

FLYNN, PATRICIA MAUD (Patti) (1937 - 2020), musician, author, activist

Name: Patricia Maud (Patti) Flynn
Date of birth: 1937
Date of death: 2020
Spouse: Michael E. Flynn
Spouse: Max G. Hallgren
Child: Paula Flynn
Child: Michael Flynn
Child: Sean Flynn
Parent: Beatrice Maud Young (née Silver)
Parent: Wilmuth George Young
Gender: Female
Occupation: musician, author, activist
Area of activity: History and Culture; Music
Author: Bet Davies

Patti Flynn was born in April 1937 in Butetown, then known as Tiger Bay, in Cardiff's docklands, to a family of mixed heritage. Her father, Wilmuth (known as Wilmot) George Young (1897 or 1901-1942), was born in the parish of St Maria, now St Mary, on Jamaica's North Coast, and came to Cardiff at the end of the First World War to seek work in the docks. On registration into the Royal Merchant Navy in 1918 his date of birth was given as 1901, although Jamaican records show his birth year as 1897. He married Beatrice Maud Silver (1904-1987), from the city's Canton area, in 1921, setting up home first in Sophia Street and subsequently at 40 Pomeroy Street in the heart of Tiger Bay. Patti, the youngest of their six children, had three brothers and two sisters. The first born was Jocelyn James Young (1922-1941), followed by Arthur Wilmuth Young (1923-1944). Her two sisters were Amanda (1925-1953) and Isilda Young (b. 1926). The third brother was Wilmuth Young (1932-2007).

Patti was just two years old when the Second World War broke out, and between 1941 and 1944 she lost her father and two of her brothers while serving their country. Her eldest brother Jocelyn had joined the Merchant Navy and was working aboard a ship trading out of Cardiff in the Far East when Japan declared war on the Allies in 1941. Jocelyn was declared lost at sea, with no further information ever received. Being an experienced seaman in the Merchant Navy Patti's father also found himself part of the war effort. On 13 September 1942, his ship, the Cardiff-registered *Ocean Vanguard*, was torpedoed by a German U-Boat 45 miles east off Galera Point, Trinidad. Eleven of the total complement of 51, including able seaman Young, were lost at sea. Another of Patti's brothers, Arthur, a sergeant in the RAF, was killed along with his six crewmates on 30 July 1944 when their Lancaster bomber crashed near Salford, Greater Manchester.

These tragic events were to have a very profound effect on Patti Flynn, especially as an adult, and she campaigned tirelessly for 26 years to ensure rightful recognition was given to the sacrifices of all Black and ethnic minority soldiers, like her father and brothers, who served their country in the World Wars. On 2 November 2019 her efforts were rewarded when a plaque was finally unveiled at the Welsh National War Memorial in Alexander Gardens, Cathays Park, Cardiff.

As a child Patti Flynn was surrounded by music and developed her love of jazz and performing by listening to the popular sounds of the day, such as Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and classics from the *Great American Songbook*. She also had the good fortune of listening to her brother Arthur, an accomplished trumpeter, as well as watching her mentor and idol, the legendary jazz guitarist Victor Parker (1910-1978) from Tiger Bay. Victor encouraged the young Patti to pursue a singing career, and even played as her accompanist on her first professional gig at the age of eighteen, in the Glamorgan pub in Tiger Bay.

In 1957 Patti married Michael E. Flynn in Cardiff. They had three children, Paula (b. 1957), Michael (b. 1964) and Sean (1967-1996), who died tragically in an accident aged twenty-nine. That marriage ended in divorce, and in 1986 Patti married Max G. Hallgren.

During the 1960s and 70s Patti Flynn toured the UK's clubs, ballrooms and theatres, and became an international cabaret artist. In 1977 she made her first West End appearance as understudy to Elaine Delmar in her starring role as Irene, in the Broadway hit musical *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, presented at the Royalty Theatre, London. She released her first album, *With Love to You*, through the independent label SRT Productions in 1979. Two singles followed in 1982: *Christmas Every Day* (Prairie Records) and *Soul Stuntman* (on the Movie Music Label).

In the mid-1980s, Patti moved to Spain where she broadened her experience in music, as a producer and popular English language radio presenter with her music shows, *Just for You* and *Costa Nights*. She subsequently returned to Cardiff and to performing her jazz repertoire, often teaming up with other well-known musicians from the city's jazz scene, such as international jazz pianist Geoff Eales and trumpeter Chris Hodgkins. At this time she also created, produced and presented her own popular shows *Jazz Ladies of the Twentieth Century* and *A Trip Down Memory Lane*, featuring the music of the *Great American Songbook* composers. In 2006 she sang with Dame Cleo Laine and Sir John Dankworth at a Jazz Heritage Wales event.

She joined with her musician friends, sisters Humie and Jackie Webbe, to create The Bay Divas trio. The aim at the outset was to celebrate the musical heritage of Tiger Bay, from the 20s and 30s through to the 50s. They performed in St David's Hall and the Donald Gordon Theatre at Wales Millennium Centre, as well as other venues in south Wales. Patti and her fellow jazz singers also wanted to revive the interest in jazz in Butetown, to keep the tradition alive for future generations. With this in mind in 2009 she co-founded the Butetown Bay Jazz Festival with Humie Webbe, making Wales Millennium Centre its annual home every May Day. The festival programme included jazz workshops for young people and performances to showcase emerging young talent in the community, as well as a celebration of Tiger Bay's musical heritage through the achievements of its jazz performers.

Patti Flynn was a strong advocate and campaigner for Black History. As the landscape of the old Tiger Bay was changing, with the regeneration of what became known as Cardiff Bay, in 1988, with help from the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation, Butetown History & Arts Centre was created. Its purpose was to capture and celebrate the area's rich heritage and Patti made a considerable contribution to its educational work, in particular, using music, writing and storytelling.

As well as performing, Patti loved writing and was passionate about researching Black History and culture. In 2003 she collaborated with photographer Mathew Manning to produce *Fractured Horizon: A Landscape of Memory*. Together, through pictures and words, they confront the past and present of Cardiff docklands. The book was edited by academic Glenn Jordan, translated into Welsh by poet T. James Jones and published by Butetown History and Arts Centre.

In 2006, through the Learning and Skills Council's Ransackers Programme, at the age of seventy-three, Patti was given the opportunity to study at Ruskin College in Oxford. During her time there she completed two research and creative writing projects, *From a Seaside Town to a Capital City*, tracing the history of her home city, and *Colouring History*, which put famous women of colour back into history. At the time of her death, she had already embarked on writing her memoir, *Born Down My Tiger Bay*, telling the story of Cardiff's docklands from her own perspective, while reflecting on the lives, sacrifices and determination of the area's diverse community.

In 2017 she was honoured as one of the founders of the Black History Movement in Wales and in 2019 received the Ethnic Minority Welsh Women's Lifetime Achievement Award. In March 2023 a purple plaque was unveiled at the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff Bay to commemorate her life and work.

Patti Flynn died of cancer at her home in Cardiff on 10 September 2020.

Author

Bet Davies

Sources

Personal acquaintance

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'Ocean Vanguard', UBoat.Net

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'RAF and RAAF Bomber Squadron Profiles: 106 Squadron', Bomber Command Museum Archives

Further reading

Wikipedia Article: [Patti Flynn](#)

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