

**Once made \$8,000 a week**

# The blues angel rises again — Matt Lucas

By JOHN FLANAGAN

Toronto is not renowned for its blues breakers. It has never tapped the talent of Memphis but it soon might with the help of Matt Lucas. He seems almost angelic, with his white hair, fair complexion, faint blue eyes and smooth mellow voice. But his background is anything but that.

His early career has yo-yoed repeatedly. At times he was getting hand outs from the street, at others he was giving hand outs. In the good days he was making \$8,000 a week. One of the songs that he wrote and recorded in 1964, I'm Moving On sold 3,500,000 copies.

His experience stems from the Memphis influence and two years of study and refinement at the St. Louis Music Conservatory. He was raised in the South and his whole life has revolved around living and singing the blues. His first influence in music came from his parents. They would go for drives in the country while his parents would sing romance songs to one another.

His first blues song was in honor of his dying dog who was hit by a car. It was partly a spiritual preparing his dog for the life beyond: "Oh Lord, please make my dog well, and if he dies, please keep him from Hell." The dog recovered.

In his hometown of Poplar Bluff, Missouri, he was influenced by many forms of music. The whites played hillbilly music while the blacks played blues and jazz. Matt Lucas eventually played with the bluesmen.

"You know it wasn't easy. Those guys didn't trust the whites, and they wouldn't let me play with them. Then I started giving this drummer some gin. You might say I put him on payola cause when I gave him the hooch, he'd let me play his drums. They told me I sounded like a nigger and the blacks even called me nigger.

"Sure, down there, there's a lot of prejudice, but I never knew what prejudice was until I came up north."

When he was seven years old Matt Lucas accidentally found out he was adopted when he was rummaging through his parents belongings. He couldn't cope with the situation. At 12 he was sent to a house of detention for stealing chickens. "The judge came into the courtroom in his T-shirt and I said, 'Morning judge', 'Good morning, Matt'. After finding out what I was there for, in his next

words he sentenced me to two years in a reform school."

After being released Lucas continued doing what came naturally, and he managed to pick up an indefinite prison sentence in the process. This youth became a tempting treat for the queens of Booneville Prison but he wasn't interested in that kind of activity.

Fortunately, the inmate boss took

pity on Matt and he declared that Lucas was never to be offensively handled. No one ever violated that law. When he was 15 he was put in the safety zone when he was moved in the cell-block with the 'hookers'. It was here that he experienced constant head colds and the 'clap'.

The warden of the jail became a friend of Lucas, and later interceded for him to obtain an early release. "Even in jail I played my music, and cause the warden liked it, it cut off some time in prison." But other

misdemeanors followed Lucas wherever he went; law stations always had accommodations for him. "I was even in one in Beverly Hills which had red wall to wall carpeting in it. It was the most beautiful jail I've ever seen."

Lucas speaks without bitterness and almost with fond memories of his times in jail. "I don't mind having been to jail, although at the time I did, but not after, because it taught me not to steal. I can't stand any kind of a thief whether he's a pick-pocket or in the music business."

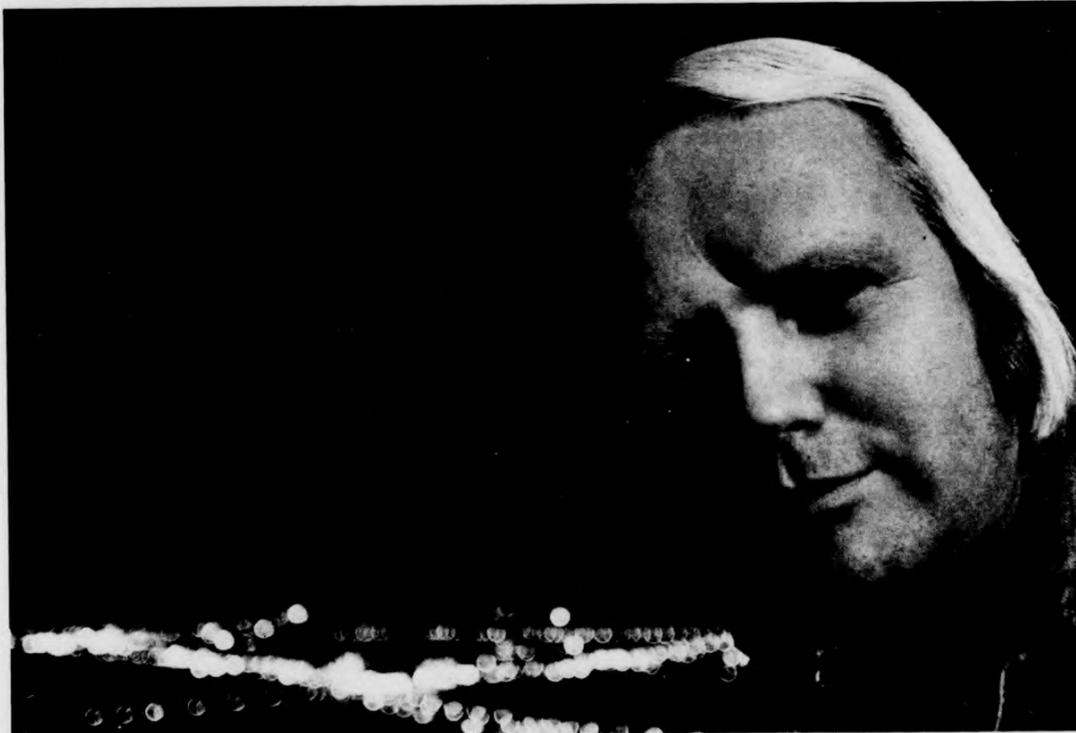
He does not have fond memories of the people in the music business. He was continually being short-changed. At one point, the 'syndicate' managed his career. He estimates that he received only half of the produce which was rightfully his. "Oh yeah, I can think right now of a \$1,000,000 that was mine and I never got."

