

Secret Love-The Amazing Kathy Kirby Story

By Graham Smith

When I first discovered what had happened to Kathy Kirby, the blonde bombshell pop star of over 40 years ago, I little imagined that I would become part of the ongoing enigma and controversy surrounding her.

After discovering a forgotten manuscript, written ten years previously, about the troubled star's glittering and scandal-filled life which turned to instant obscurity overnight, I knew there was a very emotional story to tell. I have learned that over 25 years after she last performed in a Blackpool bar, Kathy, who turned 71 last year, has continued her diva like existence even in the hidden corner of London where she lives as a virtual recluse.

It is a story which you could not make up. It has led to a stage show, "Secret Love-The Amazing Kathy Kirby Story" and a much more definitive biography than the one from the original manuscript will be published later in the year.

By undertaking the show and the book I have put myself in for extreme reaction from certain of the small band of people who have supported Kathy during her 27 years of obscurity. The threat of adverse reaction began quite early on in the project, before I had even published her story under the title of "Secrets, Loves and Lip Gloss". I received a letter purporting to be from her "legal advisors" which transpired to be from an obsessive control freak of a fan who thought he had exclusive rights to the Kirby story. This was despite the fact that another of her group, christened tongue in cheek as the Kirby Mafia, had asked me to build a web site for her, at her request. A web site, www.kathykirby.co.uk, which continues to draw an amazing amount of visitors from world-wide, largely due to the enigma and mystique which have been spun around a star who is now typical of the Nora Desmond character in Lloyd-Weber's *Sunset Boulevard*, and even looks like her.

During the publishing process for her biography I began to learn perhaps why the woman, who was once Britain's highest paid female singer, had stepped completely out of the spotlight while still only in her early forties. Opera trained and possessing a voice with an unequalled range and strength, she became most famous for her version of *Secret Love* in 1963 but her catalogue of work was so varied that she continues to hold a timeless appeal, particularly to the over 55s. She has a great gay following, partly due to her greatest hit's title.

Her career was shaped by the former big bandleader Bert Ambrose, who became her manager, mentor and lover, despite being 42 years her senior. He was one of the first to spot that Kathy had a problem with what were metaphorically termed "demons". After a performance she would sit for hours in a dressing room muttering what Ambrose himself said was "utter rubbish". What he did not know was that the star had been diagnosed as suffering from an acute form of schizophrenia, and as the years went by this, and an extravagant, controversy filled lifestyle, was to take its toll.

He would control her every waking moment until his death in Leeds in 1971. From then she lurched from disaster to comeback in regular doses, bankruptcy followed, and when I discovered the story she was living on housing benefits in a Kensington flat. She still is, cared for primarily by one friend who must remain anonymous. The author of the biography, James Harman, her last manager, had walked away from her bizarre behaviour only to return in 1995 when a play had been written called, "Whatever happened to Kathy Kirby?" - A very reasonable title in the circumstances but the content bore no resemblance to her life, it was based on a drag artist singing her songs.

Still the diva, Kirby didn't like it and the title was eventually changed after a meeting with the playwright.

Harman's story was a success and after visiting The Sunday Express offices in London I secured a major payment for serialisation and the first interview proper from Kathy in almost 30 years. She and Harman were supposed to have equal shares of the payment, although whether she ever got it is open to conjecture, and it was at this time that the bizarre behaviour began to come from more than one quarter!

Much work was done on the script for the proposed stage show and when Harman's version was rejected he began an amazing campaign to try and have the show taken off, which included ringing a national newspaper claiming that Kirby wanted the show to be boycotted and that she had never heard of me. It continues to this day.

During her career Kathy was controlled totally by her manager and mentor, Bert Ambrose, until his death in 1971. Here I was in 2008 and it seemed that still factions existed which wanted to control the enigma which has become the Kirby legend.

Regardless, the show was put together and Kathy was played by 25-year-old Suzi Jari who has many visual and vocal qualities which the star possessed. That one so young could be captured by the music and the lifestyle of Kirby shows that the story crosses the age divide. Indeed Kathy Kirby was emulating Amy Winehouse and Britney Spears before either of them were born!

We have made the show a combination of a tribute to Kirby's music and a telling of the most amazing life story. If I had included every twist and turn of events since discovering that forgotten manuscript we would have two shows. I find it incredible the amount of public interest there is for someone who has barely been seen for over a quarter of a century, but perhaps that is all down to the enigma of not knowing, wondering.

Kathy Kirby the star may have faded but the music and the diva live on.

More recently there have been further bizarre events involving members of Kathy's family from whom she was estranged for many years. A former close friend of Kathy's got back in touch with her and had been visiting her for about two years. Following a particularly happy New Year's party in 2009, in Kathy's flat at her own invitation, that friend found herself the subject of a harassment warning from the police. The same lady received a telephone call during that evening from Kathy's sister thanking her for being there with the reclusive star.

Kathy's family had not been in close or regular touch for many years and the star's welfare, supposedly, had been taken care of by two men, James Harman, the book author, and John Pugh. Understandably the woman friend was bemused and not a little upset, but the warning still stands. All attempts by her to discuss it with the family have come to nought, I wonder why?

Kathy's affairs are now overseen by her niece, Sarah Jane Thatcher, wife of Mark Thatcher, son of our former Prime Minister, Lady Thatcher. Perhaps due to previous colourful events in his life, he, and Lady Sarah, are rather elusive to contact, or are

they too grand to associate with the ordinary people who have shown genuine concern and care for Kathy in her later years? Time may tell.

Many other things are going on behind the scenes which those in the higher social strata, or indeed public authorities, seem reluctant to discuss. Is it all to Kathy's good? We hope so.

From a modest Essex upbringing to the stage of the world's finest establishments, to obscurity in a modest flat, Kathy Kirby has always courted controversy and still does. I wonder why the woman who became a legend by singing "Secret Love" over 40 years ago has such a secret life now?

The show will return, a definitive biography is in preparation, but, sadly, in the meantime, Kathy's band of friends seems sadly to be diminishing. I wonder if that is entirely of her own choosing.