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Charlie Cairoli – interview transcript

Interviewer: Sue Barbour

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Charlie Cairoli junior Clown. Agents; Gordon Blackie; Tower Circus, Blackpool; Charlie Cairoli senior, digs; employment; family involvement; pantomime; Cliff Richard; Second World War; touring; This Is Your Life.

SB: This is Sue Barbour from the University of Sheffield talking to Charlie Cairoli.... Jnr. and first of all Charlie I'd like to ask you if you agree that this recording can be used for the British Library Theatre Project and to inform future generations about Variety Theatre.

CC: Of course, no problem at all.

SB: Right. First of all I wanted to ask you whereabouts were you born and about early on in the family and your life?

CC: Well, I was born in Blackpool because my father was doing seasons here then. He started in 1939. One of those things, we always used to go to The Tower on the opening and the last night and probably partway through the season. It was compulsory, you know [SB: laughs]. We had to go along. I used to go and see other shows and I met other people but because it was part of my normal life, these people were just.... They weren't... I mean, if you look back, people say, 'Oh, you knew him". Or "You knew him!" but, they were just friends, really. You know, you never thought they were.... because they never thought themselves as Stars.... And they were just people in show business. So you got to meet all these people, which I look back and think I just don't appreciate what people I met.... and who I met.

SB: Mmm.

CC: But, yes, I had a great life and one of the things I always used to love doing.... If my father was doing Pantomime and it was far away, we always used to go and see him. Well, we went by train. Well, train was a great thrill in our day.

SB: Mmm.

CC: You know, to go on a train was great, and if you could get lunch as well! Aw, it was.... And we did Plymouth, "Oh, yes! We're going down to Plymouth" because we'd stop in a [an] hotel, we'd go down by train and come back by train. It was great. So, that side was really good. But, when he did Blackpool, we always had acts coming to see us. Well, not coming to see us. They'd come round for a drink at night. There was all languages going on and you got to meet other kids and you heard jokes in different languages and we learned to speak French quite fluently. Cant' read it – well, I can read a little bit, but can't read it fluently - only because we used to hear people talking all the time and you get into that 'picking up things'.

SB: Mmm. So, where was your father born?

CC: He was born in Milan.

SB: Oh, was he?

CC: Well, he should have been born in France [Both laugh] and you'll appreciate this. His mother and father were working in Milan – they were doing a contract and they asked to stay another month so they stayed another month and in that month my father was born.

SB: Oh.

CC: 'Cos, they should have finished and gone back to France but they said, "Oh, can you do another month?" So, they said, "Yes" so, he was born in Milan. I think he only went there about twice but he always classed himself as French because that's what he should have been.

SB: Mmm.

CC: I mean, the name Cairoli is Italian but my Grandparents always lived in France. They were born in France and lived in France but I think generations back they started from Italy. So, he always classed himself as French/English.

SB: So when did he come over to England to reside.

CC: Well, he came over in 198 - well, from what I was told - 1938 to do Pantomime in Birmingham.

SB: Oh.

CC: And he did Panto in Birmingham and the Tower Company saw him and asked him to do the summer of 1939. He did it and then war broke out and he was then shipped off to the Isle of Mann. He was interned because he was born in Italy.

SB: Ah!

CC: Because he was born - on his passport 'born in Italy'. He was taken to the Isle of Mann - he was interned there - he was there for about six weeks or something like that and me Dad said it was so funny because there were all these Italians in the Isle of Mann. He said, "They weren't going to fight" He said there were more Chefs than anything So they ate really well! [Both laugh]. And then he was given the all clear and he came back and did The Tower but he had to do it on condition that he had to.... When he was in London, he worked in a munitions factory and he did the Palladium with Tommy Trinder - he did quite a few things with Tommy Trinder - and the agreement was that they had to do shows for the troops. They had to entertain the troops so, he said it was quite funny because you'd come out - when they were doing the Palladium - you came out of the Palladium and there was a truck there and your props went in and you were driven down these road with no lights - nothing - you'd get there, you'd go in the barracks, it would be like.... you were flunking around with people like that, all these people.... just do a show for the troops. Then, you got back in trucks and they'd take you back to London. He said it was really weird but that's what he had to do and then he carried on doing Blackpool in the summer.

SB: Right. So, he came to live in Blackpool at the end of the war?

