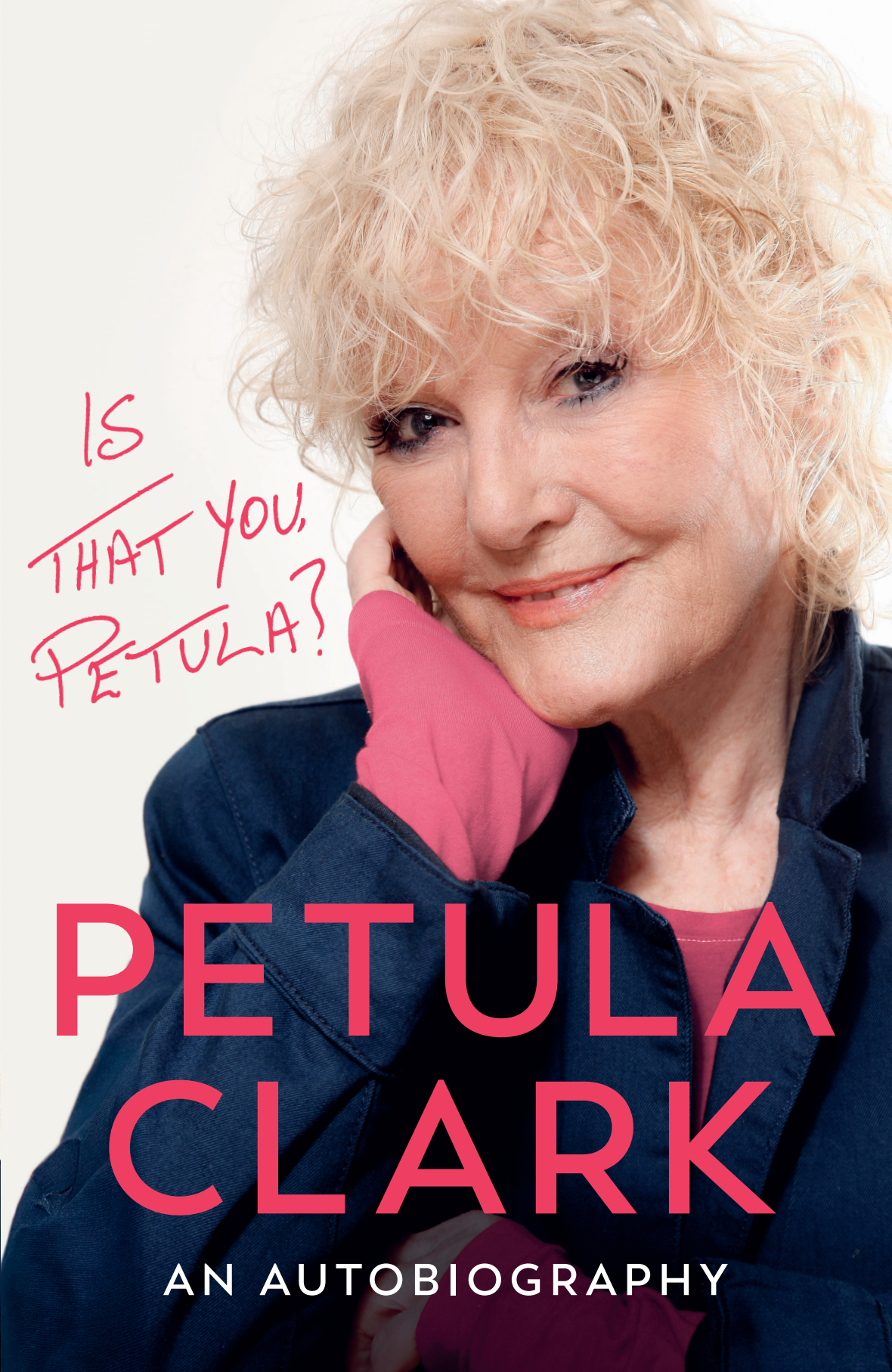


A close-up portrait of Petula Clark. She has short, curly blonde hair and is smiling gently at the camera. She is wearing a dark blue jacket over a pink top. Her right hand is resting against her cheek. The background is a plain, light color.

IS
THAT YOU,
PETULA?