Lucas is more cautious now. Recently in Toronto, a prominent man offered him \$100,000 in good will money to make a come back. Lucas turned it down aware of the fact that the only business that gave something for nothing was the Salvation Army.

Besides career upsets and exploiting agents, Lucas had other downfalls. He acquired a taste for alcohol before he reached his teens. Then in his teens he acquired a need for alcohol. The craving stayed with him during his time at Booneville Prison. "That was the worst thing about jail, no booze. We used to drink cleaning solvents and shoe polish. Anything that would give a buzz I'd take it. You'd have the runs for a month or so but it sure got the job done."

Cocaine and heroin didn't help Lucas out very much either. In his early 20s he was both an addict and a very heavy drinker. When he was on tour, amphetamines were a part of his meals. His brains became scrambled, the limelight dimmed and he was left in the dark at six feet and 105 pounds.

There were some good times. His contact with women has been reasonably fulfilling aside from his three broken marriages. Nothing stopped him from associating heavily with the ladies he liked. He got the 'clap' 38 times, but it was finally held in check when Penicillin became more readily available. The ladies gave him presents; most of the gifts, though were in cash. "Some how or other, women have always kept me. When I was playing



Matt Lucas

for 7,000 bucks a week, I was getting just as much from women. Money from women was more reliable than what I made playing music."

"When I was 12 I had my first girl friend. Her name was Viola Brown, who was one of the town hookers. Everybody was saying, 'Lucas your girl friend is the town whore. You're a fool to go around with that slut,' But I digged her; she was my chick and we got along really well cause that's all I cared about."

His gifts from women haven't always been welcomed, a scar over his left eye attests to that. "I was standing at this bar in Chicago when this guy came up and tapped my shoulder. You see, I had just been in bed with his wife. Then he said to me, 'Matt, were you messing with my woman?' 'Oh no, man,' I said, 'I never touched her in my life.' Right then he swung something at my face. The next thing I knew I was on my back with this ice-pack sticking through my forehead."

Again he's more cautious. Now at 36 Lucas is living comfortably again without any aggravation from dope or booze. His lady friend fortunately for him, is a very competent business woman. With this type of friendship his career is receiving better treatment from the many factions involved in the music business.

He is ably accompanied. Leroy Hightman from Chicago plays excellent lead guitar. He gives each sound a special personal meaning,

yet he's always in place with that Lucas is signing. He also has an excellent drummer and bass player, both from Toronto.

Times seem to have improved for Lucas. He has recently cut an album with the help of one of Canada's top producers, Gary Buck. The album is totally original. Boy, Lucas takes a swing at the carboncopy blues players who sing someone else's songs about someone else's experiences.

"White boy, What makes you think you can sing the blues?"

Just cause you got long hair baby That don't mean you payed your dues.

White boy, You're so dumb you thought Little Rock

Was in Tennessee, You never picked cotton, baby, and your music Does nothing to me.

White boy, One of these days, and it won't be long,

They're gonna take away your record chamber

And baby, you're gonna be gone."

Lucas says "I tried to get this virtuoso horn man up here, I phoned him down in Memphis; his name is Cats Bradley, and I said, 'Cats, come on up to Canada and play with me. It's a beautiful country, and I think you'd like it.' He says to me, 'Matt baby, I just can't. I'm an alcoholic. I just got out from the State Hospital'. Anyway, he's happy down there where he was once in the Farmington 'nut house'. I think he was happier in than he was out. He became leader of the nut house band. He has complete musical freedom, and he's really happy cause he can play anything he wants to without being stifled.

You know there's just one thing; whenever I talk to somebody, I feel they're usually thinking, 'Lucas, you're full of shit. How can anybody be that honest?' But they never say that to my face. Yeah, I also surprise them when I say I believe in God."

He would like people to believe that what he's saying is true but if they don't he considers it their problem. He feels that if they're inquisitive enough they'll find out it is the truth. In any event he hasn't got time to worry about it because once again, Matt Lucas is moving on.

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