

DEAD FOR FORTY-SEVEN YEARS, BUT “SPARKIE” CHATTERS ON



Photo: Hancock Museum

Even though Sparkie (1954-1962) has been dead for forty-seven years, her voice is still heard around the world, and she has now provided the inspiration for a new opera by Michael Nyman and Carsten Nicolai. Which was performed in Berlin in March 2009. Sparkie, who had a repertoire of more than 500 words and eight nursery rhymes, became a national British celebrity after fronting an advertising campaign for Capern's bird seed, and making a recording that sold 20,000 copies. When she died, she was put on show at the Hancock Museum in Newcastle in the United Kingdom.

Born and bred in North-East England, Sparkie was owned by Mrs. Mattie Williams, who lived in Forest Hall, near Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Sparkie earned her name after Mrs. Williams began calling her 'A bright little spark'. By the time she was three-and-a-half, she had won the BBC International Cage Word Contest in July 1958. She was so good, in fact, that she was disqualified from taking part again.

Sparkie was courted by bird seed sellers, and fronted an advertising campaign for Capern's bird seed for two years. She was recorded talking with Philip Marsden, the UK Budgie expert, on BBC radio and appeared on the BBC "Tonight" programme with Cliff Michelmore. When Sparkie died, she was preserved by the best taxidermist in London and taken on a tour of Britain in an exhibition of her life and work, before coming back to the Hancock Museum in 1996. Sparkie Williams is acclaimed as the world's most outstanding talking bird in the Guinness Book of Records.

The opera inspired by Sparkie is based on Michael Nyman's 1977 piece *Pretty Talk*. The original piece used material from a record made by Capern's bird-food company to help customers teach their pet birds to talk. The 18cm (7") flexi-disc featured the short sentences spoken by Sparkie's owner to encourage her pet to speak - followed by replies from Sparkie herself. The new opera, "*Sparkie: Cage and Beyond*", will also feature other recordings from the 'Sparkie' archives of the Natural History Society of Northumbria. A CD of Sparkie talking has already been released.

Work on a £26 million extension and refurbishing of the Hancock Museum will be completed this month as part of the Great North Museum. Sparkie will be among the exhibits on show to visitors.

Reference: Wikipedia

(In the Wikipedia article, the obviously female Sparkie, is referred to as "he". Ed.)