PETULA CLARK

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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PETULA?

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AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

PETULA
CLARK

WITH IAN GITTINS



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*I would like to dedicate this to all those
who love music and nature. To my family,
and the many I have not named but have admired
and loved so dearly. You are with me always.*

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INTRODUCTION

IS THAT YOU,
PETULA?

It was a low hum, a collection of whispers, but it was impossible to miss. Every time I spoke, the voices coming back at me from the darkness of the packed auditorium I was playing to were telling me that they really didn't like what I was saying.

Or, rather, they didn't like the language that I was saying it in.

It was 1 June 1969 and I was performing at the Place des Arts concert hall in Montreal. I'd played the city several times before with great success. Four years earlier, when my life and career were based in France, I'd toured Canada with a one-woman show entirely in French. It had been rapturously received.

My life had changed somewhat since then. In the interim, I'd enjoyed a lot of success in America, and by now had a wide repertoire of hit songs in English *and* in French. So, on my latest return to the province of Quebec, it seemed to make sense to do a bilingual show, in which I sang and talked to the audience in both languages.

Erreur!

These were sensitive political times in Montreal, and in Quebec as a whole. Two years before, French president Charles de Gaulle had visited the city and said, '*Vive le Québec libre!*' –

‘Long live free Quebec!’ His speech was seen as giving support to the movement for Quebec independence, and for it to be a French-speaking land.

So, that night, I had wandered onto a battlefield. The Montreal audience knew me as a French star and that was who they wanted. Each time I spoke, or sang, in English, indignant voices hissed back at me from the darkness: ‘*Pas en anglais!*’ People seemed to be taking everything I said in my native tongue as a personal insult: ‘*En français!*’

Nor was the vitriol one-sided. When I switched to the French-speaking section of my show, the exact opposite occurred. I could hear voices complaining, ‘No, no – sing in English!’ If I’d hoped that singing in two languages would please everybody, I was clearly pleasing nobody at all.*

People were making their feelings very known and I was stuck in the middle. I didn’t know what to do, or say, so I just carried on as well as I could. It was difficult, and disturbing, and when the show ended and I could finally escape backstage, I was in tears.

The team of people I was with were trying to console me and telling me not to worry and that it didn’t matter. But I didn’t agree. I was upset and thought that it *did* matter. I felt inconsolable. And, suddenly, I realised *exactly* who I wanted to talk to about it.

I had seen on the news – it was hard to miss: it was a worldwide media event – that John Lennon and Yoko Ono

* I should say that I’ve played bilingual shows in Montreal so many times since and never had the slightest problem. This night was, in so many ways, a one-off.

were doing their second bed-in for world peace just down the street in Montreal, at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel. I'd never met them, but John was a star who'd entertained millions of fans in his career. Maybe *he'd* know what to do.

So, I left the theatre on my own and walked the short distance through the night streets of Montreal to their hotel. I still had my stage make-up on and I was crying. Not only that but it was pouring with rain and I didn't have an umbrella. I got to the hotel, ten minutes later, with mascara streaming down my cheeks. Not the best look.

Somehow, the concierge recognised me. 'Madame Clark!' he exclaimed.

'I want to see John Lennon,' I said.

'Ah, yes, he is in room 1742,' he replied, pointing me towards the lift. Clearly, the security in that hotel was not all that it might have been.

I took the lift to nearly the top of the hotel. The door to room 1742 was slightly ajar, so I pushed it open. I stood in the doorway, still crying, make-up smeared all over my face like a clown, dripping water all over the posh carpet. John and Yoko were in bed in their nightwear. John squinted over at me, and looked gobsmacked.

'Is that *you*, Petula?' he asked me.

'Yes,' I sobbed.

'Come here!' he said. I shuffled over, sat on the bed with him and Yoko, and he gave me a big hug. 'What's going on?' he asked. Between sniffles, I told him the story of the gig, and the crowd, and the way they'd made their displeasure known all through my show. John listened carefully, and nodded, and then he delivered his verdict.

‘You know what?’ he said. ‘Fuck ’em!’

