mind for the Hardy’s Hamburgers jingle, Ron and Ted gave in to Gill’s insistence that she could do the job, and let her record a demo. “It was sent to America and I got the job ... and that annoyed Ron and Ted enormously!” The Hardy’s commercial was enormously successful, and Gill and Ted went on to make many more together.

With the advent of television, Ron wrote arrangements for, and played live on, programs such as *Bandstand*, *6 O’Clock Rock*, *The Midday Show*, and *The Don Lane Show*, which kept Gill busy at the dining table copying an endless stream of music.



Don Lane: one of the nicest people Gill ever met...

“Don Lane was one of the nicest people I’ve ever met. He really was. And Ron worked with him such a lot ... He would always see me, if he was like near the door ... he’d see me and come all the way over and give me a kiss.”

Gill remembers the first time they saw Don Lane in a comedy act which preceded Sarah Vaughan’s appearance at Chequers’ nightclub. Unfortunately for Sarah Vaughan, she was too stoned to sing, and was booed by the audience. Fortunately for Don Lane, he “came back on and was brilliant. He was just very funny, and he was slick at everything he did”. Within days, he’d been offered his own programme on Channel Nine.



TV compere Don Lane (left) with Sammy Davis Jr, one of the international artists in whose band Ron Falson played...

When not arranging music, or playing in clubs or TV and recording studios, Ron played trumpet in touring bands for international artists such as Sammy Davis junior, and took remarkable black and white photographs from the orchestra pit. However, this prodigiously busy and talented couple did make time to enjoy life. Gill smiled as she remembered her family sailing on Sundays and - when the TV stations took a break over Christmas - fishing at South West Rocks.



Gill (left) remembers sailing on Sundays, here with two trumpeters Alan Nash (centre) and husband Ron... PHOTO © RON FALSON ARCHIVE