

DOT MENDOZA

aka **Doris Mendoza**

(1899-1986) During her career of more than half a century, Dot Mendoza worked as an accompanist for J. C. Williamsons, performed as a variety and concert entertainer on both the stage and on radio, toured with dramatic companies and revue companies, appeared as between-films entertainment, and in the 1950s established herself as a composer and music director for children's theatre, intimate revue (notably with Sydney's Phillip Street Theatre), and television (*The Mavis Bramston Show*). She was also a leading teacher of performance and voice during the 1950s and 1960s. Mendoza was awarded an OAM in 1985 for her services to the Australian entertainment industry.

The daughter of Queensland-born commission agent and part-time singer (tenor) Frederick Herbert Mendoza and his Victorian-born wife Phoebe (née Herman), Doris Rosetta Elizabeth (Dot) Mendoza was born in Perth on 11 September 1899 with a congenital dislocation of both hips. Before she was six, she had had 35 operations and was still unable to walk. In desperation her parents took her to a specialist in Vienna, Austria, who operated and put her in plaster for six months. When she came out of plaster she was able to walk, but remained in Vienna another 12 months for daily massage. In a 1953 interview Mendoza recalls that she always walked with a slight limp but as she grew older, she was able to disguise it.

Between ca. 1907 and 1911 Mendoza was a student of Kalgoorlie juvenile music and performance teacher Mrs Bennett-Wilkinson (aka Mrs R. A. Bennett). She reportedly excelled in her practical piano examinations and also accompanied her father in concerts. Jane E. Hunt records that Mendoza was from an early age 'musically versatile... skilled at sight-reading, playing melodies by ear, and transposing on sight.'¹

After the family moved to Melbourne she began lessons with the Melbourne music teacher Edward Goll (ca. 1912) and at age 17 won a Melbourne University Conservatorium scholarship.² At a mid-winter concert in Melbourne in 1917 her selections from the Grieg Concerto were reportedly played with "brilliant technique and grasp of the Norwegian writer's intentions." One Melbourne critic went on to note that Mendoza's performance was 'one the maturest readings of the evening.'³ In 1919 she successfully auditioned as a rehearsal pianist for *J. C. Williamson's Ltd*. Two years later she married violinist Frederick John Morton in St Kilda, Melbourne. The couple had two children, Peter and June, before separating in the late-1920s. They divorced in 1942. Her association with the "Firm," saw her later tour with Anna Pavlova (Australia and New Zealand, 1926), Bagnoli (Australia, 1928), and its own Opera Company (New Zealand, 1932) among other.⁴

Mendoza is believed to have started her association with popular culture entertainment (variety theatre and film exhibition) in the late-1920s. In 1929, for example, she performed piano duos with Stephanie Grey during the Comedy Theatre's *Brewster's Millions* season. Mendoza and Grey's repertoire, performed prior to the screening and during the intermission, comprised selections from opera, musical comedy, Gilbert and Sullivan, National music, and popular songs from England, Ireland and Scotland. In 1931 she performed with Cecil Parkes (violin) and Christine Fraillon (cello) at the Café Chantant, Melbourne, playing selected numbers and accompanying leading singers. The event was staged under the direction of Hugh Steyne.

The early 1930s saw Mendoza appear in radio concerts broadcast out of Melbourne. She also continued performing as between-films entertainment (notably at the Majestic Theatre in 1933), and featured at various charity concerts. In 1933, for example, she appeared on the bill at *Gladys Moncrieff's* fundraiser for the Melbourne Women's Hospital. Also on the programme were artists such as James Foran and *Claude Flemming*. The latter half of the decade saw Mendoza tour with the Madge Elliott-Cyril Ritchard Company (1935), and Colonel Wassily de Basil's *Ballet Russe* (1936-1940). With members of Ritchard's *High Jinks* company Mendoza appeared in a special live outdoor broadcast



West Australian 24 June (1934), 7.

¹ See Jane E. Hunt, n. pag. [Further Reference section]

² George Hart records in 1947 that Mendoza graduated with a Bachelor of Music from the Conservatorium under Goll's supervision. See "*Behind the Mike*," *Sun* (Sydney) 23 Jan. (1947), 6.

