

An Obituary  
by Paul Du Noyer

# BILLY FURY

17 April 1941—28 January 1983



## HALFWAY TO PARADISE

**L**AST FRIDAY afternoon, Billy Fury's cheating heart stopped beating, and so beat him, once and for all time.

Persecuted for years by a coronary condition — the deadly legacy of rheumatic fever contracted in childhood — the singer succumbed in a London hospital.

**B**ILLY FURY... a daft sort of name, really.

He was a teenage tugboat man, called Ron Wycherley. Big pay packets on the Mersey, then; handy for a flash kid with even bigger daydreams. How did he tell his mates, back at the pub in Bootle, first time he came home? "Look lads, it's not Ron any more, right? It's Billy. Erm, Billy Fury."

You can picture the pint-spluttering mirth. And him such a shy lad, deep down. It can't have been easy.

"Britain to my mind has produced only two great singers; one of them is John Lydon and the other is Billy Fury" — Ian Dury.

**W**HAT DID someone once say about seeing a dog walk on its hind legs? Something like: what struck you is not whether it's done well, but simply that the

beast can do it at all. English rock 'n' roll, 1958 or so, came to the same thing. Until there was Billy Fury.

So he made a tape, the tugboat Teddy Boy, and got the mighty Decca interested. Then Marty Wilde, big star, arrived to play Birkenhead. So Ron Wycherley snuck into the dressing room with a guitar, impressed the big manager man Larry Parnes. Five minutes later he'd joined the tour. Five days later he read in the *Daily Mirror* that his name was Billy Fury. News to him. It could all happen that way those days.

"One thing about me is that I'm a terrible loner. I think I was born with three brick walls around me. No — four brick walls: I knocked the back one out... People sometimes used to think I was a real moody sod. But I was just shy" — Billy Fury, *NME* interview 19/12/81.

**H**E WAS biggest between 1959 and 1963, when the hits came thickest and fastest: big number, pneumatic ballads, most of them. 'Halfway To Paradise', a Goffin/King song, will probably last longest. 'Jealousy', 'A Thousand Stars', maybe a dozen more, they all did the business too. All through, he thought he'd die soon — it was in the heart-doctors' eyes.

Onstage early on (so say the greybeards; the rest of us must make do with fading *Oh Boy!* clips) he was epic — the way Eddie Cochran was, and Cliff Richard wasn't.

Golden suit, black shirt collar turned up. Sullen, hooded eyes, oozing bruised hurt. Shoulders hunched, pathetically self-protective yet provocative with it. (Got him banned from Dublin, that business.) When the drama climbed, his hand reached out and

snapped shut. A twist of the wrist and back the hand came, so he could open the palm to see what he's grasped. And find it empty...

People fell for it. He was typical Larry Parnes stable stuff, like Marty Wilde / Johnny Gentle / Vince Eager / Duffy Power / Dickie Pride. Billy Fury: a teen-tearaway, yes, a rebel, sure, but a good kid really. All he needs is some love.

Any true Fury snob will recommend you his first LP, 'The Sound Of Fury'. A 1960 ten-incher, rereleased by Decca not long since, in a sense it was his Sun Sessions. Ten tracks, he wrote them all himself — nobody's dumb puppet — but (typically self-effacing) he stuck a phoney name by half of them. The ballads transcend the schmaltz of their time, touch with tenderness. And the rockers! Superb, springy, all a-bristle with rockabilly bounce. (He grew up on Hank Williams and Gene Vincent, the very best way.) Seek out them before you decide Billy Fury means nothing to you.

And then... The Beatles, of course, and the group boom that exiled solo stars to the Northern supper clubs. In Billy's case, the tin meant worse and worse health as well. And soon, retirement, to a farm in the countryside his first real love. Perhaps that's when his real life began: caring for sick animals as an RSPCA helper, building a bird sanctuary, rearing race horses, mourning a ravaged natural environment, even a hunt saboteur or the quiet. A dignified recluse.

The '70s meant more hospitals, more natural work. But in 1972 there was a rock 'n' roll spectacular at Wembley Stadium, where you saw the quiff-and-drape faithful receive him with respect (they canned Gary Glitter, even howled down Little Richard). And in the concert souvenir you might have spotted an itemette about unknown young Malcolm McLaren. A small-time flogger of Ted-threads down Kings Road, Malc speaks of his dream; to complete an art-school film about Billy Fury "Britain's only rock 'n' roll singer of note," he says.

1973: Try and catch the cameo role in *That'll Be The Day* (and look for his cuts on the soundtrack LP, especially Townshend's song 'Long Live Rock'. Forget Fury's early films — *Play It Cool!* (1962) and *I've Gotta Horse* (1965).

**I**N LATE '81, something made me go to my first, and possibly last, record company reception. Billy Fury was back and signed to Polydor (the results released so far are not worth bothering with).

We met for a minute, while he spoke wistfully of Liverpool, before he was pulled away by a posse of Radio One personalities, who all spoke much louder than he did. Then I was cornered by Larry Parnes, regaling me with rosy tales of his boy back in the good old days. Billy, meanwhile, went through the PR motions with tired eyes and a brave display of willing.

Just a couple of weeks ago, he was at the *NME* Christmas Party — full of new plans and optimism... you know, the way people *always* are in these obituary things.

**B**ILLY FURY — the man, the private individual — has died, but his music hasn't. (Some things are true, even if Hughie Green could have said them.)

Ron Wycherley is dead. Long live Billy Fury.

photo:  
Harry Hammond