

Tributes pour in for iconic blues singer

By Bernard Silk

Legendary bluesman Victor Brox made one final bill-topping appearance - just before he died on February 20.

Ashton-born Victor, 81, played the Great British Rock and Blues Festival at Skegness in January 'to a spellbound audience' it was reported.

He shared the stage with his Mossley-based daughter Kyla - herself an internationally acclaimed blues and soul singer.

This family performance completed a 70 year career for Victor, involving thousands of gigs around the world, during which he played and recorded with everyone from Jimi Hendrix to Screaming Lord Sutch.

It seems that both Hendrix and Tina Turner named him as their favourite blues singer,

though Victor had musical encounters with artists as diverse as Pink Floyd and Stevie Wonder, while recording with luminaries including Dr John, Eric Clapton and Mick Jagger.

He'd been in his element accompanying great blues stars like Big Bill Broonzy, Muddy Waters and John Lee Hooker.

It all began in the 1950s at St Mary's School in Droylsden where Victor formed his first band, Blues Train.

He'd been fascinated by the rhythm and blues stars of the day like Chuck Berry and Little Richard and rapidly started to practice the style.

He'd already learned violin and - though mainly using piano and organ to back his gravelly vocals - was soon playing alto and tenor saxes, trumpet, tuba, trombone and his speciality - pocket cornet, claiming: "I can knock out a blues on most instruments."

After university, he continued playing, though was also a school teacher for a while - including taking music classes at St Andrews Junior School in Hadfield, Glossop.

Victor and opera singer Annette Reis married in 1965 and the couple had five children - all musically inclined and talented. Daughter Ginie recalls: "I was in his class at school when I was ten and the kids loved him."

"He was a very inventive teacher and formed a 30-piece marching band which played blues songs like Midnight Special and very lively hymns.

"He got us on TV - Granada Reports - appealing for musical instruments and the band was inundated.

"I played alto saxophone and my sister Anna was on cornet. I still meet people who talk about it to this day.

"He never lost his love of teaching which continued throughout his musical career."

In fact, Kyla and brother Sam both have musical careers and sister Buffy is a singer/songwriter.

Eventually, the lure of the blues called Victor and Annette to London where they joined the band of Alexis Korner, Annette as a backing singer.

These were top jobs since Korner is regarded as the godfather of British Blues - and of the Rolling Stones.

It led Victor to a stint with the Aynsley Dunbar Retaliation, a big name group of the late 1960s which turned in a string of best selling LPs and took the band on a tour of the USA.

As well as playing most places on the planet - including the Australian outback - Victor later lived and performed in various parts of America, Africa and



LEGEND: Victor Brox was an acclaimed blues and soul singer.

Europe - notably France where he owned a home in the Dordogne and was popular in the region.

Back in Britain, he had sung the role of high priest Caiaphas on the original album of Jesus Christ Superstar, a musical now a perennial of the genre.

Victor returned to Manchester in 2005 and to a somewhat less hectic lifestyle.

Based in Droylsden, he was still playing many gigs each year - pubs and clubs across Tameside, Glossop and Oldham while occasionally undertaking further flung and overseas performances almost to the end of his life.

Guitar

Sometimes, when the mood took him, he'd grab a guitar, take a bus to Ashton and busk in the market square where residents will have seen him.

Victor's life story really would make a book and he was writing one - but unfortunately had only got as far as the early 1960s when he died.

Victor was eccentric, wise and witty, articulate and gifted in music, writing and art - and in conversation where he was a master teller of tales, some of them tall, but always entertaining.

Festival and live concerts organiser Chris Hewitt first saw the Victor Brox Blues Train on

stage around 45 years ago.

Later in life as a promoter he worked with Victor and said: "The Blues Train was one of the first inter-racial bands in Manchester.

"It featured Victor's wife Annette who is of Afro-Canadian, English and Nigerian heritage.

"Victor performed gigs for radical causes including CND and Rock Against Racism.

"He was a regular at the Deeply Vale rock festivals I promoted and at my annual summer gatherings. He will be sorely missed."

Musicologist Dave Lunt, a musician with Victor for some 50 years, said: "I already miss the almost daily phone calls to clarify points of information about jazz and blues, of which Victor had as much knowledge and love as any musician I have ever met.

"Vic covered the entire spectrum from pre-jazz to avant garde, truly a Renaissance man.

"He possessed seemingly boundless creative energy and knowledge of music and everything else.

"News of his death was devastating - he is irreplaceable."

Victor died on February 20 in Stepping Hill Hospital, Stockport. Annette and family members were at his bedside.

Funeral arrangements have yet to be announced.



ANGELA RAYNER

MP for Ashton and Droylsden



Getting people into work

This week I want to discuss Labour's plan to help more people get back into work.

Economic inactivity among over-50s has risen by 15 per cent in the North West and it's a similar story in every part of the country according to new analysis.

Since the pandemic, every part of the UK has seen a rise in the number of over-50s who are economically inactive including 55,000 more men over 50 in the North of England.

Labour's reform plans will localise employment support, open up Jobcentres, target help to the over-50s, provide specialist support for those with ill health and make sure that work pays.

Everyone deserves proper help and support to move into work, but we know too many aren't getting the help they need and the number of people out of work and not looking for work is up across our region.

Recent employment support schemes have underperformed and under spent and this government has failed to get more people into work which is contributing to low economic growth and falling living standards.

Worklessness is a massive waste of potential with a huge cost to society. The out of work benefit bill has risen to its highest level.

Right now, hundreds of thousands of people want to work but don't have the support they need. Getting more people back to work will grow the economy and boost both public finances and household incomes.

My constituents deserve a government that is committed to delivering an employment support system that meets the needs of all businesses and workers.

Labour has a plan for employment reform to get specialist help to those who need it and to get Britain back to work.

- Further reform of employment support, devolved to local areas, with a commitment to provide tailored support in every local area for harder to help groups.

- Reforms to the Work Capability Assessments (WCAs) regime for those on benefits - removing the need for reassessments for potentially thousands of people. Labour will allow claimants to agree with their benefits advisor that if they try paid work and it does not work out, within a period of a year they can go back to the exact benefits they were on, with no fresh health assessments required.

- A plan to fix the Access to Work scheme by improved targets for assessment waiting times and by giving people

who are looking for work 'in principle' indicative awards. This will mean people searching for work - and employers - know what support is available to help in the workplace

- Targeted help for over-50s: work across government, to offer all those who have previously worked but recently left the labour market 'back-to-work support and guidance.'

- Specialist help for those with long term ill-health: We will build on targeted programmes, including those that join up with the NHS, to provide better specialist support.

- Locally delivered services: Freedom for local partnerships to decide how best to design services, with a focus on providing tailored support that meets the needs of the local area. We will move away from rigid, national contracting and ensure resources to help people find work are closer to the communities we serve. Labour would allow self-referrals and GPs, housing associations and community groups to easily direct people to employment support.

- Fulfilling quality employment: We will reform Universal Credit to give people support to move into work, or into better jobs. Our reforms will help people into jobs paying decent wages with decent terms and conditions.