

# Mary Throll

9 Dec 1922 – 13 June 2012

Mary's life was a rollercoaster ride which you can read in her 2003 biography, *The Scottish Nightingale*. She was responsible for the successful careers of many New Zealand Variety artists; inspiring, supporting and finding them work through Auckland's first talent agency *Fuller's Entertainment*. She knew what she was talking about, having been a professional singer herself. Serving on the VAC committee from 1998 to 2001 she received *Scrolls of Honour* in 1973 and 2011, the *Benny Award* in 1993 and *Life Membership* in 1996. She was editor of the 1971 *Variety Newspaper* and 1961 she was President of *Actors Equity*.



**Mary 'Mitzie' Throll** was born in Glasgow on 9 Dec 1922 to Isabella (b. Flood) and William Throll. At 16 Isabella had been engaged to a Merchant seaman whose boat was torpedoed. She gave birth to their daughter Jessie soon after. Working as a Nurse Aid Isabella met William recuperating from a bullet wound received in France and they married soon after, moving in to live with William's parents in a one room apartment. They went on to have Annie, then Mary. As a baby Mary she was not expected to live but her grandmother massaged her back to health using an old remedy of feeding through the skin with pig's fat. Three more siblings died so in 1926 William decided to change their luck and took his family to New Zealand where he found work with the *Ministry of Works* in Otorohanga. The local Sunday school had a public concert and Mary became so animated while singing *Springtime in the Rockies* that she fell off the stage. The audience loved the 4 year old's inaugural

performance!

A move to Auckland and the families' fortunes improved with the birth of Irene, Sarah, Tony and Bette. Isabella found a job and accommodation at a Symonds Street florist and Jessie and Mary started school at *St Benedicts*. A string of many moves followed until 1932 when Isabella fell in love while ballroom dancing and left; the children remained with their Father. William's trade was metal engraving but he was unemployed for some time and the girls took to busking in Vulcan lane to provide food for the family.

Mary was now learning Scottish dance and one day the founder of the *Neville Carlsen Vaudeville Revue Company* came to the *Betty McLean School of Dancing* and auditioned the students. Mary was offered a role as *The Scottish Nightingale* in his show. Rusty Greaves was also in Neville's show being dubbed *Rusty* after his red hair. In 1934 Mary auditioned for *Radio 1ZB* and broadcast a number of times. She then tried her hand at talent quests including a *Deanna Durbin contest* and the *George Carlson Cabaret*. She won the latter and bought her father a new suit.



In 1937 Mary left school and found work in a number of local factories. One night she met guitarist Bob Wrathall at the movies and they soon fell in love and became engaged. When she became pregnant they eloped and married in 1939. After Yvonne's birth Mary had health problems and although being advised to take a rest became pregnant 3 months later. Bob became violent when drunk and was unemployed so she took over the lease of a large house and rented out the rooms as an income, which was lucky as he was soon arrested and imprisoned for 3 months. Their son Robert was born but died and to Mary's horror was refused a Catholic burial as he had not been baptised. Mary found work at the *Peter Pan Ballroom* but when Bob was released she left for a milking job in Waimauku.

Returning to Auckland she became a waitress and rejoined the *Neville Carlsen Revue*. At the *Civic Theatre* she was employed to sing before the films, beginning her show with a ride up from the pit on the Wurlitzer with organist Reg Maddams. By 1942 she was appearing in a number of programs on *Radio 1ZB* and back at the *Peter Pan Cabaret* she met an American serviceman called Dick Kalebjian. They planned to marry as she was pregnant again but he was shipped out and they lost touch. Mary-Suzanne was born in 1944 and they moved to the *Tui Glen Motor Camp* in Henderson along with her father and sisters.

Later that year her face was badly burnt in a cooking accident and she was admitted to *Auckland Hospital* where she received treatment but on release she had a nervous breakdown, suffering from delayed shock and possibly Morphine withdrawal. The children were fostered out and Mary found a job in a hotel next to the hospital. By 1945 she was back with her girls living next door to her mother and Yvonne started school at Mary's old school, *St Benedicts*.

In 1946 she married Bill Fuller, an Englishman who had just been discharged from the Navy. Mary studied dressmaking at night while working at Dove-Meyer Robinson's childswear factory but again became pregnant. After giving birth to a son Tony she approached *State Advances* and was offered a brick house at 78 Titirangi Road. The girls enrolled at *St Mary's Convent School* in Avondale while Mary took in sewing to make ends meet and a year later Dennis was born. More dressmaking and alteration came her way and eventually she opened *Irene Gowns* in Avondale but soon returned to working at home.



In 1950 Mary underwent surgery to remove a benign ovarian cyst and an accident damaged her spinal cord which needed treatment far into the future. Bill was running a wholesale fruit and vegetable business while Mary went back to singing; at the *Civic* with the *Chips Healey Big Band*, moonlighting at RSA's and with the *New Lynn Citizen's Brass Band*. 1951 saw her back with the *Neville Carson Revue* and *1ZB* yet again.

The children showed talent; Tony won a contest as a ventriloquist, Dennis excelled in comedy and the girls enjoyed music, dancing, gymnastics and marching. Mary's mother came to live with them and Mary found more time to perform around Auckland and tour the country. The 1950's were great years for artists and musicians with clubs and restaurants opening weekly and in 1954 Mary got the idea to open *Fullers Theatrical Agency* at home. The response from entertainers was overwhelming so she posted out circulars to venues then began phoning and visiting. Many bookers remembered her as a singer and she soon had plenty of work.

