

HE is Scotland's most successful songwriter and has penned top-selling hits for some of the world's biggest recording artists, from Elvis Presley to Van Morrison.

by Peter Robertson

Proudly white-haired Glaswegian Bill Martin began his working life in the shipyards, alongside lifelong friends Billy Connolly and Sir Alex Ferguson, before getting a lucky break in music.

Today, the 76-year-old, who owns properties in Portugal and London and once lived in John Lennon's former home in Surrey, recalls his extraordinary career in a candid interview with The Scottish Mail on Sunday.

More controversially, the man who wrote such hits as Congratulations and Puppet On A String dishes withering home truths about the stars he has worked with – and says Sir Paul McCartney and Madonna should quit performing because they're 'past it'. After

half a century in showbiz, Martin might no longer be a household name, but he feels that his outstanding success entitles him to a frankness that others would shy away from.

Sitting in the imposing surroundings of The Caledonian Club, a private members establishment for Scots or those with an 'empathy for Scotland' not far from his home in Belgravia, he says: 'I always believed I'd make it as a songwriter. I don't know why. I've got a little magic touch.'

His two best known hits took only 30 minutes to write but became Eurovision classics. Puppet On A String was Sandie Shaw's winning entry in 1967, while Cliff

Richard was runner-up in 1968 with Congratulations.

A new BBC documentary marking the 60th anniversary of the contest – which takes place in Vienna this year – will feature Martin. But when a concert marking the milestone is staged in London later this month, Ms Shaw – who has spent decades disparaging the pop tune that made her famous – will be absent.

She has said: 'I hated it from the very first oompah to the final bang on the big bass drum. I was instinctively repelled by its sexist drivel and cuckoo-clock tune.'

Consequently, there's no love lost between the two. Martin says: 'She's knocked the classic Puppet

since she sang it. I always want to tell her to give me the money back. According to her manager, she made a lot of money from it. She hadn't had a hit for several records prior to that.'

'Puppet gave her a number one all over the world, yet she says it ruined her career. She is always running it down. She was lucky to get it – she wasn't that talented.'

'Anybody else could have sung it just as well. Dusty Springfield was THE singer then. Cilla Black was a great singer. Lulu was good. Sandie was all right, but not as good as she thinks.'

'I've never met her again since that Eurovision. I wouldn't cross the road to say hello to her.'

On the other hand, he says, Sir Cliff Richard is 'eternally grateful' and the pair remain friends. 'Every time I meet him, he says: "Thanks for giving me Congratulations".'

Referring to recent allegations of sex abuse made against the singer, Martin adds: 'I feel sad that Cliff's being hounded at the moment, near the end of his career. I've been in his company and he's a great guy. He doesn't deserve that. It's ridiculous. What happened to innocent until proven guilty?'

Elvis Presley, George Harrison, Van Morrison, Cilla Black and The Bay City Rollers, and even the 1970 England World Cup Squad, are among the countless top names to have recorded his songs. Martin has mingled with such global superstars as Frank Sinatra, Ava Gardner, Bob Hope and Danny Kaye.

He recalls: 'When I went to Las Vegas to see Sinatra I was given a letter of introduction warning not to shake his hand – because he believed it spread germs – no cameras and definitely no kissing. We said hello and, as my wife was a good-looking blonde, he not only shook her hand he gave her a kiss.'

But one of his biggest regrets is failing to meet with the king of rock 'n' roll – because he thought that his Scottish skin needed a bit more colour. He says: 'Elvis Presley sang my song My Boy. I had a house in Beverly Hills then and I was going across to meet him. Like a true Scotsman, I decided to get a suntan before I met him, and then he died that night. There was no bigger star than Elvis and I regret never meeting him.'

It's all a far cry from his humble origins in Glasgow, where he grew up in a tenement near Fairfield Shipyards. He says: 'You heard the noise 24 hours a day.'

Referring to his hit for the Bay City Rollers, he adds: 'That's how Shang-A-Lang came about.'

'Our tenement was basically one room and a kitchen; my parents slept in there, and my brother and I slept in the back. My father used to work in the shipyards but he was a great piano player.'

'My mother could sing, and did everything to keep us going by working at so many different jobs. There was happiness and love.'

He adds: 'I just wanted to be a songwriter and music publisher from the age of ten. On my father's sheet-music for the piano, I'd see names of composers and publishers and wonder who they were. I'd hear songs on the radio, write down the words to remember them, then find out who wrote them.'

