

Naughton, Charles John (1886-1976) and Gold, Jimmy (1886-1967). Comedians. Charlie Naughton was born on 15th December 1886 at 53 Clarence Street, Glasgow, the son of a bookkeeper John Elliott Naughton and his wife Susan Darling *née* Cleland. Jimmy Gold was born James Joseph McGonigal, son of John McGonigal, a house painter, and his wife Elizabeth Russell *née* Gold or Gould, on 21st April 1886 at 62 Clyde Street, Glasgow.

Naughton and Gold are principally known as members of the Crazy Gang, initially one of the most innovative, and latterly one of the most celebrated and cherished variety acts on the British stage in the mid twentieth century. They are also generally considered to be British variety's longest-lasting double act, having performed together for 53 years.

Gold was a painter and decorator, working for his family's firm, and Naughton a tiler when they first met on a building site at the age of 19. Discovering a common ability to entertain their fellow workers they took to the music-hall stage together, first as dancers and then as sketch and stand-up comedians. The legend has it that they were plucked from the Glasgow halls after only one performance in 1908 and taken to London where they developed their act under the aegis of the Moss Empires organization. On the metropolitan stage they gained a reputation as adept physical comedians, supplying expertly-timed slapstick comedy to variety bills and pantomimes. One of their most noted sketches in their early years, presumably derived from their previous working experience, was what *The Times* fondly described as 'a skit on the leisurely methods of the British workman'.

By the early years of the 1910s they were appearing regularly on the bills of the larger theatres and music halls, the London Pavilion, the Tivoli, and the Oxford under stars such as Harry Tate, Marie Lloyd, and fellow Scot Neil Kenyon. They also gained considerable international exposure, touring Australia, America, and Europe. Naughton married Alice Martin, a confectionary worker, on 16 September 1909 at St Andrew's Episcopal Church in Glasgow. Gold married Anna Elliot (d. 1951) in 1912, having met her while performing in Germany.

By the time of the formation of the Crazy Gang in November 1931, Naughton and Gold, had developed a solid if not spectacular reputation as a highly-professional variety and pantomime act. The Gang came about through a happy accident, with the pair, on their return from an Australian tour, having to share the bill at the London Palladium with the knockabout act of Jimmy Nervo and Teddy Knox, the husband-and-wife act Billy Caryl and Hilda Mundy, and comedian and juggler 'Monsewer' Eddie Gray. Naughton and Gold's part in what was billed as a 'Crazy Week' was to augment the free-wheeling comedy practised by Nervo and Knox which involved acts interrupting each other on stage, practical jokes, performers escaping into the audience, and much apparent ad-libbing. Like Gray, Naughton and Gold proved able to adapt themselves to this format and to thrive in its atmosphere of organized mayhem. In the following year the Crazy Gang was fully established when Nervo, Knox, Naughton, Gold, and Gray were joined by Bud Flanagan and Chesney Allen.

Naughton and Gold played a full part in the huge popular success of the Crazy Gang, appearing in all their shows and films for over thirty years until the group's final emotional stage performance at the Victoria Palace Theatre, on 19 May 1962 (televised by ATV on 20 May as 'The Last Night of the Crazy Gang'). All

the while, like other members of the Gang, they continued to work independently as a double act in between Crazy Gang shows and films. They maintained their pre-Gang roles as mainstays of the Lyceum Pantomimes through the 1930s and to tour their act at home and abroad. They made radio performances, audio recordings, and provided comic relief in their own right to the films *My Lucky Star* (1933), *Sign Please* (1933), *Wise Guys* (1936), and *Highland Fling* (1936).

While being some ten years older than the rest of the Gang, and with a longer stage experience, Naughton and Gold were never really its dominating partnership, functioning instead as reactive volatile elements in its combustible chemistry. The bald, baby-faced Naughton was the smallest and, in appearance at least, the most obviously comical of the Gang. As a former dancer he was an excellent mime and prat-faller, seen to good effect in his drunk act in the Crazy Gang film *The Frozen Limits* (1939), and was an adept vocal comedian, particularly in the art of gobbledygook double-talk. His comic qualities were emphasized by his high lisping voice and his being generally dressed in the most unflattering outfits in the Gang's costume comedies. While the others might be fitted out in elegant drag, as they were in the Royal Ascot scene of their show *Young in Heart*, Naughton would be got up in a frumpish outfit that made him look like a garishly decorated bowling ball. As such, he was the visual centre of much of the gang's physical comedy, almost inevitably being on the receiving end of the thrown custard pie, the bucket of whitewash, volleys of eggs, or a stray jet from a soda syphon. The seeming equanimity with which Naughton took such assaults made him the gang's most vulnerable and lovable character. His air of genial haplessness was consistently employed by the gang to great comic effect, including in their final televised stage show where the seventy-five year old Naughton featured, scantily-clad and pot-bellied, as a most unlikely Spartacus.

These sympathetic human and comic qualities made Naughton attractive to advertisers. He appeared in the first ever Guinness television commercial, aired on the UK's new independent television network on 22 September 1955 as the zoo-keeper from their well-known posters, trying and failing to recover his glass of porter from a recalcitrant sea lion.

Gold had a less well-defined role in the gang. Seemingly lacking Naughton's inherent funny bones, he was instead an impeccable straight man, a performer who might not always carry the audience's sympathy but who was admired for his mastery of the craft of comic timing. Gold had been the principal writer of their material as a double act. He was reputed to have memorized every joke he had ever heard during his long career and so never appeared to be at a loss for the *mot juste* or the apt aside. The fluency in the rhythms of cross-talk that he had perfected over the years with Naughton (heard to good effect in the pair's 1938 HMV recording of their routines 'Income Tax' and 'Holidays') served the Crazy Gang well, helping sharpen that blend of surreal verbal humour and outrageous visual comedy that worked to counterbalance the more sentimental elements characterised in the songs of Flanagan and Allen. While the energetic Naughton was the frequent fall-guy for the gang's physical gags, the more staid Gold would often find himself the target for their verbal teasing. He was notoriously careful with his money, to the point where he was reputed to take the bus everywhere, a behavior that made it easy for the gang to put him in the pillory for a stereotypical tight-fisted Scot

Following Allen's retirement from the stage after the war, Gold was the first of the Gang to manifest the symptoms of its inevitable mortality. He was struck in the late 1950s with narcoleptic episodes, even reputedly while on stage, and began to have difficulty remembering his lines. He made very few appearances in the runs of the gang's last two stage shows, *Clown Jewels* and *Young in Heart*, but did appear, aged 76 and quite obviously debilitated, in their farewell appearance. In the wake of Gold's enforced retirement and the dissolution of the Crazy Gang, Naughton sought work elsewhere, appearing in the early 1960s alongside Eddie Gray in Frankie Howerd's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* at the Strand Theatre and, late in life, making occasional appearances in pantomime.

Following the death of his first wife, Gold had married Betty (Minnie Elizabeth Hannah Nolan) in March 1957. He died on 7th October 1967 at his home in Sudbury Court Road, Harrow, and was cremated at Golders Green Crematorium.

Naughton, who had been deeply affected by the death of his only son in the Second World War, suffered further loss with the death of his wife Alice in 1967. He lived with his daughter, Alice Stapleford, in Streatham until his death on 11th February 1976 at St Francis Hospital, East Dulwich.

David Goldie

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