

Legendary 80s singer Elkie Brooks: I went from pop stardom to living on a bus

THE singer reveals why a huge unexpected tax bill means she has to keep on performing – but shows a refreshing refusal to feel sorry for herself

By: Peter Robertson

Published: Tue, February 18, 2014



Elkie Brooks went bankrupt after her accountant fiddled the books [PH]

Pop diva Elkie Brooks will be 69 next week and if anyone deserves to put their feet up and settle down to a leisurely retirement it's her.

After all she spent years belting out chart-topping numbers such as Pearl's A Singer and Lilac Wine and worked with some of the biggest names in the business, including legendary songwriting duo Lieber and Stoller, who wrote a string of hits for Elvis Presley.

In 1981 her album Pearls became the biggest selling by a British female artist in the UK and she became known as the British Queen Of The Blues. But as she blows out the candles on her birthday cake a week today, Elkie knows that over the next 12 months she faces a year of hectic touring and recording in order to secure her prosperity in old age following a devastating series of setbacks.

The turning point in her fortunes came in 1998 when her long-term accountant dropped a bombshell.

Elkie recalls: "He sheepishly said, 'We've got a problem. A £250,000 tax problem. I've got to put my hand up. It's all my fault. I've not been doing your tax returns properly for quite some time.' With that we told him we never wanted to see him again. It turned out all he had been doing was paying the nonpayment fines rather than the actual amounts owed."

This revelation triggered a chain of events that led to Elkie and her family being forced to move out of Trees, their five-bedroom detached house with a bungalow, studio and pool in Devon's exclusive Woody Bay, to what was her tour bus.

For the mishandling of her tax returns was not the only problem confronting Elkie, her sound engineer husband Trevor Jordan and sons Jay, 34, and Joey, 28.

The baker's daughter from Salford, who has sung professionally since she was 15, made her name on the cabaret circuit supporting such bands as The Beatles and The Animals before fronting rock group Vinegar Joe, featuring Robert Palmer and her first husband Pete Gage. But she had left the business side of her career to others since turning solo in 1974.

"I tended to trust my manager at the time implicitly. He signed me to A&M records for perpetuity and I didn't know what that word meant.

Eventually years later I looked it up and realised, 'Oh hell, they've got all my stuff for ever!'"

By mid-1999 the situation had become so dire that we were struggling to feed ourselves
Elkie Brooks

ER next label released two of her albums – from which she also hasn't seen any royalties. She has since signed to other record companies but says: "My advice to artists starting out would be, 'Read your contract and get advice on it... ask more questions and be more aware.' I should have done that but us musicians tend not to. With music it's easy to bury your head in the sand."

With the taxman demanding back-payments and income minimal due to the royalties denied by badly negotiated contracts Elkie and her husband had their bank accounts and assets frozen.

"Instead of being in a good financial position after a hard tour we found ourselves in a truly desperate state. We had a massive tax bill and loan, which was rapidly spiralling out of control because the bank slapped the highest interest rate on it. It accumulated to something absolutely horrendous.

"We had no way of making the money we needed to settle our debts because we couldn't afford to pay the band to do another tour. Then there was the mortgage. After a few months the building society threatened us with repossession if we didn't meet our repayments. By mid-1999 the situation had become so dire that we were struggling to feed ourselves.

Somehow I managed to stay strong through it all but Trevor was devastated emotionally. I was really worried about him. I thought he was close to having some kind of breakdown or even a heart attack. We all had one or two drinks too many some nights but he controlled it and we got through it together."

The family's fightback began when Jay and his wife Joanna took over Elkie's management and Trevor went in search of her lost royalties. "A lot of the time we've drawn a blank and it's cost too much money to go any further," she admits. "But I now own half of my catalogue, which is great, and I'm hoping I'm going to be able to rerelease a lot of albums from the past on our own label."

In 2002 they cleared most of their debts by selling Trees. Following two years in the tour bus – one bedroom, with a trailer for their younger son – they moved out and for the past year they've been in a two-bedroom rented apartment overlooking the sea. "But there's no stigma about that," says Elkie. "The fact that you can pay your rent is great, isn't it?"

"Three years ago we managed to buy seven acres quite close by that Trevor put a fruit farm on. It would be lovely if we're eventually permitted to have some kind of semi-permanent dwelling but I think that's probably very far in the future, if ever. In north Devon you have to do things very slowly. We've got a great accountant now and everything is running fairly OK."

Elkie is set to perform 27 concerts this year – three of which are already sold out – and she's working on the fourth album for her label Eventful.

"I've always maintained that whenever you've got trauma in your life you keep busy," she says. "It's the people who lay down to die who are going to die. You've just got to keep going. I survive. I've got too much to do.

"I tend to move on and not dwell on the past. If I did dwell I wouldn't be writing songs, doing the dates I'm doing, making a new album. You just get on with life."

ELKIE and Trevor have no plans to sue their former accountant, or the people who may owe them royalties. "Going down that road costs a fortune and in the end you might not win anyway so what the hell. On to the next one!" she declares.

"Yes I've been wrongly done by but so have plenty of other people in the music business. You either go and slit your wrists or you carry on. There's no point in negativity. I'm very positive in my outlook. I don't feel that the world owes me anything. I get on the road, do a few more gigs and there you go.

"Hopefully we'll get a lot of the royalties back but if we don't we don't. Thank God I'm singing great. I'm reasonably fit and I look reasonably well for my age considering I've had nothing done other than a nose job because I had an accident at 21. I've got a healthy lifestyle and a great family that are health and well. That's all that matters."

Elkie Brooks's autobiography Finding My Voice is published by Biteback. For her concert dates visit www.elkiebrooks.net

Elkie on stage with Robert Palmer at 1972's Reading Festival [GETTY]