CC: Well, he... yes, when he first came to Blackpool he was in digs and I mean in those days all they would do... at the end of the season they'd renew his contract "Would you come back next year" "Would you come back next year" They never said, "Well, there's a five year contract".

SB: Right.

CC: It was renewed and then he got, after about the fourth or fifth year, he got a boarding house in Carshalton? Road and my mother ran that for a few years and then when I was born he moved to another house round the corner. Bigger house and they lived in that all the time until he died.

SB: Oh, right. And so, when did you first become aware that you were born into a show business family?

CC: Again, it was one of those things. Because my Dad was who he was, you know, people sort of said, "Oh, your Dad's a clown". He was just my Dad!

SB: Mmm.

CC: It's just when my Dad went to work he put make-up on. I think it was.... It wasn't such a big thing in those days. I mean, I was just talking with your Mother.

SB: Yes?

CC: At one time, my Dad wore a red nose. He'd go and do the Ed Sullivan Show [New York], the Latin Quarter [New York] he'd go and do cabaret and he was just an act. You know, just an act who wore make-up.

SB: Mmm.

CC: In this day and age they have to pigeonhole you. "Oh, you're a clown. Clowns only work for kids".

SB: Yes.

CC: And I think – I do very similar to what he did – I class myself as a family entertainer – He worked all over the place and in this day and age, you can't.

SB: So, he'd work Circus, Variety, TV?.

CC: He did the Ed Sullivan Shows. He did....

SB: Just for any students listening. That was in New York, yes?

CC: I mean, before the war. A good few years before the war. I think it was about 1933. 1932/1933 he did a Command Performance for Hitler.

SB: Did he?

CC: Yes. It was a show for Hitler. I mean, for doing it, he was given a briefcase and a cigarette case with a Swastika on and when war broke out, he threw it in the sea. Because he thought, born in Italy and having this in his pocket – he threw it – but, in those days, it was just going to work. You never got involved with the politics. You didn't know what was going on and as he said, "Looking back, it wasn't as bad then.... It was rumbling what was happening but you just went – as acts, you were booked, went in, did it, and went out again that was all, so, yes, he'd done quite a few things but now, today, they tend to pigeon-hole you. You're a Circus entertainer or a Kid's entertainer.

SB: Yes. So, in those days it was good for him because he could work everywhere.

CC: Well, yes.

SB: Now, you went to school in Blackpool, didn't you?

CC: Yes. Well, my father, he started, when he was born, it was like when he was five he could go in the act.... He was put in the act. They used to black him up. I've got some posters of him blacked up, because it didn't show his age. He didn't look like a young child. They used to black him up so he could look older. But he was like..... suppose in a lot of the towns in England, if you're the son of a coal miner, you're going to be a coal miner, so whatever you were, that was the choice. So, when I left school at fifteen, I went to my Dad and said, "Can I join the act?" and he said, "No". He said, "Go and do something..... I don't want you to do I was forced... go and do something else. So, I did my time as an engineer, which was great. I mean, that's why I think I had a real normal life. Well, I had the best of both, really. I had the show business on one side and normal life on the other.

SB: Yes. But, what did the kid's at school think? They knew what you're dad did, did they?

CC: Yeh. But, it was..... nobody really..... Looking back, it was like.... My kids get the mick taken out of them sometimes at school.

SB: Do they?

CC: Because of what I do, but I never did. It was just accepted. You know, "You're Dad's Charlie Cairoli" That's all it was. If anything, they used to sort of say, "Oh, can you get me his autograph", and things like that. That was the worst but nobody ever picked on me or sort of called me names and things like that. From that point of view it was great.

SB: And when he went away at Pantomime, you went and travelled and went to see him?

CC: Yes.

SB: Who looked after you when he was away? Your Mum?

CC: Yes, my Mum because she – My Mum came from a clown family as well –

SB: Oh, did she?

CC: Oh, yes. They were quite..... there were two circuses. There was Cirque d'Hiver and Cirque..... Oh, I can't think of the other one..... Cirque Prodromo and one time, my mother's family, The Fratelinis were working in one circus and my Dad was working in the other and my Dad's Grandfather was working the other circus and because my mother wasn't a great entertainer – it was one of these, she was put into the act - they used to send her to the other circus to see what the other clowns were doing. [SB: laughs]. And she'd come across to see what the Cariole's were doing and my Dad spotted her as she was walking, coming to see him, watching the act and thought, "She's quite pretty". I think my Mum fancied him and he didn't realise she had come to spy on him [Both laugh]. So, they looked.... Anyway, they ended up getting married.