Mary opened an office at the *Alston Chambers* at 63 Queen Street and ran it 6 hours a day, dropping the boys off at school in the morning and picking them up afterwards. Soon *Fullers* had a thriving clientele, a typist and the use of a small hall for auditions. Her entertainers, many of them from overseas, loved the rooms and would often pop in to visit or pay commissions. The only drawback was when artists decided to by-pass the agency and undercut her price; often her loyal clients would phone to tell her.

She put on a series of shows at the *Lewis Eady Hall* to showcase her artists, offering everything from coloraturas to elephants. She discovered Silvio de Pra and *Sieada the Exotic Dancer* in 1956 and later started Freddie Keil and Bridget Allen's careers. *Red Hewitt* and the *Buccaneers* joined her team and her daughter Mary-Suzanne became their singer and pianist.

The next year Benny Levin set up his *Dance Band Agency* but Mary specialised in variety acts so there was little competition between them. In 1960 she sold *Fullers* to George Tollerton and went back to dressmaking, opening *Silhouette Fashions* branches in Sandringham and Blockhouse Bay with her sister Bette. In November Mary sailed to Sydney, auditioned for the *Ted James Agency* and gained a contract for 6 months work. During the day she studied for her diploma in corsetry then took a job at *Hordern Brother's Department Store* running the *Bra Bar*.



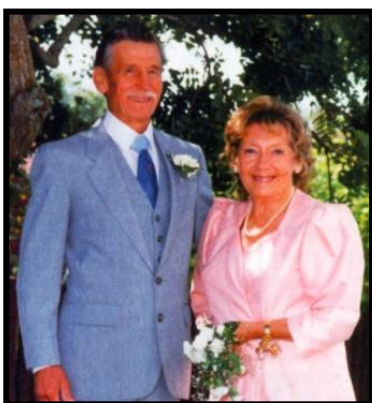
Back in Auckland in 1964 she met up with Gray Bartlett and they formed the *Mary Fuller Trio* with another guitarist, Ray Brooks, performing *Peter, Paul and Mary* type music.

In 1965 *Fullers Agency* was purchased by *Prestige Promotions* which Phil Warren ran with Bruce Henderson and Don Lillian. Phil later passed it on to Lou Prime and Glenda Law. Mary opened the *Mary Throll Entertainment Centre* in New Lynn and the business thrived again, so much so that the next year she moved to the *Strand Arcade* in Queen Street.

On her 1968 EP *Heather Mixture* she was accompanied by John MacDonald on accordion, Don Branch on drums and Mike Foley on bass. That same year Bill and Mary separated and she met up with an old friend, George Carlson from the *Neville Carlsen Revue Company*. His wife Monica had died and their string of fashion shops in Rotorua had gone into receivership along with the house and bach. He wanted to get back into showbusiness so they purchased *Tiffany's*, a restaurant-night club in Takapuna and Mary moved the agency there.

Things went well until 1969 when her father died and her mother was hit by a drunken driver and died 3 years later. A police raid turned up some unopened bottles of spirits and their license was revoked for 6 months and custom fell away. They went into liquidation.

Her next venture was publishing a monthly newspaper called *Variety* which hit the stores in May 1971. When that failed George became manager of the Remuera branch of *Adam's Real Estate* and Mary moved her agency back to Queen Street. They bought shares in a stately flat in Remuera and after her divorce was approved in 1973, Mary and George married. That same day her schizophrenic son, Tony, stabbed two men to death in Sydney. He was deemed not fit for trial and held in a mental institution. Two years later, during a trip to Sydney to visit him, Tony committed suicide.



The Remuera house was sold and they moved to an upstairs flat in Northcote where a plunge down a flight of stairs left Mary with a broken pelvis, leaving her immobile for 12 weeks and invalided for a year.

Mary and George separated and she moved back into her Titirangi house but, craving a change, moved to Christchurch to stay with her sister Irene and returned to entertaining.

Back in Auckland she met up with George who suggested that they get back together again. That did not work out as planned when in 1980 George collapsed with a perforated ulcer and needed complete bed rest, requiring Mary to move her office to Titirangi so that she could care for him. Her business prospered and the agency took on larger groups such as duos, trios and bands. Then she began manufacturing and marketing dog garments, setting up *K9 Fashions*. George helped in the office but was becoming disorientated from a series of mini-strokes. He became violent and twice accidentally set his bed on fire. Finally he had to be committed to a private rest home. He died there in 1986.

Mary sold *K9 Fashions* to concentrate on her agency and eventually passed it on to Keith Leggett. She retired in 1987 and married John Lambert but soon realised that she had made a mistake and left to set up an agency in Helensville, promoting *Craigwell House Holiday Hotel* and local venues. Mary formed a duo with Carla Van de Lisdonk and returned to singing in clubs and RSA's.

Leslie Harris and Mary became engaged in 1992 and the couple moved into their new home in Glen Eden. They married in 1995 and as Leslie says, 'I had not a clue in the world what I was letting myself in for. Stubborn as a mule and a Scottish Sagittarian to boot! Overriding that lot, I love her dearly. She has enriched my life immensely. That's overlooking all the headaches she has given me at times with her occasional leanings to the one eyed approach. At times when wearing me down, her stock answer would be, 'it comes with the territory' or 'them's the breaks'.



Towards the end of her life Mary suffered a series of strokes which limited her mobility and speech but Les usually managed bring her to the VAC Meet and Greets. I will always remember her singing my favourite Kiwi song, *Haere Mai*. Mary was living proof of the showbiz motto, *The Show Must Go On!* Mary passed away on 13 June 2012.