

Don Gibbons 1938-2023

Donald Lewis Gibbons, born 26th March 1938 in Aylesbury, Bucks., was the third of four siblings: Kathleen, David, Donald, and the youngest Edward, who arrived on the 5th October 1940, the night his father sailed to Europe with the army.

His mother was an eccentric Welsh-speaking lady who raised the children alone until his father's return at the end of the war having reached the rank of Major but severely traumatised and malnourished, having been a prisoner of war in Germany.

Don started to play the piano by ear at the age of seven and in his teens he studied for two years at the Watford School of Music, but as the music profession was considered too risky he joined the GPO as an engineering apprentice.

During his National Service Don was assigned to 2nd Division Royal Signal Regiment and posted to Germany where he spent more time in the Officers' Mess playing the piano than on his military duties!

After 36 years at BT, Don was offered early retirement from Data Network Design, which allowed him to devote much more of his time to music once again and fulfil his earlier ambition. He read music as a mature student from 1991 to 94 at the University of Southampton, which included piano lessons and organ as a second study. After gaining his BA, he studied for an MA at the University of Kent in Canterbury. An amusing recollection of his days there has been provided by his friend Howard:

We all met Don Gibbons when we were still students. He was a mature student and I guess we reacted to him like little children would. What did you expect? There was suddenly this older chap, older than our lecturers, with crazy grey hair flying in every direction, who always turned up to lectures wearing a blazer and a tie! Thinking about it, we might have been a little rude initially to be honest. But it wasn't long before he found his way into our little gang, and very soon, into our hearts.

He was unquestionably a little unusual, eccentric, one may say; clumsy as hell and prone to repeating the same old stories and jokes time and time again. Telephone conversations were always epic and he regularly referred to pieces of music by opus numbers instead of names, rendering everyone in a total state of confusion—I think he made half of those numbers up! And him being an organist. . . well need we say more!

And I shall never forget the occasion when I asked him the time and without hesitation, he turned his wrist to check his watch, forgetting he was holding a hot cup of coffee with that same hand. The entire content of that coffee cup did make its way down the front of his shirt.

But however ridiculous our friend could be at times, he certainly was an integral part of our lives and in his peculiar way, looked after all of us when we were a bunch of immature upstarts. He was somehow always there. He would drive miles to my first pro gigs and he was there at the very last; he was one of the first to meet Eleanor and was there at her christening. Every event, big or small, he always showed up.

He was also always late – I particularly remember him arriving at the end of our wedding, just as we were walking out - what timing! He did even better for Tomo and Lou - he arrived at the very, very end of their reception. But somehow, with whatever difficulties, he always made it.

He would never let us down - and he never did.

His piano playing was occasionally rather haphazard, and with his organists' habit of sight-reading everything, I am not entirely sure he ever really stopped to learn anything properly - he just played whatever was in front of him as though it was the first time every time. But he never lacked ambition and seldom played anything that was less than exceedingly challenging. I shall treasure the memories of the many happy hours we spent destroying Hugo Wolf's Prometheus together. That was the sort of repertoire he really enjoyed—loud and full of notes going at a million miles an hour. I think at heart, he was really a metal head-banging type but his medium just happened to be classical music.

I shall miss my dear friend of nearly 30 years. Please have a drink and remember this lovely, lovely kind soul if, like me, you have been fortunate enough to have known him. There will never be another Don and I am so grateful he was such a massive part of my life.

Don moved to St Albans when his work location changed to the City of London. He was heard performing regularly in St Albans both as soloist and accompanist on the piano and for church services on the organ. In fact, he would appear to have played in most of the churches in the area over many years both before and after retiring from BT, as well as being a regular organist at Rosehill Methodist Church. He was also very active in supporting local music competitions as an accompanist and the New School of Organ Studies in St Albans during its existence.

Unfortunately, he was diagnosed with terminal prostate cancer 8 years ago but in true Don style volunteered to join in the medical trials being undertaken at Mount Vernon Hospital. Dr Roberto Alonzi describes him as his miracle patient after managing to keep him alive for so long. He kept his impish sense of humour and general equanimity to the end, fading out peacefully at home.

A favourite verse of Don's was:

I have outlived my youthfulness
so a quiet life for me
where once I used to scintillate
now I sin till ten past three.

This is a shortened version of the eulogy read by Don's nephew at the funeral. The verse is by Roger McGough. Ed.