This was certainly forthright advice! *Well, it’s John Lennon talking!* I thought. *He may be right!* ‘You need a drink,’ John added. ‘Go in there and get one!’ I walked into the suite’s living room, where a few people were hanging out. I knew one or two of them, such as Tommy from The Smothers Brothers. Someone gave me a glass of wine.

I sat down and started to relax and cheer up. Some gentle music was playing in the background. A guy handed out lyric sheets and we all began singing. It was fun: I had no idea we were being recorded. And that was how I ended up singing along on John and Yoko’s anti-war single, ‘Give Peace a Chance’.

I’d never met John before but I was to bump into him a few times in subsequent years, until he was taken from us, and I found him a wonderful guy. He never forgot about our first meeting. And I reckon those first words he said to me have a wider significance in terms of me, and my life: ‘Is that you, Petula?’

I wasn’t born Petula. I was christened Sally Olwen Clark. Not that I can remember anyone ever calling me Sally. My father quickly invented the name Petula for me: don’t ask me why. He said that he came up with it by combining the names of two of his old flames: Pet and Ula. I still wonder what my mother thought about that.

I’ve always felt ambivalent about the name ‘Petula’. Of course, I’ve got used to being called it now, and I like it more than the diminutive ‘Pet’: I’ve never cared much for that. But the honest truth is that I love the name Sally. I think it suits me. All through my life, I’ve always felt more like a Sally than a Petula.

Ah, well. It’s too late to change it now!

I'm quite surprised, not to mention apprehensive, to find myself penning *Is That You, Petula?* It's the book I swore I would never write. I've been asked to put my memories to paper so many times by publishers, and my response has always been a firm 'No, thank you'. So, why have I changed my mind, this late in the day?

There are a few reasons. Maybe it's to do with time running out. And my late husband, Claude Wolff, who died in 2024, wanted me to write my autobiography. Claude said that if I don't do it myself, someone else will do it when I'm gone, and probably get most of it wrong.

So, I'll do my best to get most of it right. For Claude, and for me.

In truth, nostalgia has never appealed to me. I'm not the kind of person who sits around talking about 'the good old days'. They weren't *all* that good, and they're gone! I rarely listen to my old records or rifle through old photos. I much prefer to live for today. I always have. I've even released an album called *Living for Today*.

But maybe, hopefully, that's what *Is That You, Petula?* is – a book about a life spent living for today. I know that looking back can be painful, but I am going to try my hardest. So, as a friend of eighty-four years, Julie Andrews, used to sing, *let's start at the very beginning ...*

CHAPTER 1

HOW GREAT WAS MY VALLEY?

... it's a very good place to start.

I was born on 15 November 1932, in West Ewell in Surrey. Not that I tell anyone that if I'm abroad. No one's ever heard of it. If you say 'Ewell' to a French person, they'll reply, '*Quoi?*' Or '*Où ça?*' So, I say I'm from Epsom, which is nearby. It has more of a ring to it, and people abroad have vaguely heard of it because of the Derby.

My mother gave me my Welsh middle name, Olwen, in memory of one of her two younger sisters. I never got to meet Auntie Olwen: she'd died young, before I was even born. I only recall ever seeing one family photo of her. She had dark hair and was very beautiful.

There was a big mystery surrounding Auntie Olwen's death. I remember, when I was little, asking why she had died so young, and at first I was told that she hadn't been well and had died of pneumonia. Then, later, someone said that she died of a broken heart. *What?* I wondered. *Who was this person who broke her heart?*

It's not a phrase you hear today, thankfully, but I was told Olwen had 'fallen in love with a Jew boy'. 'What's a Jew boy?'

I asked. It didn't mean a thing to me at the time. Of course, the irony is that I was myself later to fall in love with a Jewish man, Claude, have three kids with him, and stay married to him for sixty-three years.

But that's all to come. I'm getting ahead of myself.

My mother, Doris Phillips, was a very pretty, petite Welshwoman. She had auburn hair, blue eyes, high cheekbones and a strong Welsh accent, which I loved. She also had a lovely singing voice. She hadn't had any training: the Welsh tend not to need it. But she'd never sing in public. She was too shy.

Mum was kind and loving, and cooked for us and looked after the family, but my main memory is of her being ill. She was quiet and not very talkative and never seemed well. She was often poorly in bed, and I suspect now that she was suffering for years from the tuberculosis that was eventually to kill her.