SB: So, she came out of the business?

CC: Oh, she came out of the business. Well, she - Bless her – did a hand balancing act with her sister and she was terrible. You know, she was only ten but the most.....she was heavy handed. You'll appreciate this.... She was heavy, you know what I mean? and her sister used to say, "Oh, she's murder to lift" or do anything with. So, she came out of the act. I mean, she'd do things in my Dad's father's act, when we were young, she'd make things Dad's spaghetti or maybe the odd stooge, just things like that, but that's all she ever did but when we came to Blackpool there wasn't really parts for her, so she was a sort of stay-at-home mother.

SB: Fine. Well, that's good, isn't it... to have your mum around?

CC: Oh, yes.

SB: So, you used to go.... When your dad went away, obviously kept the home in Blackpool, where did he stay? Did he go into 'digs'?

CC: Most times he'd go into a [an] hotel, or 'digs' or whatever was available. I mean, in the old days you could go to people and you used to say, "I want a room for so and so..." and they used to say, "Are you from the theatre?" Because if you were from the theatre, you were always classed as something special.

SB: Right.

CC: In those days, you were the artists from so and so... now, you're classed as a bit of gypsy. But, in those days you were an artist, you're with the show. And, in the early days, he used to Top the Bill in some of the Pantomimes. He did things like Humpty

Dumpty or Little Miss Muffet, or some of the Pantomimes which you never hear of now. And he Topped the Bill so, the Top of the Bill going in to the Pantomime, it was great. It was good for him.

SB: Yeh. And did he have an agent or.... ?

CC: Yes, he had an agent, Blackie.

SB: Oh yes.

CC: Gordon Blackie, who lived.....in Lavillian? Chambers.... Not lived, but he had offices there and there was everybody but it was one of those offices that if you just waited there, there was people coming in and out. I mean, the one story I always thought was lovely.... He was going to see him and as he was going there, he met an act who said, "Oh, Charlie, I believe you're going to the Palladium?" He said, "No, no I'm going to Wembley". "No, I've just been in the office and they're talking about you going to the Palladium for Panto". And he said, "Oh right" and he'd already signed a contract for the Ice Show. So, he goes up to Gordon's office and Gordon said, "I've got some great news for you. You're doing the Palladium". He said, "Oh, great". He said, "Except that I'm doing the Ice Show" "Well, you're doing the Palladium, it's better for you". He said, "The money's not the same". So, he said, "Oh, I won't go then" "But it's the Palladium, Charlie". He said, "No, I'd rather do the Ice Show for more money". "But, it's the Palladium!" "I'm not doing it" "Oh. Alright, well, leave it with me" Because he knew, because the guy had told him, we can get you the same money. You know all agents, they'll always try, "Well, I'll get you the same money". "Alright I'll do it". That was with Cliff Richard.

SB: Oh, was it?

CC: Cliff Richard and the Shadows and it was Alladin. He said Cliff Richard was so nice. A really nice guy. I met him a couple of times myself, when I was young but things were changing. I mean, The Delfonts were coming in and taking over. The big offices and things like that, so it was getting harder for the agents to get in to that thing, you know what I mean?

SB: Yes. Because, they have control of the theatres.

CC: Also, they had the TV that they were dangling in front of the people. I'll get you this series. In those days, as is now. What you do on television in one night would take you a month to do in the theatre.

SB: Yes. So, did your dad ever do anything like Moss Empires? Dates?

CC: Yeh, he did, which is quite strange actually because, when I go round now the press office will say, "Oh, we found a poster of your dad here in Pantomime. He did this, he did that". Because, he didn't really brag about what he did. It's just he enjoyed working. He enjoyed doing it for kids and things, but it was good work. I mean, he worked with some....with Freddie Frinton and Billie Dainty, which he loved. But he'd worked with him, so when he did a Pantomime, it was never really work. It was work but it wasn't...

SB: Mmm.

CC: Because it was so much fun and the artists in those days were wonderful. They were talented. They could do sketches. One would feed for another. "We'll do that" or "Charlie, I've got this ... Can you help?" "Ah, yes, great" or "Billie, I've got this" So, I think, work was no problem. I mean, if you had gags, "I've seen a great gag, it'll be smashing for you" so it was wonderful, and a lot of times if they got – because it was Emile Littler – if you got the show right, it would all go.... They'd keep it all together. So, you'd go to the next place where, if you had two or three week's rehearsals, you knew it in a couple of days because they all knew the parts. Mind you, you'd have to chip and rehearse because there might be one other person – different person – but you knew what was going to go, what were the gags and it was great.

