

Desert Island Discs

Monday 3rd October 1955,
1.10 p.m. – 1.40 p.m.

Castaway : John Gregson
Presenter : Roy Plomley



John Gregson

BROADCAST | 03 OCT 1955

Actor

Name | John Gregson

Choices



1.

Sons of the Pioneers
Cool Water
Others who chose this
artist



2.

Burl Ives
Barbara Allen
Others who chose this
artist



3.

**Muggsy Spanier and his
Ragtime Band**
At Sundown



4.

Giacomo Puccini
O mio babbino caro (from
Gianni Schicchi)
Soloist: Joan Hammond
Others who chose this
artist



5.

Pietro Mascagni
Cavalleria Rusticana
Soloist: Anton Heiller
Orchestra: Vienna
Philharmonic Orchestra
Conductor: Herbert von
Karajan
Others who chose this
artist



6.

Sydney MacEwan
Jeannie With the Light
Brown Hair



7.

Marina Fiordaliso
Canzone Ballabile



8.

Bing Crosby
I'll Be Seeing You
Others who chose this
artist

Transcript of the programme

Announcer: (Over Music, 'By the Sleepy Lagoon')

Every Monday at this time, a well known person is asked the question: "If you were to be cast away alone on a desert island, which eight gramophone records would you chose to have with you? Assuming, of course, that you also had a gramophone (and an inexhaustible supply of needles)." As usual, the week's castaway is introduced by Roy Plomley.

Plomley : How do you do Ladies and Gentlemen. On our desert island this week is one of our most popular young actors.

We've seen him on the screen in 'Genevieve', 'Above us the Waves', 'Whiskey Galore', 'Value For Money' and a whole lot more. His West End stage successes have included 'Seagulls over Sorrento' and 'Macadam and Eve.' Here's John Gregson. And the first question, John – what would you say described your views on music ~ do you call yourself a high brow, a low brow, a middle brow.



John Gregson : Well, , I think I'm sort of middle-low-brow. Somewhere between the two.

Plomley : Do you play any instrument yourself?

John Gregson : I wish I did. I've always wanted to play the guitar. Or the piano. But you know, when I walk to the piano ~ they're always right, I can never lift it.

Plomley : (Laughs) I heard you sing in a film a little while ago.

John Gregson : Oh, that's your misfortune. I mean, don't bring your problems to me at this time. (Sings) 'there's one that is pure as an angel.'

Plomley : Yes, that's the one. I didn't really mean you could sing.

John Gregson : It sounds a little different with the light accompaniment, I admit.

Plomley : Have you got a lot of records at home?

John Gregson : Quite a few, yes. Quite a mixed bag.

Plomley : How did you set about choosing just eight for your desert island exile?

John Gregson : Well, they all have a meaning, a specific meaning to me. They have some sort of sentimental attachment with my past life. Except the first, my choice, that is. I imagine this island is a sort of sub-tropical island.

Plomley : Well, let's assume it's one of those nice south sea islands, yes. Good climate.

John Gregson : Well, I imagine myself lying on the warm sands, gently cooled by the breeze, gazing up into the foliage, and listening to the Sons of the Pioneers singing and playing, 'Cool Water.'

Plomley : Cool music for a warm island.

Play 'Cool, Clear Water'

John Gregson : Well, my second choice is an old ballad, which – I don't know really why I want to hear this one, except that it's always been a favourite of mine from the time I was a small child.

Plomley : Where did you spend your childhood by the way? Where do you come from?

John Gregson : Liverpool.

Plomley : Mm

John Gregson : But this isn't a Liverpool ballad. It always has a melancholy, haunting quality for me. It's called 'Barbara Allen' and I'd like to hear this sung and played by Burl Ives.

Play 'Barbara Allen'

Plomley : Well, that's rather a sad song. To risk taking a sad song like that, John, sounds rather as if you're optimistic about your – how this desert island's going to affect you.

John Gregson : Well I admit it is a slightly melancholy song, but you know there will be an awful lot of things to do on this island. I'm going to be very busy. I'm going to build myself a log cabin.

Plomley : Well, that's what we'd like to hear – plans. What sort of cabin did you say?

John Gregson : Log cabin.

Plomley : You've got no tools remember.

John Gregson : Yes, I see. Well, that's a slight problem, isn't it?

Plomley : Yes.

John Gregson : I remember seeing a film once with these natives – they shin up these trees, you know, to get coconuts. I'm sure that I could learn to do this in time. I'd go up those trees and get some leaves, plat them together and make myself a little hut out of leaves.

Plomley : Splendid. Ever done any camping, by the way?

John Gregson: As a boy, yes.

Plomley : Successfully?

