



## THE MASONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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### **Bro. LEONARD LONDON - Radio personality.**

The golden age of radio or as I prefer to call it the wonderful world of wireless was probably at its best in the 1940s to the 1960s. Remember such stars as Jack Davey, Bob Dyer, Dick Fair, Harry Dearth, Howard Craven among many others. This paper recalls certainly one of the most memorable of those radio personalities, Len London.

Len London was born of British parents, his mother coming from Cardiff and his father from Devonport. Charles London tried his hand at an apple orchard in Tasmania following World War 1 but this was not successful so in 1921 he and Lovina met again and married in Melbourne. They journeyed to Sydney where Charles tried many jobs before joining Mauri Bros. and Thompson. They settled in Lakemba where Len London was born on 31st July 1922. Len London was to have two sisters and one brother. This was to be the family home for the next thirty years and the London family were stalwarts of the local Methodist Church.

Len was educated at Belmore South Primary School and later at Canterbury Boys' High School. Len London learnt to play the piano at an early age and also had an excellent bass voice commencing singing lessons when he was 17 years of age. This voice was always his trademark as a radio personality. During the late 1930s 2GB ran programmes called Radio Youth Club and Radio Reporters, children's programmes compered by Charles Cousens. Len had an article published in the Wireless Weekly in 1938 and his voice was first heard on radio in a programme called Radio K. I. D. when he won first prize of two shillings and sixpence and an invitation to come back again. He returned many times to comper the children's show, with the producer saying he was a natural with an amazing voice for a fifteen year old.

Len and his future wife, Vivienne Jarbo, met very briefly for the first time when her sister appeared with Len in a play on the Radio Reporter's Show. They only met once more before World War 2 and that was at the Independent Theatre in North Sydney. Vivienne's father was employed at Johnnie Walker after World War 1. Her mother died when she was seven years of age and following the death of her grandmother two years later the three girls managed the house themselves.

In 1939 Len London left school and commenced work as a despatch clerk with J. Walter Thompson, the large advertising firm. In 1938 he had previously been heard on Radio for the same firm in a programme for one of their clients, Wrigley's Chewing Gum, who was sponsoring on radio a ventriloquist, Mal Verco and Ginger. He was also acting in productions by the Young People's Theatre and the Sydney Players' Club and appeared in many productions. He was soon promoted from despatch clerk to a radio assistant in the Radio Production Department and assisted with such shows as the Lux Radio Theatre, serials and variety programmes.

Len commenced an advertising course but this was suspended when he joined the AIF and was sent to Bathurst for training before being promoted to Lieutenant. He then did an Officer's Training Course in Western Australia in 1942, came home on leave to attend the wedding of Vivienne's sister. It was here that he and Vivienne met again, he was twenty she was eighteen. Len then returned to the West.

He returned once more to Sydney and was stationed at Walgrove Camp before being sent to New Guinea in 1943. His company served at Madang, Wewak and Finchhafen and at the end of the war in 1945 Len was sent to Rabaul for another year. During this time he became involved in concert party work and did some announcing on Amenities Radio Stations.

Len returned home in June 1946 and rejoined J. Walter Thompson in the Radio Production Department and was heard as The Voice of the Chef on 2UE. He also became involved in the Kraft Dorothy Foster Show, Lux Radio Theatre as the sound man and Australia's Amateur Hour. Len and Vivienne were married on 30th November 1946. Len became producer of many of the radio serials presented by J. Walter Thompson such as Martin's Corner and the Dad and Dave Show. Among Australian actors of the day were names like John Ewart, Muriel Steinbeck, Gwen Plumb, Leonard Teale and Ethel Lang just to mention a few. remember When a Girl Marries, Dr. Mac, Portia Faces Life, Yes What, Mrs. 'obbs and so the list goes on. Perhaps the greatest stars of the 1950s were Bob Dyer and Jack Davey. Len London says he learnt a lot from Jack Davey.

In 1951 Len London left J. W. T's Australia's Amateur Hour to go to 2UW to work with Dick Fair on a show called The Amateur Hour. After one year Dick Fair returned to 2UE with his Amateur Hour and Len returned to 2UE as producer. Len was to stay with 2UE for the next twenty-two years. During the 1950s amateur hours gradually faded out and Len and Dick Fair produced a new show called Australia's Hour of Song which proved to be one of Australia's favourite shows and was also probably the last of the musical presentations on radio as the television era was coming. Australian stars such as Gladys Moncrieff, Johnny O'Connor, Buster Noble, Peter Dawson, Peggy Mortimer and many others appeared on this show. Overseas artists from Great Britain and the USA also starred. Frank Scott was the regular pianist and each show opened with community singing with slides showing the words and Len London leading the audience. The stars of the show would then be introduced and a particular favourite was Gracie Fields. Australia's Hour of Song toured extensively throughout Australia playing in all the capital cities and being particularly popular in Melbourne. During his early days at 2UE Len London appeared at the Tivoli Theatre in Sydney doing three shows and appearing with Arthur Askey, Tommy Trinder, duo pianists Ivor Morton and Dave Kaye and Australian artists Babs McKinnon and George Nicholls among others. The early 1950s were indeed busy, working full time on Australia's Hour of Song, singing 6 nights a week at the Tivoli and assisting Harry Dearth with the Lux Radio Theatre on Sunday nights.