Well, that was my mother. My father was a different kettle of fish. Leslie Norman Clark was a dashing, handsome man. He was an extrovert and, with his dapper moustache, looked like a suave movie star, a cross between Errol Flynn and Ronald Colman. I loved having a dad who was so good-looking. Any little girl would.

Dad came from Chichester and had always wanted to be an actor. I never got the full story, but I know that in his teens, he ran away with a travelling theatre company who came to town. His parents tracked him down, dragged him home in disgrace, and he was never allowed to mention acting again.

It made Dad a frustrated performer. Could he have made it as an actor? Who knows? He had a slight accent, what they call a Sussex burr, but he was charming and had a lot of charisma.

When I was little, I worshipped him and I thought he could do no wrong.

My mum and dad had met when they both worked as nurses at Long Grove Hospital, a mental hospital in Epsom. Dad carried on working there after I was born. He didn't talk about it much, but he did once tell me about a patient who, when the leaves fell in autumn, went around trying to tie them back on the trees.

When I was four, my beloved little sister, Barbara – Babs – came along. We always got on well and we still do today, even though our lives took us in very different directions. We were both shy children but, growing up, Babs was even more introverted than me. I have old photos where I'm smiling at the camera and Babs really doesn't want to be there.

Ewell is a suburb of London, and our early life there was very suburban. We were a typical middle-class, middle-of-the-road family and lived in an ordinary semi-detached house. Babs and I shared a bedroom. A year or two after she was born, we moved to a similar house, in a nearby area called Hook.

Our new home in Hook had a willow tree in the back garden. I used to spend a lot of time in it. I'd climb up and sit there with the birds for hours. Everything looked wonderful from up there. I loved that tree, and I still have a passion for trees and for nature. That's always stayed with me.

As a young child, I lived in my own little world. I'd tell myself stories, made up from my very vivid imagination, which I still have today. And I had music going on in my head all the time. I was always singing.

I'd sing anything and everything. We'd listen to the BBC Home Service, which played the popular hits of the day *and* classical music. I loved all of it. I'd float around the house singing

songs by Bing Crosby or Anne Shelton (a great British singer). If I went to see a movie, I'd come out singing the incidental music.

My father would work nights in the hospital and then come home, go to bed and sleep in the daytime. Once, he was woken up by my singing, and shouted to my mum: 'Will you turn that radio off? I'm trying to get some sleep!'

'It's not the radio,' Mum answered. 'It's Pet.'

Pet, you see? Not Sally.

I sometimes wonder if my father would have liked to have a son, because he schooled me in some very masculine pursuits. He used to take me to boxing matches and explain the finer arts of that sport. He also gave me some boxing lessons in the back garden. Apparently, I had a very good left uppercut. Not that I've ever used it. Yet.

My dad also tried to teach me to ride a bike, which I found quite traumatic. Try as I might, I just couldn't get the hang of it. And my father's way of checking that I could swim, after he'd explained the basics of how to do it, was to chuck me off the pier at Bognor Regis. It was a question of sink or swim – literally!

I have such fond memories of family holidays in Cornwall. I can remember the immense beaches, long walks on cliff tops, beach picnics with sandy salmon sandwiches with lemonade and, now and then, the big treat: a cream tea. And always, over and above everything else: the sea.*

I gave my first ever live musical performance in 1939. We used to go to Kingston-on-Thames on the number 65 bus. In

* I formed a passion in my childhood for seas, rivers and streams which has never left me. I still love Cornwall today and I adore the Lake District: there is an atmosphere of poetry and peace there that I have simply never found anywhere else.

those days, Kingston had a huge department store called Bentalls, which I loved going to. It had an escalator hall by the entrance with a kind of raised platform at the top of the escalators.

One day, my dad took me to Bentalls and there was an orchestra up on the platform, playing to the customers. I'd never seen an orchestra before. I'd heard them on records, but I had no idea what they looked like. Now, here one was, right in front of me. It both looked and sounded wonderful.

'Would you like to sing with them?' my dad asked me.