John Gregson : More or less, yes. The old primus stove and the...

Plomley : Well, that's something else you wouldn't have – a primus stove. How would you light a fire?

John Gregson : Well, I'd have the clothes I stood up in and just by chance, I have my lighter with me.

Plomley : Ah yes, but the sea water would probably be in it.

John Gregson : True. Very true. Well, they'd be a flint.

Plomley : Yes, fair enough.

John Gregson : All right?

Plomley : You could light a fire with that. Good. Can you cook?

John Gregson : Yes. Of course there'd be no-one to criticize my cooking?

Plomley : That's a point. Fish?

John Gregson : Yes. I can fish.

Plomley : Swim?

John Gregson : Swim as well.

Plomley : Very useful. I think you get full points.

John Gregson: Oh. Have to live on fish all the time.

Plomley : Now what?

John Gregson : Well, if things go a little bit too slow, and I really felt I wanted, sort of, kick in the pants, I think a good slice of, a good slice of jazz – real traditional Dixieland New Orleans Jazz – would bestir me into some form of action – a sort of music while you work, you see?

Plomley : Yes, are you a jazz fan?

John Gregson : Well. I'm not a fanatic but I'm quite interested in the old jazz.

Plomley : And who do you chose?

John Gregson : I'm just thinking. I'd like to hear a record of Muggsy Spanier's. About two years ago I was in Hollywood and I was walking along Hollywood Boulevard and I happened to drop in to a little night-club, and there, sitting on the stand, was dear old Muggsy Spanier and his boys, and they were playing a number called 'At Sundown'. There weren't many people in there. There were a few sort of youngsters in front who were busily making notes. And as I walked past the stand, Muggsy took the trumpet away from his lips and I distinctly heard him say to the – to his clarinetist, 'we got the scholars in tonight boys. Play good. We got the scholars in.' His battered face looked like the back of a basket. So I'd like to have Muggsy's recording of 'At Sundown.'

Play 'Barbara Allen'

John Gregson : Well, this next record is pure nostalgia and sentimentality – unashamed sentiment. It goes back to the time when I was in a repertory company in Perth, in Scotland, and –

Plomley : Different play every week?

John Gregson : That's right. Different play every week. Lots of lines to learn. You do a production in the evening, then you go home after the show to your little room and try to learn the lines for to be word perfect for the rehearsal next morning.

Plomley : Yes.

John Gregson : Well, sometimes, instead of learning the lines, we used to sit, and drink coffee and play records. And the great favourite of mine in those days is a record of Joan Hammond's. As you probably know, it's 'Oh, my Beloved Father.' Incidentally, about this time – this time I met the young lady who was to become my wife.

Plomley : She was in the company, was she?

John Gregson: She was in the company, so I met her.

Plomley : Incidentally, you're a family man. Now, how many children have you got?

John Gregson : I have two children. I've got a boy of 7 and a little girl of 4.

Plomley : Yes.

John Gregson : And the first present – as a matter of fact, the first present I bought my wife, was this record. So I should like to hear it.

Play 'Oh, My Beloved Father'

Plomley : Lovely. That record's one of my own favourites. Now, what's number 5, Mr G?

John Gregson : Number 5. Well, a few weeks ago, my wife and I – we were in Venice for the film festival and we managed to snatch a couple of days in Rome. Always wanted to go to Rome. And I'd always wanted to see – see and hear – opera – Italian Opera in its natural setting. So we were very fortunate – we went along to the Opera House, and the production that night was 'Cavalleria Rusti' (I can never say this word) , 'Cavalleria Rusticana ', you see?

Plomley : Should have been 'Tosca'.

John Gregson : And it was always a great favourite of mine. We were very fortunate, because everyone was in extremely good voice, and the orchestra was excellent – absolutely beautiful. So I should like to hear the Intermezzo from – what I said before – 'Cavalleria Rusticana ', if you don't mind.

Plomley : Here it is.

Play 'Cavalleria Rusticana'

Plomley : John, let's go back to the early days. How did this career of yours as an actor start? Was it something you'd always wanted to do?

John Gregson : Yes, I think it was something I'd always wanted to do. I didn't start professionally until after the war, though. Prior to the war, I was doing a lot of amateur work, but I was working working in a factory – telephone factory – making telephone parts. It's all very confusing. I've never really been able to find out exactly what I was supposed to be making. I've never seen it since.

Plomley : Well, what happened after that, after the factory?

John Gregson : Well, after the war came along of course. I came out of the war – I came out of the navy in 1945. I was very fortunate – within 2 or 3 weeks, I got employment in the Liverpool Old Vic Company, understudying.

Plomley : Yes, and like most understudies, I suppose, you were praying for an epidemic.

