

DONALD PEERS READS MUSIC BADLY

THE babbling brook singer of stage and screen, radio and TV, 45-year-old Donald Peers was emphatic with his gestures until he was quietly reminded: "This is a court, not a theatre." He had just brought one hand down with a slap on the rail of the witness box, but he was quieter when he admitted that he read music badly and had a vague idea when the notes went up and down. He added, however, "I am not alone in that."

That was on the third day of the hearing in the High Court in London of an action in which he was sued by his former accompanist, Ernest John Ponticelli, for £490 arrears of salary. Donald Peers denied that there was any contract, and the contest between singer and pianist — so different from those which sometimes leave one of the participants breathless—ended in a draw.

On the first day of the hearing, the bushy grey eyebrows of Mr. Justice Cassels, which often say more than the taciturn judge, had shot up as he asked the pianist: "Did I hear you say that you taught him his songs?"

"Yes, my lord," replied Ernest Ponticelli. "I had to teach him songs. He is not a musician, he does not play an instrument. He has to be taught his songs by a pianist."

Peers and Ponticelli have appeared together on the stage hundreds of times.



DONALD PEERS

"One has to be taught the melody"

J. W. GOODWIN tells how his pianist taught him his songs

When they met in 1938, one was already established, the other was a youthful and budding pianist. In 1946 Ponticelli was engaged as personal accompanist, manager and general factotum. He was dismissed in 1951.

"I was his right-hand man," Ponticelli told the High Court. "I used to run errands for him, phone his wife, and go to the chemist to buy throat drops."

More important, he told the judge, were the times he went backstage to teach Donald Peers his songs, particularly before making a film or a recording. He always went to the studio to see that everything was all right.

Some of this was admitted by the singer. Asked by Mr. Michael Corley, for Ponticelli, if he had to be taught his songs, he replied: "Taught songs, yes. One has to be taught the melody."

Mr. Corley: You had to be taught your songs by Ponticelli in "Sing Along With Me?"—If I remember rightly, the songs were not recorded until the last moment. One of the songs I knew, and I was taught another by Mr. Arthur Ridley.

Earlier Donald Peers had told the judge that he had "done everything in my power to put money in this young man's way." He denied emphatically that he had been "rather mean about it all."

When they were travelling, Ponticelli went first-class, though it was usual for accompanists to travel third. The arrangement was that as the pianist progressed, he was paid more, but there was an arrangement of "no play, no pay."

"If it suited me not to work because I wanted to play golf, I did not think it fair that he should be out of pocket, so I paid him his salary just the same."

Asked about a letter in which he had written: "I cannot afford to pay £30 a week whether you work or not," Donald Peers said he had not been paying that sum regularly.

He agreed that when he dismissed his pianist-manager, he withheld several weeks' salary. "I asked him to bring me all the music, and it was in a shocking mess, higgledy-piggledy and bits missing all over the place."

"Being no musician, as he has told you, I had an enormous amount of work to sort it out."

After Mr. Justice Cassels had given judgment for Ponticelli to receive £200 paid into court by Donald Peers, it was expected that they would break even over the settlement of costs which they must share for different periods.

"Both are accomplished artists," said the judge. "It would be right to say that each owed a great deal to the other, so far as success was concerned."

Donald Peers, asked as he was leaving the High Court whether he might employ Ponticelli again, said merely: "I cannot discuss that."

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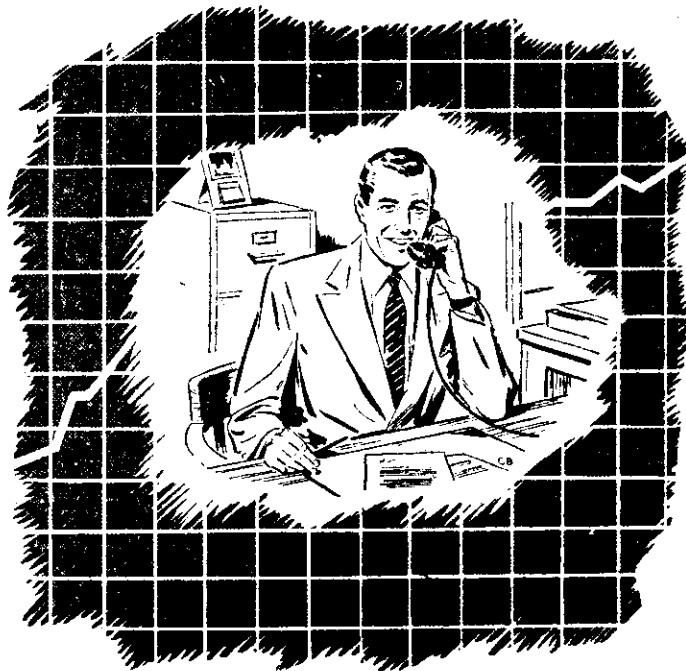
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Lasseter's Reef

SOMEWHERE out in the parched wastes of the Gibson Desert of Australia lies a rich reef of gold—Lasseter's Reef. The story of how Harry Lasseter found his reef in the closing years of last century, and how, some thirty years later, it was the death of him, is told in an hour-long BBC programme, *Quest in the Desert*, which will be heard from 1YA at 2.0 p.m. this Sunday, March 28, and from 2YA at 9.30 a.m. on Sunday, April 4. It took Lasseter 30 years to convince anyone that he had found an El-dorado in the desert, and it was through the influence of John Bailey, President of



the Australian Workers' Union, that the Central Australian Gold Exploration Company was formed. An expedition was fitted out in 1930, and although it was dogged with bad luck at every stage. Lasseter would not be daunted. Companion after companion dropped out as cars broke down and aeroplanes crashed, but Lasseter pressed on. In January, 1931, searchers found him dead in the desert. His diaries made it almost certain that he had found his reef again and pegged it in accordance with the law, but the details were incomplete. Since 1931 many expeditions have been organised in an attempt to solve the mystery of the reef. None so far has been successful.

N.Z. LISTENER, MARCH 26, 1954.

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