

'I tried to like Kylie Minogue, but I just don't!'

When he was a child, Gary Williams played Frank Sinatra so much that he wore out the cassette tape. He drove his family nuts and, while all of his friends were listening to Kylie Minogue, he couldn't help but love swing and jazz.

"I think the same way that kids like certain foods or certain colours, I was just attracted to that sort of music," he says.

"When you're a teenager, you want to fit in and I was weird because I liked all this stuff and my friends liked Kylie Minogue. I remember sitting down and I put some Kylie Minogue on and I was really trying to like it. I played it over and over again and I didn't like it. I still don't!"

Islington local Gary is a testament to the timeless influence of the crooners. He seems to be channelling the whole Rat Pack, from Sinatra to Sammy Davis Jr and Dean Martin; which probably helped when he played the role of Sinatra on the West End.

His numerous albums map a journey through Broadway, big band and classic jazz. But his most recent contribution, Gary Williams at the Movies, draws songs from different genres, all of which have been seen on the silver screen.

"The original idea with this album was for it to be an album of Disney songs because I love Disney," he says. "The old Disney songs, not 'Do You Wanna Build a Snowman?' No, I don't, thank you!

Singer Gary Williams talks to **Zoe Paskett** about his new album of movie hits and his love for Islington

The old classic Disney stuff, particularly things like The Bare Necessities; there's proper, hardcore philosophy in that song."

Alongside new twists on classics such as The Bee Gees' How Deep Is Your Love and Joni Mitchell's both sides now, there are some lesser known Elvis Presley tunes.

"I recorded about six more songs than we put on the album: Cruella Devil, Spiderman, Feed the Birds from Mary Poppins; I love that song, but my boyfriend hates it," he adds, laughing. "I love the arrangement and it's actually not on the album because he wouldn't shut up about it, he wore me down! Sometimes I'll leave him a WhatsApp message of me singing it; it drives him mad. I don't know, I think he's got a problem with pigeons."

As a singer, writer and broadcaster, Gary's bread and butter are singing on ships across the world. While he used to find himself in Chile one day and China the next, he now prefers to stay around Europe. He feels that cruise ship entertainers get a bit of a bad rap.

"It's an unfair characterisation,



Gary Williams' new album brings together songs that have appeared on the silver screen.

Picture: FRANCESCO GUILDICINI

which isn't helped by people like Simon Cowell," he says. "The kind of work that I do on ships, it hardly exists on land at all. I go on a ship, it's me, and it's my name doing what I do. If I'm on land, it has to be a tribute to the Rat Pack or a night with Frank Sinatra."

He appreciates the diverse audiences and the freedom to entertain in the way that he chooses, without having to worry about getting by.

"I feel every fortunate to be able to make a living as singer. It's hard to get established. I wrote a book a few years ago called Cabaret Secrets, a guide book about how to do it. So I get contacted by people asking for

help and often they're really good, really talented people. Not only are they not famous, they can't make a living. And it is hard; it's a constant struggle, so I feel very fortunate."

Gary started out in Grimsby, where he grew up, singing alongside his day job, but got his big break with the BBC Big Band and decided that London was where he needed to be.

He remembers very vividly how he came to live in Islington.

"My ex-husband and I went to see something at the Almeida, it was a matinee on Saturday I think, and we came out onto Upper Street, we'd never been before. It was a beautiful day and

everyone's out in the street, eating and drinking and it suddenly felt like we had been transported into some European town. We walked up and down Upper Street and had a meal and I just thought it was fantastic.

"I remember reading a description about Islington in a guidebook and it described it as 'delightfully raffish'."

Gary is still as enamoured as he was when he first arrived, and despite the call of the sea to cities far and wide, he's always glad to return.

Gary Williams at the Movies is out today. Download from iTunes or buy a CD from garywilliams.co.uk/shop

Review

FOLLIES
National Theatre
★★★★

Stephen Sondheim and James Goldman's 1971 musical finally gets the outing it deserves in Dominic Cooke's blockbuster revival – with a 37-strong cast and full orchestra. Follies isn't just "still here", it's thrilling, heartrending, spectacular.

The former stars of Weismann's (read Ziegfeld's) Follies, a hit revue between the wars, reunite in their soon-to-be-demolished Broadway theatre. Thirty years on, life choices are reconsidered, as they're faced – literally – with the ghosts of their younger selves.

Cooke uses the setting to thoughtfully explore the masks

we don and roles we play, while nostalgia is both seductive and poisonous. Sally's married to salesman Buddy, while Ben and Phyllis are in a chic but frigid society marriage, but Sally still fixates on the past, when Ben might have chosen her.

There are shades of Imelda Staunton's Momma Rose in another girl who wants too much and rages against the world. She spits out the words in "Losing My Mind", a great standard here almost too raw to bear.

Janie Dee lands Phyllis's caustic barbs, but her vocal command means she can also layer emotion beneath the ironic "Could I Leave You?", and her dancing is equally impressive.

Philip Quast, another dexterous vocalist, exposes

urban Ben's insecurities, and Peter Forbes's Buddy expresses agony via vaudevillian clowning. Alex Young is a feverishly neurotic young Sally, Di Botcher witty and dynamic in "Broadway Baby", Josephine Barstow brings operatic grandeur, and Tracie Bennett stops the show with "I'm Still Here".

Just as the score and book riff off period music and American ideals, Bill Deamer's choreography is cleverly referential, while locating the yearning soul beneath the razzle dazzle. Vicki Mortimer strikingly contrasts feathers and beads with crumbling walls, as we drift from regretful reality to dream and memory.

Well worth the wait.

Marianka Swain



Imelda Staunton in Follies.

Picture: JOHAN PERSSON