SB: Mmm. Yes, they were good Panto's, Emile Littler.

CC: I always remember one of those acts – this is a silly thing – and I saw the script once. And it would be the Village Scene. The dancers, the Juveniles and then you'd have eight singers as extra village people, who sang as a band of singers and then you'd have the close of the first half that would either be a waterfall or something and on the script it would be "Front Cloth goes out.... Two minutes for applause.... [both laugh] because it would be, 'Ahhhh!' The Ballroom Scene, that was the one 'Ohhhhh!' and everybody would be there, posed! White wigs and gloves.

SB: Mmm.

CC: And the curtain would go up, there was a sort of silhouette of these people on the stage and then everybody clapped for two minutes! And then the show would carry on. And there were these things when they knew what was going to happen. 'Hold that scene for one minute' or 'Applause for two minutes'. Then the music starts. And things like that... it was great, you know. Fantastic. I mean, I do Pantomime now and you get four boys and four girls. I mean, there were twelve boys and twelve girls and sort of... twenty-four juveniles... and the singers.

SB: Yes.

CC: And then there was all the Principals plus a couple of acts. You had a couple of Spech acts in with it and it was phenomenal. I mean, no wonder the Pantomimes were about three hours! [Both laugh]. Took food parcels in!

SB: Yes. But, they were amazing, weren't they?

CC: Ohh. Yes. It's a shame because you talk about these things and you sound – excuse the expression – you sound like an old fart and people do Pantomimes now and they thing they're spectacular but they've seen nothing.

SB: Yes.

CC: And living in Blackpool, it's like – I was talking to your mother – all the shows that were here. They were phenomenal shows. The Names at the South Pier, the Central Pier, North Pier. They were Names that were here. Big Names like Morcambe and Wise and such. They would go and do the South Pier or the Central Pier, which you couldn't afford any of those people now.

SB: No.

CC: So I have, in one respect, I was spoilt because I've seen a lot of people, a lot of shows. I've seen the good and the bad and it spoils you and it sounds like you're being blasé, it's one of those things.. I mean, the one thing my Dad used to do and I hated..... We'd go and see a ... or a Circus or something like that and he'd always say, "Oh, I remember, so and so, doing that about fifty years ago". "Yeh, I knew you were going to say that Dad". or, "I remember that act" But, not four, they used eight! Or "There were twelve elephants". I'd seen four. "There were twelve". And what am I doing? I'm doing the same to my lads! [Both laugh]. "Thirty years ago, I remember seeing this and they did that and they did everything" and my lads looking at me going "Dad!"

SB: Yes. So, do you remember any bad times? And what were the worst bits.... ?

CC: The worst ...In a way, I suppose I've had a cosseted life, really. The bad times were when my Dad was doing his accounts. His books. And he used to – we had a basement downstairs – and we were never allowed to go and visit. There was a table down there and there was paper everywhere! It was all in piles and things like that and numbers on it, written and he was like.... It was a nightmare. That's what I'd class as the worst time. And the other time was before the start of the season at The Tower because every year he used to do two new acts and some days, he'd be working and he'd be downstairs and he'd come up and say, "What do you think of this?" and show us something and we'd go, "Well, it's alright" "Oh! Ah!" and he used to go back downstairs! [Both laugh].

SB: Oh, no! So, he used you as the judges?

CC: Oh, yeh. Yeh. I use my boys now. They come and see me only they don't..... It's funny, I can remember I used to go to the Circus on the opening night or last night. I can remember a load of the other acts that were on but I can't remember what my Dad did. I mean, sometimes...some acts I say, "Oh, yeh" especially if I see one of his old props or something and look, "Oh, yeh, he did that" but I don't remember that well back, but I remember people flying, up poles and things like that because I suppose it was like, "Oh, that's Dad".

SB: Yes.

CC: "Saw Dad" and what he was doing but some bits you notice and some bits would stick in your mind, the rest was just like everybody else.

SB: Yes.

CC: Bad times? [Pause]. My Dad was my Dad. He didn't have a great childhood and the one thing he always used to say... he said he never wanted his kids to think of him as the way he thought about his dad.

SB: Really?

