

JENNY

HILLS



Hello, hello! My name is Jenny Hill or, 'The Vital Spark' as my agent nick-named me on account of my boundless energy. I reckon it was that energy kept me going through hard times and took me from rags to riches to become the leading female performer on the music hall stages. Until that Marie Lloyd came along and knocked me off my perch, that is.

CAN YOU THINK OF A MODERN DAY PERFORMER WHO CAME ALONG AND STOLE THE LIMELIGHT FROM ANOTHER STAR?

In 1848 I was born Elizabeth Jane Thompson and, like a lot of people, we were very poor. When I was little, I got a part in a pantomime and I knew straight away that I wanted a career on the stage. Life was hard and a poor girl like me had to work 20 hours a day, scrubbing, cleaning and serving in a pub for almost nothing, even though I was only just a teenager. And the boss was a brute!

WHAT KIND OF WORK DO YOU THINK JENNY WOULD DO IF SHE WAS A YOUNG GIRL NOW?

 But, through it all, I never let go of my dream. I kept trying to get a job as a singer, even though all I ever heard was 'No'.

 One day, I got my lucky break and was allowed to sing at the London Pavilion. The audience went wild, I was so excited that I fainted and guess who carried me back on stage for an encore? Only George Leybourne! There was no stopping me after that. I worked all the big London music halls and toured other parts of the country. I danced and I sang for all I was worth and always did a panto at Christmas. Often, I sang songs about downtrodden people, to support them and give them the dignity they deserved – you've got to stand up for your own kind haven't you? My dances were very unusual and acrobatic, not like anyone else's and I was soon earning as much as £30 a night – a fortune!

HOW MUCH DO YOU THINK £30 IS WORTH TODAY?

I even invented a sort of Twitter and FaceBook before they were even heard of by posting news about what I was up to on the back page of *The Era* – *the* theatrical newspaper of the day. Oh yes, I was way ahead of my time!

JENNY HILL



Jenny Hill was the leading female performer of the early music hall period, working from the 1860s and reaching the peak of her fame in the 1880s. She rose to the top of her profession, though her fame was soon eclipsed by the next great 'Queen of the Halls', Marie Lloyd, who was working between 1884 and 1922, when music hall entertainment became a part of mainstream British culture.

JENNY HILL WAS A SMALL, SLIGHTLY-BUILT WOMAN, WITH A PRETTY AND EXPRESSIVE FACE, though her skin scarred by childhood illness. She was often described as 'chic' or stylish and travelled between music hall engagements in a small, horse-drawn carriage, packed to the roof with **GLAMOROUS, DRESSES, STAGE COSTUMES, AND EXPENSIVE JEWELLERY** given to her by her admirers (both male and female music hall performers were given jewellery by their fans).

JENNY WAS BORN ELIZABETH JANE THOMPSON INTO A VERY POOR FAMILY IN MARYLEBONE, West London, sometime around 1850. Her story was one of rags to riches and the events of her early life were only documented after she became famous. For this reason there are various versions of key events in her early life e.g. where she first performed, and how she got her first big break. What is agreed is that in her early teens, she was apprenticed to a Bradford publican to entertain the often drunken customers and clean the pub, and was harshly treated. In 1866 she married an acrobat, John Wilson Woodley, who used the stage name Jean Pasta. They separated, and Jenny brought up their two daughters herself. After working in London for several years, she had her first big break in 1871, with an engagement at the London Pavilion. **FROM C. 1874 JENNY WAS NAMED BY HER AGENT 'THE VITAL SPARK'** because of her life-giving energy.

JENNY WORKED EXTREMELY HARD THROUGHOUT HER LIFE, touring regularly in the north of England, and all the leading London music halls, and appearing each Christmas as 'principal boy' in a pantomime. She was also a brilliant self-publicist. From 1876 until her final illness she placed regular updates about her working life on the back page of The Era (the main theatrical journal of the day) which read like modern day tweets. **EVERYTHING SHE WROTE ABOUT WAS POSITIVE, STRESSING HER SUCCESSES AND HIGH WAGES, WHICH WAS VERY UNUSUAL FOR A VICTORIAN WOMAN.**

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 **JENNY DIDN'T WRITE HER OWN SONGS,** but collected over a thousand songs from other writers and selected those she wanted to perform. She had a particularly strong relationship with her audiences, chatting to them while she sang, and presenting her own interpretation of the songs. Almost all her material was based on the lives of ordinary working people. She would appear on stage in realistic costume, singing as a 'Coffee-shop Gal' or 'the Lodging House Drudge'. Many of her songs were about downtrodden but spirited women. She also impersonated male characters. **IN ONE OF HER MOST SUCCESSFUL SONGS, "ARRY", SHE DEFENDED THE YOUNG, WORKING CLASS MEN WHO SET OUT TO DRESS AS STYLISHLY AS THE TOFFS.**

The 'Upper Ten' may jeer and say
What 'cads' the 'Arries are,
But the 'Arries work and *pay their way*
While doing the La-di-da....

