



Frank Ifield with autograph seekers, 1962

Rediscovering the music of Frank Ifield

By Paul Hazel

Back in the early 1960s, the name of Frank Ifield was synonymous with chart-topping hits and lavish concerts in major theatres around the world. Frank was the first artiste to achieve three consecutive number one hits in the UK pop charts; he won multiple awards and ranked as a singer alongside Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin.

Nowadays, many members of the younger generation may not know the Ifield name, or may recall that their parents were fans in the past. However, that limitation may not hold true for so very long. There seems to be something of a Frank Ifield resurgence going on and people of all generations are once again buying CDs and listening to those silver Ifield vocal pipes. In this feature, writer and broadcaster Paul Hazell reviews the Ifield musical career with particular reference to some recent UK CD releases.

It really depends when you first started listening to Frank Ifield's music as to what kind of music you most associate with him. For those who know him best from his many tours, concerts and TV shows in the early and mid-80s, he is a contemporary country artiste uniquely harnessing the writings of the songwriters of the day and delivering them with an informal but sophisticated presentation. Those who remember him most for his concerts and tours of the late 60s and early 70s will remember the

still strongly country-tinged approach richly intermingled with big band numbers and cabaret-style presentation.

Back in the early to mid-60s, Frank was known around the world primarily as a chart-topping pop star counting amongst his peers such esteemed names as Cliff Richard, Roy Orbison, Kathy Kirby, Brook Benton, the Everley Brothers and The Beatles. After early frustrations with only moderately successful singles from 1959 to the very early 60s, Frank hit it big with "I Remember You", "Lovesick Blues" and "The Wayward Wind". The latter two were country standards and whilst "Lovesick Blues" had to be recorded with a twist beat in order to be commercially viable, "Wayward Wind" managed to sound both country and commercial!

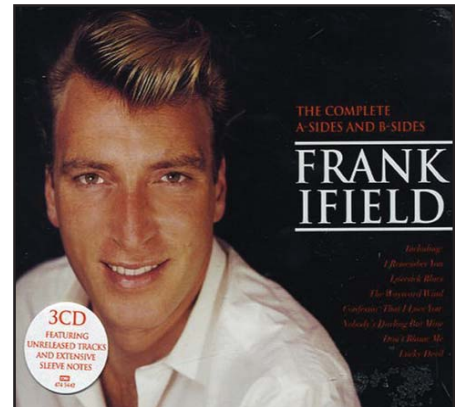
What many in that era did not realise was just how high was the country content of the Ifield repertoire. However, a glance today at the Ifield albums that rode the charts back then will reveal amongst other sources a rich content of country standards presented with a relaxed combination of country guitars, light strings and backing vocalists. Country purists in the 70s regarded Frank's tours of the country music venues as "jumping on the country bandwagon". He was criticised for singing country with strings - purists like to hear the steel guitar and the fiddle - yet listen to those recordings today and they are revealed to be far more country in feel than much of what emanates from Nashville.

Ironically, whilst Frank was breaking new

ground recording country songs with a commercial feel in London, the Nashville fraternity strove hard to bring him to their own studios so that they could reproduce the hugely successful Ifield sound there. And that is exactly what happened - having become the hottest thing since fried bread in the UK, Hickory records began releasing his material to great acclaim in the USA and eventually coaxed Frank into performing and recording in the US. There he worked with such luminaries as Don Gibson, Chet Atkins, Cowboy" Jack Clement, Jerry Reed, Floyd Cramer, Boots Randolph, and Mickey Newbury to name a few. Under the auspices of record producer Wesley Rose, Frank gained awards in the USA and went on to tour the world for the greater part of three decades.

Since those heady days, Frank has remained deeply involved with the music business - for many years continuing as a performer - but since the mid 80s as a manager, mentor and radio and TV presenter. The music of Frank Ifield gradually took a back seat in the record stores with only the occasional "Greatest Hits" type compilation appearing in the racks. Now however, a series of new releases has made available to new generations of listeners, a wide range of Frank's music.

One of the recent releases is the EMI Gold release "The Complete A and B Sides" (EMI Gold 7243 4 74544 2 4) which gathers together



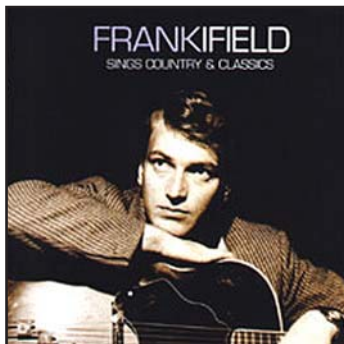
for the first time all Frank's UK Columbia singles plus a few bonus tracks. For the first time in many years, now the record buyer can purchase - for an incredibly low price - a three CD set with a 32 page booklet outlining the influences and strategies that set Frank's musical direction through those phenomenally successful years. Alongside the big hits - most presented in stereo by the way - you can find such hidden country gems as "One Man's Love", "I'm Saving All My Love For You", "Call Her Your Sweetheart" and "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry". Frank's feel for a great country song shines out and his love for the genre influences his interpretations of the non-country material.