CC: Yes. So whether they protected me, or us, from that type of thing and he took a lot of the worry out of his side. I don't know but looking back I think he did. He didn't work Sundays, so Sundays was the day when he would go fishing early in the morning. Come back about eleven o'clock. We'd all go to Yates's for a drink. Yates's Wine Lodge which was a great watering hole. Everybody, all the Starts, went there. It was so sawdust on the floor. We'd have a drink and then we'd go home and have Sunday Lunch. He would always sleep in the chair. And do a bit of gardening and then we'd go to the Cinema at night... but that was our Sundays so he was there for a while and then I got to an age when I was going to play football and things like that. Not sort of grew apart - because, I was doing my electrical... but I was still there and then, on 'This Is Your Life', he did 'This Is Your Life' with Eamonn Andrews and they got me doing this silly thing where ... well, they were going to ask me to do a silly thing because he didn't know about it.... And they said, "Is there anything else" and I said, "Well, I've asked him once or twice to join him but he's always put me off, so I asked him on 'This Is Your Life' and he said, "Yeh, Yeh, Of course you can." And it was great. I had nine years working with Dad. I mean, he was a hard... he was a great musician and I wasn't and sometimes we were playing and he looked at me and I thought, "Oh." [Both laugh]. It was one of those 'the look' [Both laugh]. He didn't have to say anything but look at the floor. But, I had nine or ten years of laughs. Well, I had more laughs than I had bad times.

SB: Yes.

CC: I mean, he was a great practical joker. Great practical jokes. Loved kids. He had a lot of time – 'cos he always said, "A child's laughter is like a crystal bell". It was pure.

There was no....Like the kid's either laughed or you were rubbish. You know, grown ups will say, "Oh, yes you were wonderful, wonderful, and as you walked away, "He was awful". Whereas kid's say, "You're awful", you're awful!. Well, that was it, I had nine years... a lot of time... good fun.

SB: Yes. And how did you feel about suddenly going on your own? Afterwards.

CC: Well, that was a strange thing because I think we had what – we never talked about it – I think, the idea was... he was getting to an age – I think he was coming up to seventy – and I think he was starting to back off and I was going to go – so what I was doing ended up reversing roles. Anyway, he did the dirty on me and died, didn't he! [Pause] I'll never forgive him for that, you know.

SB: Ahh.

CC: So it was that sort of limbo and I thought, "Well, what do I do?" Because I thought: If I don't try it I'll never know if I can do it and if I do try and I fail, you know. So, I started and again, it was one of those awful situations. When my Dad died, they used to say, "Don't worry, we'll look after you. Let us know where you're working and we'll come along and see you". Well, they all said that but nobody would book me! [laughs].

SB: Really?

CC: It was one of those, "Let us know where are you working" but trying to get the work, you know. So, the first.... about the first year, was really hard and then I got this girl and we'd done a couple of Pantomimes and she was... looking back she was a lovely girl but she was awful. Then, I got this guy who was a musician and he was a lot better and we got some sort of.... I was only doing what my Dad did.

SB: Yes.

CC: Basically was.... And then I did a Pantomime in Fleetwood and my wife was there with her mother and her sister and they were doing the magic act and my mother-in-law was playing the Witch, It was great. My mother-in-law was playing the Witch, my sister-in-law was playing the Principal Boy and my wife was playing the Fairy and my wife couldn't stand me!

SB: [Laughs].

CC: My mother-in-law loved me, my sister-in-law loved me but my wife thought I was such a pain in the bum! Anyway, I'm asking her out and one thing and another and we went – we first met on the 5th of December and by 5th September the following year we were married.

SB: Really?

CC: Yes and no children! [Both laugh]. So, we got married and then I just got her in the act. And, because she was from the old school of... when we went into shows she could stooge and she could dance and when they had four dancers we had two extra here, they went in and danced. She could stooge and do the magic act and present and sing. So, I pinched her. [SB: laughs]. She made my bad act very good! [Both laugh]. Don't tell her that, she'll want money! [Both laugh]. She does it for love! [Both laugh]. So, anyhow, I got her in the act and from then it seemed to take off. We got a lot better and here I am still at the bottom!

SB: Oh, that's lovely. Anyway, thank you very much for talking to me.

CC: It's a pleasure. I hope I haven't bored you too much.

SB: Not at all!

CC: But, can I just ask one question? Do we have to do it in the nude?

[Both laugh].