'Yes!' I said. And, being the man he was, my dad went up to the conductor and told him: 'My daughter would like to sing a song with you.' For whatever reason, the man smiled and agreed. And, aged six, I climbed up on the platform and sang with an orchestra for the first time.

I wish I could remember what I sang but that is lost in the mists of time. But what I *can* recall is how much I loved doing it. The managers at Bentalls must have been suitably impressed with me, because they gave me a tin of toffees as a reward. I guess that made it my first paid gig.

Around the same time as this impromptu live musical debut, my father took me to see a play. It was *Mary Tudor*, starring a brilliant actress (or actor, as we say nowadays), Flora Robson. Simply being in a theatre was wonderful for me. Just being with so many other people, all staring at the stage, felt new and thrilling.

I was so young that I could only half-follow the story, and what was going on, but I was transfixed by Flora Robson. She wasn't a beautiful woman but she was a great actress. She had such presence and such power over the audience. She gave them her amazing talent. I never met her but I will never forget her.

I was mesmerised by the whole experience. I remember that, afterwards, I was on the top of a bus with my father, going home, and he asked what I was thinking about. ‘That’s what I want to do when I grow up,’ I told him. ‘I want to do what *she* does.’

What I am about to say now may sound strange, but because I got well known so young, *I hardly remember any of my life before I got famous*. I do remember that I was hopeless at school. I liked English, and history, where I could use my imagination. But maths, or anything to do with numbers? I didn’t have a clue. Still don’t.

At Moor Lane School in Hook, I was in the choir. The songs were all too high for me, as I have what’s called a mezzo-soprano voice.* I couldn’t sing that high, so I started singing harmony. I thought it sounded pretty good, but it didn’t go down well with the teacher: she rapped me on the knuckles and kicked me out of the choir. So that was that.

My early school years were shaped by my shyness. I had a couple of friends who, like me, were very quiet. In a way, I’d have loved to have been one of the girls running around playing netball and doing all that stuff. But it just never happened. Yet on the whole I was a happy child, and I’ve no doubt when I was happiest. And that was every time we went to visit my mum’s parents in Wales.

* * *

Mum had grown up in a tiny Glamorgan mining village called Abercanaid. It stood right on the River Taff. On the other side of the river was a neighbouring village, Pentrebach. They were

* Not that I knew anything about that then!

two halves of the same place, really. Pentrebach had a train station that served both of the villages.

I adored Wales. I loved how everything there was different. I loved the accents and the Welsh language, even though I couldn't understand it at first. I loved the mountains and the coal tips. I even loved how Abercanaid *smelled*, due to the coal dust. It all felt unusual and exciting.

We didn't have a car in those days, so we would go to Wales by train. Even getting on those old steam trains was wonderful. We'd leave from Paddington, change at Cardiff, then get the local train through the valley to Pentrebach. And arriving there was always a thrill.

We'd cross the Taff and walk to my grandparents' house. It was in a row of about twenty in something called a *cwm*, which was a tiny, narrow street, if you can call it that. You'd never get a car down there. Not that anyone in Abercanaid had one, anyway.

Along the *cwm* stood five or six taps. This was because there was no running water in the houses. Nor electricity. We'd walk to our grandparents' old stone cottage and up its whitewashed front steps. And once we got in, to my eager eyes, everything about that house, and life inside it, was extraordinary.

My grandfather, William Phillips, was a coal miner. He was a good-looking man who would come back from the pit with his face black with coal dust, which made his blue eyes look even more sparkling. He was very funny, always telling jokes, and he used to sing, beautifully. I adored him.

My grandmother, Jane, cooked meals on a coal-burning stove. She was a small, plump, rather bossy lady who was always bustling around cleaning the steps, or polishing the brass and black lead around the fireplace. She spoke Welsh and hardly

said a word in English. Although I think she understood it, she preferred not to speak it.

When my grandfather got in from work, my grandmother would go to the *cwm* to fetch water from a tap. She'd heat it on the stove, pour it into a tin bath in front of the fire and he'd climb in and have a bath. Later that evening, Babs and I would share a bath before we went to bed.

The toilet was in a shed at the end of a long garden. You had to be brave to go there at night (if we couldn't face it, we had a potty under the bed). But, to me, that garden was magic. The earth was black, and strawberries, raspberries, blackcurrants, gooseberries and beautiful flowers all grew amazingly well. It was nothing like our London garden.