All tracks on this set have been digitally re-mastered and the whole set has been beautifully illustrated with labels and album covers from the now rare original vinyl discs. The exceptional quality and strength of the Ifield voice is beautifully showcased and because the tracks are

largely presented in chronological order, one can trace the development of the sophisticated of the Ifield country-laced vocal style.

But where, one might ask, did that strong country thread in the Ifield style originate? Did Frank, as the sceptics would have us believe, turn to country music in the 70s because his singles were no longer charting? Or was there more to it than that?

Well, firstly, I would argue - and no doubt so would Frank - that anyone who drew regularly on the repertoires of Bob Nolan, Hank Williams, Don Gibson, Leon Payne and other big country names in the 60s could hardly be accused of jumping on said bandwagon because he recorded more fine country songs in the 70s! Secondly, I would refer the sceptics to another EMI Gold release **"Frank Ifield Sings Country & Classics" (EMI Gold 7243 5 41734 2 4)**. This album



presents tracks recorded by Frank back in the 1950s long before he was heard of at all

outside Australia and certainly many years before the success of "I Remember You".

The album brings together 30 tracks previously only released in Australia - mostly from Columbia 45s and Regal Zonophone 78s. All have been lovingly re-mastered to sound crisp and fresh but minus the fried eggs that so often haunt old recordings. Together, they provide a showcase of the evolving singer who led the way in a very successful career in Australia and New Zealand from the mid-50s to 1959. In 1959, Frank realised he had achieved everything he could in Australia and emigrated back to England, where he recorded for Columbia UK under the watchful eye of the famous band-leader Norrie Paramor. That is where EMI's "The Complete A & B Sides" takes over the story.

Frank's country roots are very evident in this "Country & Classics" collection and he can be heard with country backings - even steel guitar on some tracks - and a tight, almost western swing sound on others. Even then though, whilst country music formed the core of Frank's repertoire back then, the up-market Columbia label required that he also record some old standards. The result is that alongside such country classics as "Kaw Liga", "You Better Not Do That", "Pale Moon" and "Maybe I'll Cry Over You", we find superb renditions of songs like "Autumn Leaves", "That Lucky Old Sun" and "Deep Purple".

There are some early examples of the Ifield yodel too as well as a few hybrids of rockabilly, pop and country such as the bouncy "I've Got A

Feeling", "Don't Do That" and "Chip Off The Old Block". Until this release, these tracks were so rare that even EMI Australia - who owned them - did not realise they existed! Now for the price of a budget CD you can hear all 30 in high quality sound and read the 8-page booklet that accompanies the release.

Whilst the "Sings Country & Classics" album takes us back much closer to Frank's roots, it generally deals with the mid to late 1950s. To really explore the origins of Frank's affinity with country music, you need to go back even further. In the 1940s, after his Australian parents left Coventry, England, where Frank was born, the family settled in rural New South Wales. There, Frank grew up in a semi-farmland environment and was exposed to the sounds of early Australian country music as well as the American and Canadian records that inspired the local artistes.

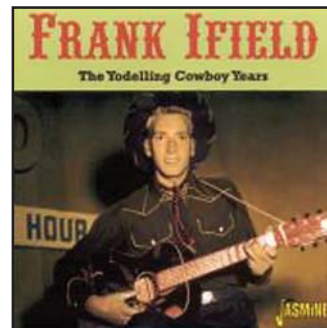
These early years in the mid to late 1940s were when the young and unknown Frank Ifield learned the songs of the Sons Of The Pioneers, Roy Rogers, Slim Clark and Elton Britt and Canada's Orval Prophet, Hank Snow and Wilf Carter. He was exposed every day to the music of Tex Morton, Buddy Williams, Slim Dusty and Smoky Dawson - the great names of the Australian scene - and would save his pocket money to go and see such great showmen as Tim McNamara, Dusty Rankin and Tex, Buddy and Smoky. Frank's early singing style was forged in those formative years.

With grooming from his school headmaster and encouragement from his family and later wrestler Chief Little Wolf, together with watching his idols, Frank learned the art of show business and by 1950 - whilst still only just in his teens - was already a popular solo name. Through radio, stage shows and later TV, his talent was spotted by many - some saw it as a threat to their own careers - but others recognised in the young Frank Ifield a name that had the potential to go far. Amongst the latter were leading husband and wife team Rick & Thel Carey, who helped Frank by pointing him in the right direction. After recording some early amateur acetates, Frank graduated to the esteemed Regal Zonophone label for his first commercial 78rpm release in 1953.

