

QUESTION What happened to Wilson, Keppel and Betty, a music hall act who dressed as Egyptians and performed a comic dance routine?

WILSON, Keppel and Betty were Jack Wilson, Joe Keppel and Betty Knox. Wilson was born in Liverpool in 1894, moved to the U.S. at a young age and made his stage debut in 1909 as a dancer.

Having served in World War I in the Royal Navy, he moved to Australia and joined Colleano's Circus where he struck up a friendship with Keppel (1895-1977), an Irish tap dancer and veteran of the Royal Flying Corps.

The pair clicked and they combined to form a comedy acrobatic and tap dancing act, which debuted in New York in March 1919.

It was not until 1928 that the pair expanded their act to become the famous trio, having met the beautiful Betty Knox, comedian Jack Benny's stage partner, in Des Moines in Iowa. They quickly began to develop their famous Cleopatra's Nightmare sand dance routine, using Luigini's celebrated Ballet Egyptian music, arranged for them by Hoagy Carmichael.

This sand dance was a parody of Egyptian postures, combined with references to Arabic costume. The lithe and lanky Wilson and Keppel, who wore long moustaches and make-up to emphasise the sharp angularity of their features so as to appear almost identical, would demonstrate their impressive suppleness in adopting gestures reminiscent of Egyptian hieroglyphs, while Betty looked on.

Having stormed the New York stage, the act were signed to play at the London Palladium on August 2, 1932. They caused such a sensation that they decided to settle in England and became an established feature of British variety shows for three decades.

They were chosen for the Royal Variety Performance in 1934 and were invited back again in 1945 and 1947.

They played regularly at the Alhambra and the Palladium and, because the act was silent and did not require translation, played at venues across Europe. They can still be seen on some of the variety compilations filmed in that era, such as *Soft Lights And Sweet Music* (1936), *Variety Jubilee* (1943), and *Starlight Serenade* (1943).

While Wilson and Keppel remained constant, they went through eight Bettys. The original left in 1941 to become a war correspondent who reported the Nuremberg trials. She was replaced by her daughter Patsy, born in 1924, who took on the stage name Betty.

When they retired from the stage in 1963, Keppel returned to his native Cork and died there in 1977 aged 82. Wilson took up residence at Brinsworth House for retired actors in 1967, where he reportedly enjoyed an active and sociable retirement, and died on August 24, 1970.

Sally Short, Twickenham, Middx.



Walk like an Egyptian: Jack Wilson, Joe Keppel and Betty Knox performing their popular variety act

Comedy's first carry-on Cleo

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS
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