Len London was next asked by 2UE to comper a new programme being started, the National Old Time Dance. This was first played at the Rivoli Hall Parramatta with Len compering. It was broadcast throughout Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. The show changed venues a few times moving to the Albert Palais in Leichhardt and also to Auburn and was compered by Len London for nineteen years. It featured strictly old time dances such as Jazz Waltzes, Barn Dances and Canadian Three Step and more. Jack Papworth's Band was

featured and many Australian artists sang with the band. During this period Len and his wife, Vivienne, appeared in stage shows at the Mercury and Phillip Theatres in Sydney.

The RSL asked Len to be the official broadcaster of the Anzac Day March which was broadcast from Gowling's awning in George Street.. The Mobil Quest was another show compered by Len London.

As the 1950s drew to a close dance programmes on radio were fading with the introduction of television. Len then presented a popular music programme called SOUND on 2UE, this held top ratings, for a long period on the 8.00p.m. to midnight time. The call sign was "This is London Calling, Len That is." This is the title of a book written by his wife, Vivienne. Another programme written, produced and presented by Len London was The Calypso Hour featuring of course Calypso music.

When music shows closed and producers were no longer required Len was asked by 2UE to be their news reader which role he filled for some time very successfully while continuing with the National Old Time Dance. So came the 1960s with Rock and Roll but the Old Time Dance continued. At this time Len was news reader, writer and covered special events and even sang on the Gary O'Callaghan morning programme, remember Sammy Sparrow.

Then came television and radio seemed to be doomed until the wide spread use of car radios and talk back radio gave it a big boost. Apart from news programmes Len was not heard on the air in the early 1970s as often as he would have liked as radio shows and serials were losing popularity. In 1973 Len London described the opening of the Sydney Opera House from the top of a block of home units in Kirribilli.

At the end of 1973 Len was approached by 2CH to be their featured early morning news reader and presenter of special events so on 17th February 1974, after 22 years, Len left 2UE and commenced on 2CH to present Good Music and News and this became No. 1 in the ratings in 1979 and was known as "The Gentle Alternative." In the 1970s the Good Music programme was presented on stage and toured Melbourne and Adelaide. He was also compering Xmas Carols in Hyde Park as well as the Rocks Celebration, which ran from 10.00a.m. to 6.00p.m. with Len on stage all day. Len also conducted for many years the Christmas Carols at Taronga Zoo. The Blessing of the Fleet and Carnivale from Mrs. Macquarie's Chair were other assignments. Len London also gave very freely of his time to assist charities including the Spastic Society, Sunshine Homes and the Blind Society among many more.

In 1975 Len was presented with a certificate by the RSL in appreciation for services rendered as he had been broadcasting the Anzac day marches for ten years. His voice can still be heard in some RSL Clubs reciting the ode.

During the 1980s Len and 2CH continued the news and Good Music format and Len played some parts in TV shows and films. When he turned 65 on 31st July 1987 Len was assured by 2CH that he would not have to retire however one month later he was told differently as the station was about to change programme format. As this change was being implemented Len left 2CH and the result of the changes was a disaster for staff and ratings at the station.

Another change came then for Len and Vivienne. He was approached at the end of 1987 by 2CH to lead a tour to Russia which was to be promoted on the radio station. This was successful and then between 1987 and 1992 he and Vivienne led one overseas tour each year.

He was diagnosed with cancer in 1991 and despite this he continued with the travel work and gave a presentation in 1991 in the Powerhouse Museum of the good old days of radio. In 1992 he compered the Annual Australia Day Concert for Kuringai Council in West Pymble.

Len London died on 12th November 1992.

Leonard London was initiated in Lodge Lakemba, No. 396, U.G.L. of N.S.W. on 21st June 1945, probably whilst on leave from New Guinea, passed on 3rd October 1946 and raised on 10th January 1947. He called off on 16th September 1954. His father, Charles Leonard London, was also a member of Lodge Lakemba from 17th December 1942 to 21st July 1960. In a further Masonic connection Len's sister, Lorna, married Cec Barlow, an active Freemason and a member of Lodge Lakemba, now Lodge Excalibur since 1946.

Ref: I am indebted to Vivienne London for the kind gift of her book "This is LONDON CALLING...Len that is." and for her assistance and advice in improving this presentation."

Records of the U.G.L. of N.S.W. & A.C.T.

