

# ***ERIC JAMES and PHYLLIS O'REILLY***

***Whitby has been very fortunate in recent years to have two very energetic and marvelous individuals in the persons of Eric James and his wife Phyllis O'Reilly. They have been musical performers all their lives and moved to Whitby in 1987.***

***James was sole music associate to Charlie Chaplin for the last 20 years of the movie pioneers life. It was he who helped Chaplin write and score the music for a number of early films the screen legend still owned. An acknowledged expert on the man and his work, James was a sought-after guest on Elwy Yost's popular "Saturday Night at the Movies" when Chaplin films were shown on TVOntario. The public broadcaster also hired James to record the music for 33 of the "Little Tramps" silent shorts it was preparing to air.***

***"I've been in show business for more tha 70 years" stated James. "Since I left school at 15 .... In our profession, if you still have your health and all your marbles and can travel, you keep working".***

***Phyllis was singing on stage in Liverpool at age seven and grew to take on leads in musical comedies and Gilbert and Sullivan productions. James began playing the piano at age five. Throughout the 1930s, he honed his musical skills in dance bands and with radio orchestras. Following service in the Royal Air Force organizing entertainment for airmen, it was after the war James's work with the BBC Orchestra garnered him notice. He began recording extensively, playing the Royal Albert Hall, the London Palladium and Royal Festival Hall. Then came his most challenging assignment.***

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***“I met Mr. Chaplin in 1956 when he was filming ‘A King in New York’ at Shepperton studios in London”, he says. “He had eventually decided to emigrate (from the US) because of a certain Senator McCarthy”.***

***The infamous senator was Joseph McCarthy, who head-ed up the investigation of Communist infiltration in the Hollywood motion picture industry brought about by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).***

***By the 1950s, writers, actors and directors were blacklisted. In Chaplin’s case, he had remained a British citizen and was simply not allowed to re-enter the US following a trip to Europe. “A King in New York” satirizes HUAC.***

***“I asked him once, ‘Were you ever a communist? Are you a communist?’” confides James. “Chaplin simply told me, ‘I have always been a socialist ... I did a very silly thing one day when I was asked to go to speak at a (Second World War) rally to raise money for war bonds. I thought I would say something funny so the first thing I said was, ‘Good evening comrades,’ ‘That was enough.’”***

***There were other interesting conversations over the years at Chaplin’s estate, the appropriately named ‘Manoir de Ban’ in Vevey, Switzerland. Chaplin once told James how (Toronto born) Mary Pickford was too slow when they were negotiating the sale of United Artists to Samuel Goldwyn in 1950. The impatient MGM head dropped the price from \$12 million to \$9.5 million.***

***“Mary Pickford’s dithering cost me \$2.5 million,’ he told me.”***

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***His long association with Chaplin, up until his death in 1977, saw James become a member of the family. Chaplin's eight children called him 'Uncle Eric.' He had meals with them and attended family celebrations, weddings and star-studded dinner parties, meeting the likes of Noel Coward and James Mason who lived nearby.***

***"Charles Chaplin knew only one thing, work." says James. "He had no hobby ... We worked from 9:30 am to 9:30 pm."***

***"He had a brain like a dynamo and expected everyone to think as quickly as he'd dictate his ideas." he says of his famous collaborator, who never learned to read or write music. "I'd take it down but when things got tough, I'd say, 'I'm not a magician, I'm a musician.'" The two not only developed a rapport musically, but also became friends.***

***The arrangements James created for Chaplin's films were for 50 to 60 piece orchestras. "He was sick of others trying to make the music sound funny," he explains. "'The Kid' has beautiful music, not unlike Tchaikovsky."***

***'This is My Song,' was written by Chaplin (and James) for the 1967 movie, 'A Countess From Hong Kong,' O'Reilly first sang it on the BBC but then Petula Clark recorded it into pop song history. "Petula had more of that pop quality," says O'Reilly, who describes herself as "soprano."***

***James's memories of working on the song and the movie score are priceless. It seems 'Countess From Hong Kong'***

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***co-stars, Sophia Loren and Marlon Brando, didn't get on to well. "There was this one romantic scene when Sophia suddenly said, 'Marlon, you've got hair growing out your nose,' James regales. "Marlon Brando was a bit sour at the best of times and blew up. Chaplin (the film's director, producer and screenwriter) told them off."***

***Both James and O'Reilly spend time each day at their Grand Piano, topped with framed portraits of O'Reilly's pupils (she still teaches), Charlie Chaplin and an invitation to a Buckingham Palace garden party. "Once you've seen these things, you never forget", adds James. Indeed.***

***Eric James has written a book about his interesting life. 'Making Music with Charlie Chaplin' is available at both the Oshawa and Whitby public libraries.***