We used to visit Wales in our school holidays and I would count the days until it was time to go. And then, suddenly, we were going there a lot more. Because Britain was at war.

* * *

I vaguely remember World War II starting. Well, that's not quite right. I was only six and I didn't know what a *war* was. We kids all wondered: *we're at war? What does that mean?* We knew there was a baddy called Hitler, but that was about it. We only saw what 'war' meant when the bombs began falling.

In Hook, we were on the flight path for the German planes coming in to bomb London.* Soon, we'd hear the Luftwaffe engines overhead every night. They had a very different sound

* Hook is close to Chessington Zoo. Recently, I drove past it, for the first time in years. I remembered how, during air raids, we used to hear the terrified animals roaring and howling in the night.

from our British planes. The Messerschmitts, Heinkels and Junkers had a very distinctive low throb.

They weren't actually dropping bombs on our suburban bit of London but the RAF Hurricanes and Spitfires were trying to shoot them down. We saw dogfights going on up in the sky. And it might sound awful to say, but Babs and I thought it was an amazing spectacle.

We had an RAF station near us and they'd send up barrage balloons to defend ground targets. We lived close to a railway line and we'd see a huge gun rattling down the track at night, firing at the enemy planes. For us, and a lot of other children, it was all a thrilling contrast to our humdrum everyday lives: *Well, this is different!*

I won't say we *enjoyed* the war. That feels wrong. But we were too young to understand the human tragedy of it all. It just felt exciting to us: a wild time. We weren't scared. I don't really know why, except that children just go along with things.

We had an air-raid shelter in our garden, like most families, but we didn't like it. It was made of corrugated iron, smelled horrible and was full of sandbags, worms and spiders. So, my father dug a proper Army-style trench just outside our kitchen door, and we'd leap into that instead.

Later in the war, the Luftwaffe began dropping V-1 flying bombs: doodlebugs. We'd hear a throbbing noise. When it stopped, we had to run for cover. Babs and I played 'chicken', waiting for the buzzing to stop before we ran and dived into the trench. Then, the next morning, we'd be out looking for shrapnel. All the kids did that.

In school, we kids spent as much time in the air-raid shelter as the classrooms. There were a lot of us, and a lot of air

raids, so it made sense to have lessons in there rather than running back and forth. But the oil lamps didn't give out much light, and we could hardly hear the teachers. So, to keep things going, they would skip the lessons and get us to sing, or tell stories. All the kids would have a go, but usually I'd volunteer to go first.

Because I'm basically very shy, singing helps me to express myself. Why is this? In fact, the need to sing is very deep inside of me. It always has been, and it's when I'm singing that I've always felt the most free.

My father joined the Army during the war. He signed up for the armoured corps and rose through the ranks to Lance Corporal. It meant he'd go away to Farnborough for days at a time. But he was often given compassionate leave to come home, as our mother was still so ill.

* * *

By 1941, the Blitz had begun. The German air raids grew even more frequent and intense, and my mother and father packed Babs and me off to Abercanaid, where it was safer, to stay with our grandparents. And, OK, there was a war going on, but I had the time of my little life.

I started going to school in Abercanaid. It was difficult at first because the lessons were in Welsh and I didn't speak a word. But I picked it up quite easily. Kids are so good at learning and assimilating quickly. After a few weeks there, I was speaking fluent Welsh.

At first, the other kids were a bit: *who's this, then?* I was a curio to them because I was new, and I was English. But on the whole, they were pretty welcoming. And I enjoyed

it because it seemed a lot more relaxed and laid-back than my school in Hook and, of course, there was lots of music and singing.

I'd often go off to the mountains on my own. Even though I was still very young, kids were allowed to do such things in those days. I'd spend my day clearing the stones from a little mountain stream so the water could run more swiftly. It made me feel as if I was doing a good deed. I'd sing and tell myself stories as I did it.

After a day in the mountains, I'd go back to my grandparents' house with my hair all over the place, and my face almost as black as my grandfather's when he came home from the pit. I think I've always had a tomboy side* and Wales allowed it to manifest itself. I was very, very happy indeed.

