

Windmills of his mind

As honky tonk pianist Nick, Bexhill's Derek Nicholas sold more than 500,000 records. DUNCAN HALL learns about his other on-going obsession

IN 1969, the same year The Beatles recorded their final album, young nightclub pianist Derek 'Nick' Nicholas stepped into Decca's recording studio for the first time.

The resulting album, *Warm Red Sentimental Blue*, was the first in a series of instrumental releases which sold more than half a million copies over the next decade. Derek has just rereleased that initial recording of piano, choir and orchestra as *Get Back To The Sixties* under his own NML label.

Born in Shirley, Surrey, in 1946, Derek had trained as a classical pianist from a young age. But he was soon drawn to the fertile music scene of the 1960s – working as a music copyist and arranger with a London music publisher by day and a club pianist by night under the name Nick Nicholas when Decca's A&R man spotted him. "The album cost something like £3,000 in those days, with a full orchestra of session musicians," he says today, from Bexhill's seafront members-only club The Waterfront. "The piano part took three days – I did it live with the rhythm section and some of the brass and strings." His later releases came through Polygram, who encouraged him to move to the honky-tonk style made popular by Mrs Mills and Russ Conway, as well as releasing an album of popular TV themes and jingles. His take on the *What's My Line* theme came out as a single, one of two 7ins he was to release – the second, *Royal Event*, coinciding with the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977.

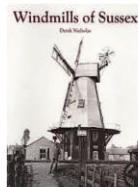
Through the 1970s and 1980s Derek worked with songwriter Norman Newell, arranging and transcribing material for stars including Barbara Cartland, Geoff Love and US film star Bette Davis. "Norman used to phone at 2am and say: 'I've got an idea for a song,'" he remembers. "I would have to come and play passages while he wrote the lyrics. I was there when he wrote *Never, Never, Never* and *This Is My Life*." Many of the songs were based on European tunes, with Norman, who died in an East Preston nursing home in 2004, writing new English lyrics. "He wrote them all longhand," recalls Derek. "They were like poetry. He was a perfectionist, he wouldn't stop until he was happy."

In 1982 Derek began a 20-year residency at the Dorchester Hotel, playing to guests including Tony Curtis, Bruce Forsyth, Judith Chalmers, James Bond producer Cubby Broccoli, Rosemary



Photo: Sue Jackson

Derek 'Nick' Nicholas taken for the cover of his album *Get Back To The Sixties*



FIND OUT MORE

For the *Get Back To The Sixties* album visit www.nicknicholas.co.uk
Windmills of Sussex by Derek Nicholas is published by Stenlake Publishing and available for £20 at all good bookshops and online.
 Call 01290 551122;
sales@stenlake.co.uk

Clooney and West Chiltington's own Norman Wisdom, whose favourite was *Don't Laugh At Me*. "I always played things from memory," says Derek who admits to being a quick sight-reader. "There was never any sheet music in front of me."

The second track on *Get Back To The Sixties*, *The Windmills Of Your Mind* made famous by Noel Harrison, links to Derek's other major passion. In 2015 he released a book, *Windmills of Sussex*, the result of a decade's research into more than 200 windmills across the county. It carries on an obsession which began as a teenager, when he would explore the derelict buildings, and now into retirement in Bexhill. "When I was touring in the 1960s I saw many of the last working windmills," he says. "The structure of the buildings always fascinated me." A keen traveller, he has visited windmills in San Francisco, South Africa, Perth and Barbados, but counts the nearby Polegate and Stonecross windmills as two of his favourites, both of which have been restored. He is a member of the Oldland Mill Trust, as featured on pages 44 to 46.

"I feel like the book is an unfinished historical document," he says. "I'm always finding new details. I have requested a revision – I've got enough material to update a second edition!" ♦