At 15, Martin became an apprentice marine engineer at The Alexander Shipyard in Govan, where fellow Govan High School old boy Sir Alex Ferguson became a toolmaker.

The future football legend was 'brilliant even then' the songwriter says. 'He was a shop steward for the apprentices and he was certainly tough. Billy Connolly became a welder, though he could have been anything – even prime minister. We all had to join in. I couldn't tell people I was going to be a songwriter. In Scotland that was ridiculous.'

At 21, Martin moved to South Africa to avoid National Service and to play professional football for Johannesburg Rangers. Whilst there, one of his songs was accepted by singer Adam Faith and Martin returned to Britain a songwriter – and a family man. He says: 'I married

THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF A SPARKLING CAREER...

On Elvis, who sang Bill's 'My Boy'

Like a true Scotsman, I decided to get a suntan before I met Elvis, and then he died that night.

On stars who should stop singing

Madonna should pack it in. A 56-year old woman rolling about on a stage.... falling off the stage.... give me a break!



On his old shipyard pals Sir Alex Ferguson and Billy Connolly

I still have a Scottish accent, but I sound far clearer than Alex Ferguson will ever be! Billy Connolly became a welder, though he could have been anything – even Prime Minister

my teenage sweetheart when I went to Africa. We came back to London with two lovely daughters.'

But then he met the woman who would become his second wife, Jan, to whom he has been married for 43 years.

His marriage break-up led to the Cilla Black song 'Surround Yourself With Sorrow'. He says: 'I broke a lady's heart, and that's what inspired my hit for Cilla. I wrote that in five minutes. George Martin [The Beatles' producer] thought it was the best song I'd ever written.'

The Scot went on to have a daughter and son with his second wife.

At this time, together with his songwriting partner Phil Coulter, he was at his most productive. He struck gold with film soundtracks, music for TV shows and hits for bands including Kenny, Slik and The Bay City Rollers. He says: 'The Rollers had a very bad



Legendary Scots songwriter Bill Martin's waspish verdict on music's biggest superstars

**A date with Elvis,
a run-in with Frank
Sinatra... and why
Madge should shut up!**

manager. They were massive and sold about 138 million albums and were number one in every country. For a while they could have recorded the telephone book and got to number one. We wrote them good pop songs but they wanted rid of us and thought they could write better themselves.'

'We got to number one with Slik and Midge Ure, and Kenny. These songs would have suited the Rollers but people get greedy in the music industry and think they can do everything, and you really can't.'

In 1973, Martin bought the former Surrey home of John Lennon for £56,000 from a second-hand car salesman.

He says: 'Lennon loved the place and in 1976 sent me a fantastic letter which I framed and put in my study next to one from Bob Hope. One

night I heard a noise and went downstairs to investigate.

'I was looking round the house and couldn't find any damage when suddenly there was a crashing noise. I then found the framed Lennon letter on the floor. I picked it up, went back to bed, and when I woke up the next morning my wife said "John Lennon was shot last night".'

'That had happened at the exact same time as the noise.'

Martin could have retired long ago on royalties alone but he gives talks about his career on cruise ships and is preparing to publish his autobiography, called Congratulations (It's All About Me).

But he is also still pursuing his dream of writing the ultimate pop song – possibly driven by a joke made at the funeral of fellow

songwriter Mort Shuman in 1991. He says: 'Kenny Lynch sang Mort's song Save The Last Dance For Me and Tim Rice pushed me in the ribs and said: "Bill, you better write an even bigger hit, because can you imagine when you go and they play Congratulations?"'

He adds: 'I'm driven by ambition. We never think we're finished. I've not written THE definitive hit.'

'But some are clinging to the wreckage and should give up. I think McCartney is probably the best songwriter this country has produced, but if I hear him singing Hey Jude once more... I think I'll get up and sing instead. You can doctor voices now, but not on stage.'

'Talking of artists who should pack it in, Madonna should pack it in. She'll have more money than she could

ever need. What is the point? A 56-year old woman rolling about on stage and falling off the stage – give me a break!'

Martin has won countless awards including an MBE. He remains a proud Scot and retains his accent, although he jokes: 'I think I'm far clearer than Alex Ferguson will ever be.'

Talking of his dream of buying a house in Scotland, 'somewhere like Hawick' he adds: 'It's about time Scotland's number one songwriter was up there.'

MUSIC MAN: Bill Martin wrote for Elvis, far left, and met Frank Sinatra, but says Madonna should quit. Inset, with Billy Connolly in 1974