It rained a lot in Wales and there was nothing to do when we stayed home. Babs and I used to sit in front of the window and go through a box of buttons that my grandmother kept on the windowsill. Some of them were such beautiful shapes and colours.

My grandmother was very religious (my grandfather wasn't) so we weren't allowed to do anything much on Sundays. Instead, we went to chapel in Abercanaid two or three times. At least we could sing there. Sometimes, I even sang solo.

I enjoyed chapel. The service was in Welsh, and could be hard to follow, but I loved the *sound* of it, and all those glorious voices raised in song. It was all about the music. And, in any case, it wasn't like there was anything else for us to do. Going to chapel was our Sunday entertainment.

* You know what? I still do!

Sometimes, my grandfather would take me down the local pub, the Colliers Arms. The locals would stand me on the table and I'd sing for them. There was also a sweet old man at the bottom of the *cwm* who'd give me a ha'penny if I sang him a couple of songs. Which I was more than happy to do.

A big thrill was getting on the bus to go to the nearest town, Merthyr Tydfil. It was such a rickety old bus that I'm surprised it ever got anywhere. Merthyr was great on market days. My grandmother would bustle around buying coloured wools and all sorts of stuff. I can still picture her buying peanuts. At home, she kept them in her apron pockets so that us kids could get to them.

Even more exciting for Babs and me was going to a small town called Pontlottyn, where our cousins Shirley and Clive lived with our aunty Emma and uncle Bert. More than eighty years on, I can still picture the journey. We'd get the Merthyr bus to a place called Dowlais, which was really just a windy hill-top, and change for Pontlottyn.

Aunty Emma was my mother's other younger sister (besides the late Olwen). She was dark-haired, curvaceous and very pretty. She was a midwife, which meant she had a car: very rare in those days. Aunty Emma was always dashing off up into the mountains delivering babies. I thought she was terrific.

Her husband, Uncle Bert, was a quiet man who ran a grocer's shop in Pontlottyn. It was a proper old grocer's, lit by gaslight, where you cut the cheese with a wire, and the sugar and flour were kept in sacks and served in paper bags. I adored being in that shop, especially when Uncle Bert let me help him serve the customers.

My cousin Clive was the same age as me. He had been a twin, but his twin sister had died very young. I think that I kind

of replaced her for him. I loved Clive, and we had all sorts of ridiculous, often dangerous, adventures together.

When he came to Abercanaid, we'd slide down the coal tips around my grandparents' house on tin trays. We'd slide, as fast as we could, straight into the River Taff, and try to skim all the way across to the other side. I think Clive even made it once. Or maybe that's my memory playing tricks on me.

In Pontlottyn, our big thing was trying to get into the local cinema. It was really grotty, a proper fleapit: the sound was terrible and the projector was always breaking down. If you've ever seen *Cinema Paradiso*, the State Cinema in Pontlottyn was exactly that. We were too young to get in, but we were determined to do it.

We'd try all sorts of schemes. We'd dress up in our parents' clothes: Clive, aged nine, in Uncle Bert's trilby, and me with my mum's lipstick. Other times, we'd climb in through the toilet window. We hardly ever made it and, if we did, we got kicked straight out again. We didn't care. It was the whole adventure of getting in that mattered.*

Aunty Emma and Uncle Bert lived in a flat over the grocer's shop. It was bigger than my grandparents' house, so I quite often went to stay with them for a few days at a time. I used to sleep in Clive's bed with him. In fact, Clive's was the first willy that I ever saw.

When you're eight or nine, that kind of thing is quite interesting, so I mentioned it to his mum and dad. My parents were also

* Sadly, Clive died recently, but before he did, we met up for dinner and a laugh about our old adventures. I said, 'We got up to so many things because you were a naughty boy.' 'What?' Clive laughed. 'You were the one that got me to do all that stuff?' That surprised me. Maybe I was more of a daredevil than I remember?

there and were horrified. Needless to say, I was never allowed to sleep in with Clive again. I wondered: *what's the problem?* It didn't traumatised me and, well, it was always going to happen one day ...

There were a few other shops on the same street as the grocer's. There was a chemist up on the corner, owned by a family with the good local name of Evans. Auntie Emma and Uncle Bert were friends with the family who ran it and we'd sometimes pop round to see them.