³ *Punch* (Melbourne) (26 July 1917, 8)

⁴ Mendoza was known professionally as Doris Mendoza until the early 1930s. She is billed as Doris in 1932 radio programmes, for example. The following year an advertisement for the Majestic Theatre, Melbourne, identifies her as Dot Mendoza. Her given name was also sometimes erroneously credited as Dorothy.

from the Perth Esplanade.⁵ She also appeared in a variety concert for the Goodwood Orphanage in Adelaide in 1937. Other artists on the bill were fellow members of J. C. Williamson's *Over She Goes* Company, *Kitty Bluett*, and the Pot Shot Revue Company. A 1936 article on Mendoza indicates, too, that she had previously been associated with tours by international artists such as Toti dal Monte (soprano), Italian conductor Rossi, as well as Boucicault and Moscovitch.⁶

After World War II Mendoza became involved with Sydney's Minerva Theatre and made at least three recordings with Columbia Records. In January 1947 she was appointed staff pianist with the Colgate-Palmolive Radio Unit, which had by was based largely in Melbourne.⁷ She also continued to work regularly in radio, making numerous appearances for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) up until possibly the early to mid-1960s.⁸ She was also involved in a project to rejuvenate Tasmanian theatre in late 1950.

In 1954 Mendoza travelled to Britain to visit her children who had both moved there after the war. The trip was also made so that she could receive treatment for osteoarthritis, a condition which had begun to impact on her well-being from around 1949. By the early 1950s she had become almost crippled from the affliction. Later, while recuperating in London she did some work for the British Broadcasting Corporation.



"Red, a Pomeranian owned by Miss Dot Mendoza, of St. Neot's Ave., King's Cross, and an entrant in the Popular Dog Competition in aid of the R.S.P.C.A., smiled almost as brightly as his vivacious owner for this picture."

Truth (Sydney) 11 Apr. (1948), 4.

After returning to Australia Mendoza worked primarily, as a creative artist, in revue, children's musicals and radio,⁹ while also setting up her own teaching academy in Sydney - she specialised in piano, singing and voice (the latter coaching primarily catering for people involved in radio and television). During the late-1950s and early 1960s, she was heavily involved with the Phillip Street Theatre as composer, music director, and pianist for its revues. Mendoza wrote most of the music for such shows as *Alice in Wonderland* (1956), *Cross Section* (1957), *Bats* (1958), *The Birthday Show* (1959), *Stop Press* (1961), and *At it Again* (1962). She also performed in some productions and was the musical director of the revue *Is Australia Really Necessary?* (1964).

In the mid-1960s Mendoza was associated with *The Mavis Bramston Show* as scriptwriter, composer and performer. Jane Hunt further notes that "she wrote the score for *The Vatican*, a special radio presentation broadcast in the mid-1960s. It included the voice and Blessing of His Holiness, Pope Paul VI, recorded during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), along with dramatic performances by local actors. The script was credited to "John Crane" (aka George Landen Dann). Hunt further notes that Mendoza [and] coached actors in performance and voice production. Among those she taught were Barry Humphries, June Salter, Gordon Chater, John Meillon and Jill Perryman.

Dot Mendoza was awarded an OAM in 1985. She died on 19 May 1986 in her home at Mount Waverley, Victoria, and was cremated. She was survived by both her children.

Sun (Sydney) 9 Dec. (1946), 10.

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⁵ "Theatrical Day: Gaiety on Esplanade." *West Australian* 30 Aug. (1935), 25.

⁶ "Pianist's Cavalcade of Colourful Folk." *News* 15 Oct. (1936), 7.

⁷ George Hart. "Behind the Mike." *Sun* (Sydney) 23 Jan. (1947), 6.

⁸ Mendoza's last known radio appearance was on 2CY in 1958. However, as most Australian newspaper issues digitised by Trove are currently available only until 1954 (including Sydney papers), there is no way to currently ascertain how long her radio career continued. The 1958 details come from the *Canberra Times* 6 May (1958), 9.