Back then many of his records featured him singing and yodelling to his own guitar accompaniment. Later discs featured steel and fiddle and other backing. His radio appearances created a stir from the start because his stage presence, voice and yodelling were so mature for a youngster and before long he was compering his own TV show, "Campfire Favourites". These were the very earliest years of the Ifield career and until now his performances from this period were one of the best-kept secrets of show business. That has now all changed thanks to the efforts of the UK-based Jasmine label. Like EMI Gold, Jasmine product aims to deliver older recordings packaged for excellent sound quality, value for money, informative notes and unique artwork. Jasmine first featured Frank Ifield in their 4CD set "A Cowboy's Life Is Good Enough For Me" (Jasmine JASBOX 13-4).

This set presents 100 tracks of vintage singing cowboy material including not only the great names of Tex Ritter, Roy Rogers, Jimmy Wakely and Gene Autry but also many lesser known but equally as good names like Canada's Wilf Carter, Don Reynolds and Stu Davis, America's Elton Britt, Jesse Rogers, Rex Allen, Slim Clark and Red River Dave and a fair smattering of the great Australian names like Tim McNamara, The Legarde Twins, Smoky Dawson, Buddy Williams and Frank Ifield! So not only can you hear some of the many names that influenced Frank back then, you can also hear two very early tracks taken from early Frank Ifield 78s, "There's A Love Knot In My Lariat" and his self-penned "A Mother's Faith".

More recently, Jasmine has issued an album dedicated to Frank Ifield's early career, both before and after he began recording commercially. **"The Yodelling Cowboy Years" (Jasmine JASCD 443)** presents a further 31 tracks from this golden period and includes recordings taken from radio and TV shows,



acetates and 78s. Bearing in mind the rarity of the material, it is perhaps surprising that only 4 of the 31 tracks are at all suspect in their

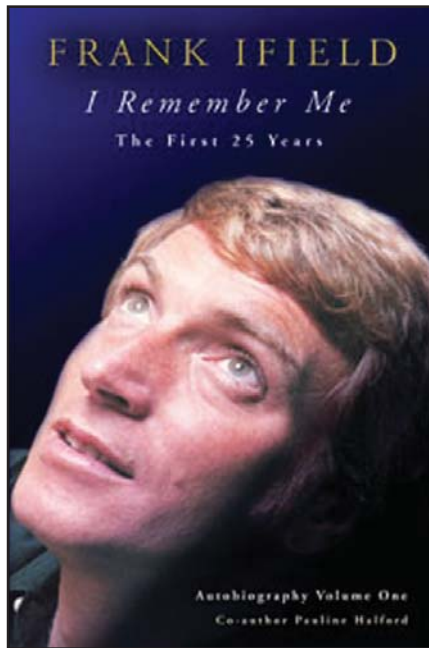
sound quality. These are the tracks that come from early amateur recordings but they are still listen able. Songs include "Yellow Roses", "Did You See My Daddy Over There?" (Frank's first commercial recording), "My Sweetheart's In Love With A Swiss Mountaineer" and his own composition, "Yodelling Craze". Also included is the much sought after theme song from the TV series "Whiplash". The album effectively takes the listener from those humble beginnings to where the EMI "Sings Country & Classics" begins.

At the time of writing this feature, Jasmine is preparing a further release that will feature another very rare Ifield recording, this time of Frank singing Hank Snow's "Yodelling Back To You". That track is planned to appear on "Chime Bells: The Best Of Country Yodel Volume 3" (Jasmine JASCD 3566) which is provisionally scheduled for release early in 2007. There are at least two more early tracks to be included on future albums.

So in summary, from a relative famine only a couple of years ago, there is now excellent coverage of Frank's recorded career to the latter years of the 60s, with the very earliest recordings available on Jasmine and the mid 50s to 1968 covered comprehensively by EMI (only a handful of tracks have yet to be reissued from the late 50s Australian recordings and that was only because they could not be fitted onto the "Sings Country & Classics" release).

What the collectors will now be looking for is the reissue of more of Frank's recordings from the 70s and 80s, most of which are now exceedingly rare. For more information browse his website at: www.frankifield.com

In the meantime though, you may like to take to bed with you a copy of Frank's book, "**I Remember Me**", published by **Kempton Marks (ISBN 0-7552-0501-4)** the first part of his autobiography and co-authored by UK writer



Pauline Halford. The book provides an inside perspective on those early years in Australia as well as Frank's struggle to make it in the UK from his return to England as a young hopeful in 1959 to the eventual success of "I Remember You" in 1962.



So whether you know Frank Ifield as a country singer, a big-time cabaret artiste or as a contemporary song stylist, there is without doubt now more of his recorded work available than has been the case for many years. These recent releases offer today's music lovers an opportunity to catch up with the work of one of the greatest singers of the second half of the 20th Century.

PAUL HAZELL