I'll never forget walking into the flat over the chemist one night. The mother was making ointment in front of a crackling coal fire like a scene from *Macbeth*, smoking a cigarette as she stirred the mixture. The ash from her fag was dropping into the ointment. *Hmm, maybe that's a magic ingredient!* I thought. I'm sure it was on sale in the shop the next day.

Wales always seemed full of funny, offbeat people like that. Going there was an adventure, but it also touched something deep in me from the very first time. It still does. There's a certain Welshness that has stayed with me, and in me, all of my life. And I'm grateful for it.

* * *

My first experience of singing to a real audience came about in a very haphazard way. I suppose you could call it my big break into show business but it wasn't planned in any way, shape or form. It just sort of happened.

During the war, the BBC's Overseas Forces Service used to record a programme called *It's All Yours* at the Criterion Theatre in Piccadilly Circus. This was a show where children could send messages to family members who were away serving with the Armed Forces in far-flung corners of the globe.

The Criterion Theatre had been requisitioned by the BBC because of one crucial factor. It was situated underground. This meant that even though it was right in the centre of London, and the Blitz was still hammering the city, it was a safe place for them to record and broadcast programmes.

Now, let me confess: I'm terrible with dates. It may be something to do with how I was so bad at maths at school: I can't deal with anything to do with numbers. But I know the date that I went along to that fateful recording of *It's All Yours*. It was 17 October 1942, and I was nine years old.

It was my father's idea for us to go. I was to send a message to a relative whom I used to call Uncle Dudley. He was in the Army. We hardly ever saw him, and I didn't really know him that well, but he was apparently stationed in Iraq, having fought in the Anglo-Iraqi War the previous year.

We arrived at the Criterion and went down the stairs to a lovely theatre that was full of sandbags.* Really, it was a glorified air-raid shelter. My dad looked handsome in his Army uniform. When we got in, they gave us kids name tags to pin on our chests, so that the announcers could read our names. We settled down and they began a rehearsal.

The producers were deciding among themselves which order we kids would read out our messages in, and there was a full orchestra onstage, warming up. And then, suddenly, from nowhere, Messerschmitts zoomed into the skies over London and there was a full-blown air raid.

* It's strange how the memory works: I went back to the Criterion more than seventy years later to see a play, and as soon as I walked in, I swear that I could still smell those sandbags.

The Luftwaffe were really going for it this time. The noise was terrible and it felt as if the building above us was shaking. I didn't think too much of it. I was quite blasé, because I was a London kid who'd watched dogfights over Hook. But a lot of the other children were up from the country. They'd never been in an air raid before and they were terrified.

With the noise of the bombs, and lots of children crying in the audience, there was no way to continue the rehearsal. So the *It's All Yours* producer, a lovely man called Stephen Williams, asked if anyone would like to go onstage to sing a song to calm everyone down.

Nobody else was volunteering, so I put my hand up. 'I'll sing a song,' I said. I walked down and got up on the stage. The big BBC microphone was way too high for me, so they put a box in front of it so that I could clamber up to reach it.

I began to sing 'Mighty Lak' a Rose', a sweet little song that was popular at the time. I think I'd heard Paul Robeson singing it on the Home Service. And as I was singing, a truly great thing happened. The orchestra started playing behind me, just like in the movies. I can't tell you how wonderful it sounded, and felt.

I guess I must have sung the song quite well, because the show's producers up in the control room liked it. They asked my father and me if I'd sing it again for broadcast on the actual show, as well as sending my message to Uncle Dudley. My father was very keen, and I thought, *why not?*

This may sound odd, but I wasn't nervous. I never was, as a kid. It felt the same to me as singing at home, or in the chapel or the pub in Wales. *I just loved singing.* It never occurred to me that millions of people would be listening to that radio broadcast. Any nerves came much later in my career.

When that edition of *It's All Yours* was broadcast, there was a huge reaction both from the Forces and the BBC. One soldier sent in a letter that said: 'Petula's voice reminded us of chapel bells on a Sunday morning in England.' My father kept that letter. And the BBC asked if I would go back and sing on the show again.

And that was how it all began.