

Still singing when the snowman melted

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From angelic chorister to daytime-television presenter, Aled Jones will be forever associated with *The Snowman*. He talks to *Sarah Meyrick*

PA



Those were the days: the younger Aled Jones with the Emmy award for the documentary about his life, *The Treble*

ALED JONES burst onto the musical scene more than 30 years ago. Many will remember the sweet-faced choirboy from Bangor Cathedral who sang with startling beauty and clarity.

His rise was stellar: suddenly he was everywhere. Recordings and television appearances quickly followed his first broadcast. By the time his voice broke, he had sung for the Queen, and the Prince and Princess of Wales, among others, and at the wedding of Bob Geldof and Paula Yates. He had already made 12 albums when he released the song with which he will always be associated: a cover version of "Walking in the Air" from *The Snowman*. It was a worldwide hit.

Since then, he has released more than 30 albums, generating sales of eight million. He has performed across the world, from the Hollywood Bowl to the Vatican, and from Buckingham Palace to the Sydney Opera House. Now, at the age of 45, he has just published a new CD for Christmas. *One Voice at Christmas* is a follow-up to the highly successful *One Voice* which came out earlier this year. What makes the two *One Voice* albums stand out from all the other recordings is that the music features Jones the tenor singing duets with Jones the treble.

The success of *One Voice* took everyone by surprise, Jones says. It went straight to number three in the UK album chart, and dominated the number-one position in the classical chart for 14 weeks. "It seems to really resonate with people. So it was the obvious thing to do another one for Christmas. My favourite music in the whole world is carols, closely followed by hymns."

The first album used one of the last set of recordings made by the treble Jones, which had never previously been released. This time around, the treble line comes from one of his first recordings, which was published in Wales only.

TODAY, Jones is as much in demand as a TV and radio presenter as a singer. To give a snapshot: alongside concert tours, his output in 2016 includes *Songs of Praise* (BBC1), which he has hosted for 15 years; *Escape to the Country* (BBC1); *Weekend* (ITV); *Too Much TV* (BBC2); and regular radio shows on BBC Radio Wales and Classic FM. As a result, squeezing in the new album was tricky.

"As ever, we were pushed for time," he says. "My producer lives in New Zealand; so the only way to do it was to meet halfway in California. That meant we ended up recording 'In the bleak midwinter' in 32-degree heat in August. But it was a total pleasure to sing pieces I'd grown up and known all my life. They were songs I can remember hearing for the first time and loving while sitting cross-legged on the floor in primary school."

The choice of the repertoire was entirely his own, and he is pleased with the results. "It just seems to work," he says. Howard Blake, who composed "Walking in the air", produced a completely new arrangement which Jones loves. "And I'd always wanted to do 'Silent night' in its simple state. But I never dreamed, when I asked the record company to ask John Williams — who's the most famous classical guitarist in the world — to play, that he would accept; but he did.

"I also asked Howard Goodall for a piece. He's a neighbour of mine in London, and I bumped into him one day and asked him, and he was keen. Two days later, he emailed me a brand new setting of 'It came upon the midnight clear' which I loved. It grew on me, and became one my favourites. And I haven't sung 'Little road to Bethlehem' since I was a kid."

He loves "Away in a manger". "I hate the fact that people sneer at it, and say it's for children. The minute I hear it, it takes me straight to Christmas." The album ends with a bonus track of Jones singing "Little Drummer Boy" with Sir Terry Wogan, recorded some years ago for Children in Need. "Terry was a real hero of mine. I got to know him very well, and looked up to him. I never

thought I'd be there in Abbey Road Studios, recording it. But we decided it should be there in memory of Terry, because he died this year."

I ASK him what the experience of singing with his younger self was like; after all, he could not suggest any changes or retakes of the treble line. "It was very weird," he says. "There was more preparation in this than any other recording, but it was also the quickest and easiest to record.

"It was quite a strange experience, especially to start with. But, within 12 bars, when I started singing with Little Aled . . . it was joyous. I looked through the glass at my producer, and I said every hair was standing up on my neck and arms, and he said the same. The phrasing, the feeling was just the same. It's as if the same emotion I had as a child is back in me as a man."