 **JENNY ALSO PERFORMED ACROBATIC OR 'ECCENTRIC' DANCES** – dances that looked weird or unusual, with acrobatic flips and contortions. One example danced by Jenny was a cellar-flap break dance, where the dancer's feet were rooted to the ground but every other part of her body moved as much as possible.

 **JENNY MADE HER FIRST APPEARANCE AT WILTON'S ON 6TH APRIL 1873,** on the first night under the new management of George Fredericks and his wife Carrie Julian. Jenny Hill was the sensation of the evening and credited with making the show a success. She sang a sentimental song 'The Goodbye at the Door'. She then danced as 'Troublesome Nan' to the song, 'When the Organ Man Comes Round', (JENNY HILL WAS KNOWN FOR BAWDY HUMOUR WHICH SHE MAY HAVE DEMONSTRATED IN THIS DANCE). She finished with a sailors' hornpipe. 

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IN THE 1880S, AS JENNY GOT OLDER, AND BECAME A RECOGNIZED STAR OF THE WEST END THEATRES, HER ACT CHANGED.

She cut out the energetic dances, and extended her character songs into longer dramatic sketches like **'The City Waif'**, **'The Little Stowaway'** and **'Little Gyp'**. These mini-melodramas employed increasingly elaborate scenery and extra cast member. They were well-received by contemporary critics and helped confirm her fame.



SHE ALSO TRIED HER HAND AT ACTING IN THE LEGITIMATE THEATRE, AND AT MUSIC HALL MANAGEMENT, buying and running a series of music hall pubs between 1879 and 1884, without much success. More successful was the farm she bought in Streatham where she entertained lavishly and raised money for charity, which was expected of successful music hall entertainers. In 1890/91 she performed in New York, but the American audiences found her humour hard to understand and the strain of the tour may have contributed to her becoming seriously ill in 1892. She recovered sufficiently to perform two new songs at the London Pavilion in 1893, **AND WAS GREETED WITH FLOWERS AND RAPTUROUS APPLAUSE.** She died in 1896 at the home of her daughter Peggy Pryde, another music hall performer.



JENNY HILL



She appeared at Wilton's in the 1870s and was described as **'THE EPITOME OF SPIRIT, AGILITY, AND FUN'**. She danced a horn-pipe and sang 'I've been a good woman to you' in which a wife complains about her husband who **'GOES TO THE PUB AND BLOWS THE KIDS' GRUB'**.

SHE WAS A SMALL, PRETTY WOMAN, with an expressive face. On stage she dressed 'in character' as the hard-up working-class people she was portraying. Off-stage she was described as **CHIC OR STYLISH**.

JENNY HILL WAS THE LEADING FEMALE PERFORMER of early music hall, working from the 1860s through the 1880s.

She was born in Marylebone in c1848 AS ELIZABETH JANE THOMPSON into a very poor family.

She was a child performer from an early age, perhaps as young as 6 or 7 – accounts vary. One story says how her first appearance was **AS THE LEGS OF THE GOOSE IN THE PANTOMIME MOTHER GOOSE**.

BY HER EARLY TEENS she was apprenticed to the publican at the **Turk's Head in Bradford** where she had to entertain local farmers until 2 o'clock in the morning, and get up at 5 to clean the pub.

IN 1866 SHE MARRIED AN ACROBAT, John Wilson Woodley. His stage name was Jean Pasta. The marriage did not last and Jenny brought up their two daughters herself.

In 1871 she got her first big break with a **BOOKING AT THE LONDON PAVILION**. Her career took off and she was now top of the bill wherever she played.

SHE WORKED VERY HARD TOURING all the leading halls in London and the north of England, and starring in a pantomime each Christmas as Principal Boy.

MOST OF HER CHARACTERS WERE WOMEN, often mistreated wives, but she also cross-dressed and sang as a man. One of her most popular songs was "Arry", about a young **COCKNEY WHO DRESSED AS STYLISHLY AS A TOFF**.

SHE ALSO DANCED HORNPIPES and 'eccentric dances' which looked unusual or comical, and included acrobatic flips and **CONTORTIONS**.

She engaged and sacked, a long line of theatrical agents. One of the agents started calling her **'THE VITAL SPARK'** because of her life-affirming energy. The name stuck and was used in all her adverts from about 1874.

IN THE 1880S SHE EXTENDED SOME OF HER SONGS into longer dramatic pieces and sketches, using scenery and a cast of extra characters. These sketches tended to be more sentimental and melodramatic and less funny than her earlier songs, but were liked by reviewers.

IN 1890/1 SHE TOURED NEW YORK, but it was hard work getting the Americans to appreciate her very British act.

IN 1892 SHE BECAME ILL and never fully recovered.

SHE DIED IN 1896 AT THE HOME OF HER DAUGHTER PEGGY PRYDE, ANOTHER MUSIC HALL ARTIST.