⁹ Sydney's *Sun* newspaper refers to Mendoza in 1950 as both a "radio star" and actor. See "Pyramid Party." 12 Mar. (1950), 3.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. After her divorce from Frederick Morton in 1942, Mendoza married another entertainer, musician and baritone, Francis Daniel Forde, in Melbourne. Their relationship also did not last.
2. **Peter Mendoza** (ca. 1928-): Known professionally by his mother's maiden name, Peter Mendoza was well-known in Australia theatrical circles from the early 1940s as an actor and later stage manager. In 1948 he travelled to England and soon afterwards secured a 12-month contract with Harrogate Repertory Theatre, then one of England's most acclaimed theatrical organisations. His daughter is actress/comedian Gina Mendoza.

NB: Not to be confused with the English composer of the same name who was active during the early to mid-twentieth century.

3. In 1948 Dot Mendoza and her daughter June wrote and illustrated respectively, *The Tail is Familiar*, a book about dogs. It was published by Robertson and Mullins Ltd, Melbourne. The foreword is by Peter Mendoza.
4. **June Mendoza** (ca. 1925-): As with her brother, June Mendoza used her mother's maiden name professionally from an early age. Although best known as one of Australia's finest female artists, and certainly in the area of oil painting portraiture, Mendoza was nevertheless involved in various aspects of the Australia entertainment industry prior to immigrating to Britain in the late-1940s. This included appearances on both the dramatic and variety stages, and in radio broadcast. For further details relating to her life and career see the individual entry in the AVTA.
5. Dot Mendoza's discography includes both jazz and classical piano performances.
6. In reporting in 1954 that Mendoza was about to travel to Britain to see her children and receive medical treatment for osteoarthritis, the *Sun* newspaper also records that she had been writing verse from the age of six and that many of her poems had been published. The article also indicates that Mendoza planned to publish a volume of her poetry while in England.¹⁰ No details regarding Mendoza's published poems has yet been located.
6. **Mendoza Street (Australian Capital Territory)**: In 2015 a street in the designated Canberra suburb of Moncrieff, was named in Mendoza's honour. Although Moncrieff was gazetted back in April 1991, initial land releases only became available to developers in June 2014.



WEDDING OF THEATRICAL INTEREST. Mr Frank Forde, well-known singer who has been heard in musical comedy and over the air, leaving Wesley Church with his bride, formerly Miss Dot Mendoza (Mrs Morton) after their marriage yesterday. The bride is pianist at Comedy Theatre, and her husband is a discharged soldier.

Argus 28 Sept. (1943), 6.

SEE ALSO

[June Mendoza](#)

FURTHER REFERENCE

- Baker, Sally. "[Woman Who Refused to Die](#)." *Sun* (Sydney) 7 June (1953), 53.
- Djubal, Clay. "[Dot Mendoza](#)." *AustLit: The Resource for Australia Literature*. (2015) [Incl. Mendoza's late career works with Phillip Street Theatre, Sydney]
- Hunt, Jane E. "[Mendoza, Doris Rosetta Elizabeth \(Dot\) \(1899–1986\)](#)." *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 18 (2012).
- "[Life One Long Adventure](#)." *Age* 11 Mar. (1944), 8.
- "Papers of Dot Mendoza." National Library of Australia. MS Acc11.055
- "[Pianist off to London](#)." *Sun* (Sydney) 18 Feb. (1954), 39.
- "[Theatre Identities Marry](#)." *Argus* 28 Sept. (1943), 6.
- "[West Australian Returns](#)." *West Australian* 24 June (1938), 7.

¹⁰ See "[Pianist off to London](#)," 39.

Actress hopes 5/- will to snowball to £16



"Pyramid Party. Dot Mendoza receiving 5/- from Janice Childe. Mrs. M. Hammersley, Mrs. W. Simpson, Mrs. J. J. Childe and Miss Shirley Donald look on."
Sun (Sydney) 12 Mar. (1950), 3.



DOT MENDOZA is accompanied at the piano by her dog, Red.
Sun (Sydney) 7 June (1953), 53.



Peter Mendoza, who takes a part in the drama, "Watch On The Rhine," at the Comedy.

Argus 18 Sept. (1943), 6.



Illustrations from Dot Mendoza and June Mendoza. *The Tail is Familiar*. (1948).



June Mendoza painting Sammy Davis Jnr
(ca. 1968)
Source: National Library of Australia

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