What does he think of Little Aled's performance? "He's quite good. This is the first time I've been able to look back and be proud."

He never listened to his albums as a boy. "As *Spitting Image* said — and they were so right — 'There's about ten minutes until Aled Jones's voice breaks, and that's 17 albums.' So, I never listened. I was more keen on football, and girls, and all the other things kids like doing at that age anyway. I sang in church, and if my producer said it was good, that was fine by me. Now, I listened for the first time, and I feel proud of what I achieved in those four years [as a chorister]."

He says that it has also been quite emotional, making live shows with his younger self. "I was doing a show in the Albert Hall, and I heard the voice [of Little Aled] and remember being that 11-year-old kid stood on this stage. Hearing it again, I had to pull myself together, get a grip.

"It got easier. I did this cathedral tour, and that was something I'd always wanted to do, and now I don't want to go back to theatres. Cathedrals are awe-inspiring. I've felt so lucky and privileged to sing in places like Winchester and Ely and Bangor Cathedrals. There I was, at 20 past nine in the evening, singing 'The day thou gavest'. It really resonates in a cathedral at that time."

AS PART of the promotion, Jones took part in a stunt to launch the album at 18,000 feet on a plane between London and Cardiff, presumably in homage to *The Snowman*. He describes this, as politely as he can, as "a unique experience". It was clearly not much fun. "Your ears pop, and there's turbulence. There's probably a good reason why people don't normally give in-flight concerts."

Nor had he realised that there would be regular fare-paying passengers on board. "I knew a lot of press would be there, but there were quite a few hardened commuters, including a couple of MPs. Seeing people in Santa hats singing 'Silent night' in October was quite surreal." Fortunately, everyone joined in, and some even asked him to repeat the performance another time.

THE few weeks leading up to Christmas will be busy, but he insists that he enjoys the variety, and feels very lucky to have so many opportunities. His last pre-Christmas engagement is two concerts at the Barbican on 22 and 23 December. "Then I have a week off, and we'll probably go to my parents in Wales on Christmas Eve." Christmas is very much a family affair: he is married with children, aged 11 and 14, the older of whom is the child actor Emilia Jones.

He remembers with great fondness his Christmases as a boy chorister in Bangor Cathedral. "We just loved midnight mass because it was the latest we were ever allowed up. We'd be talking in the sermon — sorry! — about what we were going to get tomorrow. Then you heard the bong of

midnight, and it was today. Then we'd have to sing on Christmas morning before we could go home."

Christmas as a chorister was frantic, but has stood him in good stead for his adult life. "Once a chorister, always a chorister. That's why I don't panic when I'm busy. I'm used to ploughing my way through it." And he clearly loves choral music. "I'm at my happiest listening to choral music, and especially religious choral music."

He laughs when I ask if his children have similar tastes. "My children love music, not my 'Dad' stations. That leads to battles on the school run."

WHEN asked if he always intended to end up as a presenter, he replies: "I shudder at that idea. There was never a plan, never a B side. When my voice broke, I knew I'd sing again, but whether that would be in the Albert Hall or the shower was in the lap of the gods.

"I knew I wanted to study music. Then, even if people say I'm rubbish, I know I'm qualified rubbish, because I've studied at the Royal Academy of Music and Bristol Old Vic Theatre. I paid my dues.

"But the end of my boy career had given me a taste for it — for being in the public eye — even if I didn't know about my singing. In fact, I didn't really enjoy singing [as an adult] until I started doing *Songs of Praise*, and singing hymns and feeling that emotion again."

WHAT does he have in the diary for 2017? "Lots more TV," he says. "My ITV weekend show starts again on Saturdays and Sundays in March. I've got two tours of Australia lined up, launching *One Voice* and *One Voice at Christmas*. And lots of concerts and a tour of Britain."

For now, though, Christmas beckons. "It's all about time with the family. We tend to listen to a lot of carols, including *Carols from Kings*. Other than that, we close the front door and wear ridiculous Christmas hats and laugh at all the terrible [cracker] jokes. It's very traditional, very