John Gregson : Precisely. And I was fortunate. My prayers were answered. And the character I was understudying – he went down with violent flu – I stepped into his shoes. I must have been fairly successful. I was kept on at the end of the season, playing parts. And then I went into the Perth Repertory Company.

Plomley : That you've already mentioned – where you met your wife?

John Gregson: That's true. After that, I tried to storm the citadel. I came to London ; and nobody wanted to know about my genius whatsoever. My wife and I – we had a rather tough time, as a matter of fact, for a few months. We were living in a small furnished room, and – we had one of these cold cream tins, you know, theatrical removing tins.



Plomley : Yes.

John Gregson: One had to use one's ingenuity in much the same way as I shall have to use my ingenuity on this island. Because I used to – we used to use this tin for making tea, for cooking beans – served all sorts of purposes, as a matter of fact.

Plomley : Oh dear. But you got a break eventually?

John Gregson : Yes. I did an audition for a play called 'The Sleeping Clergyman', which starred Robert Donat and Margaret Leighton at the Criterion Theatre. And it was a Scots part. After that I was more or less type-cast. And I was in lots of Scots parts – in fact I got very patriotic. Every time I heard the bagpipes, I wanted to stand up. This next choice of mine, 'I Dream of Jeannie with the light brown hair', I've always thought that was a Scots ballad. I only discovered in my ignorance, oh two or three years ago, it isn't – it's in fact written by Stephen Foster, an American, an American song ; but I'd like to hear it sung by Sidney MacEwan, who's Scots of course.

Play 'Jeannie with the light brown hair '

Plomley : John, when did you get your first chance in films?

John Gregson: My first chance in films came with a film called 'Saraband for Dead Lovers'. I was playing this small part of a soldier, engaged in mortal combat with one Stewart Granger. I thought I did rather well, actually, but when I saw the finished product at the local cinema, I was most disheartened to find that it had been cut out. I hope it wasn't my fault.

Plomley : Oh dear. Disappointing.

John Gregson : Well, then one graduated to bigger parts and eventually sort of...

Plomley : Starring parts.

John Gregson: Yes. I think, looking back that my favourite part, despite the success of Genevieve, was in a film called 'Venetian Bird' (also called 'The Assassin' in some countries).

Plomley : I didn't see that one.



John Gregson: No. Well, it wasn't really as successful as we'd hoped it would be ~ at least the film. But the part was an actor's dream-piece. I was playing the part of a man who was pretending to be another man who was pretending to be another man who was pretending to be another man!

Plomley: Sounds great fun.

John Gregson: It wasn't only a dual role – it was a quadruple role. We made the film in Venice in Italy and about this time there was a great – a big hit – big Italian song which was very popular – and the extras in the crowd were always singing and humming it. Whenever I hear it, it takes me back to Italy. It means Italy for me...It's called 'Vola Columba', and I'd like to have this record with me on the island. And I'd like to hear it sung by Marina Fiordaliso – how's that? Did I pronounce it properly?



Plomley: You pronounced it beautifully.

Play 'Vola Columba '

Plomley: 'Vola, Columba' – number seven. What's it mean by the way? 'Fly, Dove', isn't it?

John Gregson: 'Fly, Dove.'

Plomley: Good. What's number eight? What's your last one?

John Gregson: Well, you know, I think if I didn't have a Bing Crosby record with me on the island, the Old Crooner would haunt me – I'd never get any sleep. So, from all the thousands and thousands (words missing here....)the war. And I can always conjure up a picture of on the mess-deck, of the boys – some of the boys that are lying in their hammocks, some gazing into space, some trying to read, and listening to this battered old recording of ours, of 'I'll be seeing you,' which in a way sort of symbolises, incidentally, my feeling about this island, because I'm sure it would be absolute bliss, but I think perhaps after a while I'd want to get back to civilisation, you know.

Plomley: A nice hopeful one to end.

John Gregson: Yes.

Play 'I'll be seeing you '

Plomley: Well, there you are. There's your eight records. Now you've got one more choice to make – your luxury article. What luxury would you like to take with you on the island.

John Gregson: Yes, well, I'm quite settled on this. I'm going to take _ a guitar.

Plomley: Yes.

John Gregson: All right?

Plomley: So that eventually, as you said, you've always wanted to play it – this is your chance.

John Gregson: This is my opportunity. I'm going to learn to play this guitar. I'm going to be the Burl Ives of this island – the greatest undiscovered guitarist on the island.

Plomley: Good. Well, many thanks, John Gregson, for letting us hear your choice of Desert Island Discs. Goodbye, everyone.

John Gregson: Goodbye and thank you for listening to my records.

