

Frank Holder

High on life

Mark Gardner meets the veteran singer and percussionist, former sideman to John Dankworth, Tubby Hayes and Joe Harriott and more recently the subject of several fine releases on the Mainstem label

Singing on the same bill as the likes of Nat Cole and Billy Eckstine, tutoring Cleo Laine on the wrinkles of vocalese, touring with Tubby Hayes and Joe Harriott, being a long-standing member of the Dankworth Seven, keeping wicket to the thunderbolt deliveries of Wes Hall.

These are just a scattering of milestones in the colourful, eventful career of jazz singer and percussionist Frank Holder, who has been a vital figure on the British scene for more than 65 years. Frank was born on 2

April 1925, in Georgetown, Guyana, South America - but a country very much part of the Caribbean crescent.

He was quickly captivated by rhythms experienced at dances organised by his father. His vocal gift first shone in the church choir with his elder brother, who had a superb voice, and was polished by experience with local bands and radio broadcasts. He first heard jazz via late night band broadcasts from the USA.

Frank's father was a fairly strict

'I know Joe Harriott had a reputation for being difficult, but I always got on with him so well. He was very quiet, gentlemanly, beautifully dressed, not a hair out of place, and more English than the English in his manner.'

disciplinarian and wasn't overly keen on his son's secular singing; he wanted the boy to have a steady, respectable career. Towards the end of World War II Frank seized his chance to escape the paternal influence by volunteering for the Royal Air Force. He hoped to get into a more competitive music situation.

'It was towards the end of the war, but many of the young men in the West Indies wanted to help Britain's fight. You have to remember that at that time everyone out there regarded Britain as the mother country, it was a big deal; we were anxious to do our bit,' Frank explained. 'I also wanted to be where the musical action was, ideally America, but that wasn't possible. Britain offered prospects and a challenge.'

A ship was despatched by the War Office to sail around the islands collecting the recruits before returning across the Atlantic to Glasgow. 'It was a hairy crossing. A lot of U-boats were around, but we were well protected in a convoy. It was an exciting time and we were keen to get into the action, but as things turned out we were held in reserve and sat out the war in Wiltshire. As an AC2 a lot of my time was spent in the cook-house!'

But Frank soon made an impact by working with service bands, entertaining the troops, even playing drums on occasion, becoming in the process a self-taught percussionist. It was invaluable experience and also enabled him to make good contacts in the business which would help to launch his career once the conflict ended. On being demobbed, Frank decided to remain in England and was soon hard at work with the Mecca Organisation and on the northern club circuit.

His repertoire expanded. He knew all the standards and liked giving them a personal jazz flavour. He also developed the difficult art of bebop singing. Along with bassist Coleridge Goode, Frank was in the vanguard of young, modernist, black entertainers of the time and his first early break came when he joined the band of another pioneer, Leslie 'Jiver' Hutchinson, in 1946. Through his efforts during that important stint and gigs with trumpeter Kenny Baker, Holder came to the attention of John Dankworth in 1950.

'I never approached John for a job; but some of the guys in the Seven had heard and jammed with me in clubs and mentioned me to him. One day he just came up to me and said, "You're Frank Holder; the

Joe Harriott and Frank Holder at the Marquee Club in the early 1960s



Bruce Fleming