

OLLY OAKLEY

Born: Joseph Sharpe (b. Birmingham November 26th 1877; d. London January 4th 1943)

Young Joseph Sharpe's first interest in music started at the age of ten when his father put him to studying the violin. Although he made reasonably good progress, the instrument was laid aside after only twelve months tuition. He next tried the mandolin but his interest in this instrument was short-lived for after only a few months it was discarded.

1889 – 1893 Hears the Bohee brothers; Joseph Sharpe's student years

At the age of twelve he was taken to hear the Bohee brothers and it was through hearing these masterly coloured banjoists that his interest in music was sharply re-awakened. He and his boyhood friend, Walter Melville, decided to take up the banjo and together they commenced the study of the instrument under a local teacher, Mr. Leslie. Very soon they changed their teacher and started to take lessons from Arthur J. Taylor, who had been conducting a successful music shop and teaching studio in Birmingham since 1881.

When young Joseph and his friend Walter each knew a few banjo solos, they were allowed to play in some of Melville's father's productions at the Grand Theatre, Birmingham, which he owned. They were certainly two proud youths, making their appearance before the public and what they lacked in showmanship and musical ability they made up for in keenness and a desire to please the public.

Two years later Sharpe left school and was offered (and gladly accepted) a job in the Taylor shop but within twelve months this came to an end when the proprietor entered into partnership with Arthur O. Windsor, who had established a small factory in the town for the making of musical instruments.

Next we find the youthful Sharpe demonstrating instruments and giving lessons in the Constitution Hill music store of Joseph Riley & Sons. After a few years the demand for private tuition had grown to much he decided to open his own teaching studio and within a short time he was giving lessons to between forty and fifty pupils very week.

During all this time Joseph Sharpe's father was taking his ambitious son to Surbiton, in Surrey, for lessons with Arthur Tilley, who introduced him to the zither-banjo. Later father and son travelled to London once a week for finishing lessons with Alfred D. Cammeyer.

1894 Sharpe becomes Oakley; first recordings

In 1894 an amateur Minstrel Troupe was being formed in Birmingham - as was happening in many other towns and cities throughout Great Britain - and the up-and-

coming local banjoist was invited to join as a soloist - and this is where the name of 'Olly Oakley' came into being.

In Oakley's own words, this is how the adoption of the name that became known all over the world came about:

“At the first rehearsal of the troupe I was asked what name I was going to use (it was the thing in amateur theatrical circles in those days to work under an assumed name). Hitherto, the idea of using a name other than my own had never entered my head but, as it seemed expected of me, I began to look around for a name that would be easy to remember and, at the same time, trip off the tongue easily. I was a follower of the Aston Villa football team and one of its forwards was a player with the name of Olly Wakeley. I remember he was nicknamed ‘the daisy clipper’. The name ‘Olly Wakeley’ seemed to come easy to the tongue and I thought if I could strike a name something like it I would have the ideal nom de guerre. I started with ‘Olly this’ and ‘Olly that’ and then, calling in ‘alliteration’s artful aid’, began to think of surnames beginning with an ‘O’ and suddenly struck upon my grandmother’s name of Oakley. I repeated the name ‘Olly Oglekley’ to myself several times and it seemed to have the sound I thought was usually associated with people in the public eye – so ‘Olly Oakley’ I called myself and, after the run of the minstrel show, stuck to it for all my public appearances.”

He changed his name officially to Olly Oakley by Deed Poll in March 1922 because his sons were finding it a little embarrassing at school when they, understandingly, boasted of their famous father with the name of Oakley when they were called Sharpe.

Oakley's first engagement as a soloist for which he received a fee was at one of the popular Saturday Night Concerts which were a regular feature at the Birmingham Temperance Hall.

Before long Oakley's professional engagements were taking him farther and farther afield as his fame spread; even to London where he appeared at an Essex & Cammeyer Banjo Concert at the St. Martin's Town Hall in June 1894. He was referred to as 'Cammeyer's pupil' and was stated to be “adopting the matchless touch of his master in a most noticeable manner”.

Later that year, when he was still only seventeen, he travelled to London to perform at a concert in the old Finsbury Barracks. After the show a distinguished-looking member of the audience called ‘back stage’ and, introducing himself, said he was a representative of the Edison Bell Phonograph Company and would he (Olly Oakley) care to make a test recording for his company? An appointment was fixed and a few days later Oakley travelled from Birmingham to London to cut the test wax which was to prove to be the starting point of Oakley's vast recording career.

His forceful style of picking with the right-hand finger nails (acquired through playing in large halls) proved ideal for the recording conditions of those days and for the next three years he was paid a retaining fee by the Edison Co. to make so many records a

year for them.

Soon the name of Olly Oakley was becoming known and revered to all owners of phonographs and his latest Edison cylinders were being eagerly looked for. Like his American counterpart in the British Isles the name of Oakley became synonymous with the banjo.

Here the writer would like to mention the time, over forty years ago, when he started to build his unique collection of fretted instrument records. The most satisfying source of supply in those days were the back-street junk shops, and when he entered such a place he would ask "Have you any banjo records?" as a prelude to being shown the inevitable stacks of old records usually hidden away somewhere at the back of the shop. So often the reply to his opening question would be "Wot! Yer mean Olly Oakley's?" that eventually he changed the opening gambit to "Have you any Olly Oakley records?" Seldom did he find it necessary to say "banjo".

When the Birmingham Industrial Exhibition was held in 1894, a newspaper reported "The banjo ranks next to the Royal Artillery Band as a musical attraction at this Exhibition, attracting large crowds round the music stalls of Messrs Joseph Riley & Sons, who are agents for the celebrated 'Windsor' banjo, and have a fine collection of these instruments on show. They have engaged for a term of years that wonderfully gifted young player, Mr. Olly Oakley, who attends at the stall and performs. In his absence they crowd round the phonograph, upon which he has recorded."

Later in that year Oakley was commanded to appear before a royal party at Warwick Castle and, as an indication of the type of solos he was playing at this time, we give details from a Nottingham concert at which he played on December 29th 1894. His contributions to the programme were 'Gallopade' (Cammeyer), 'Queen of the Burlesque' (Tilley), 'Polka in C' (Morley) and the Intermezzo from 'Cavalleria Rusticana'.

1895 – 1900 Changes to zither banjo; growing reputation; first solo recital

Then came the offer of a regular job after Oakley's own heart, testing banjos and zither-banjos in the Windsor factory at Newhall Street, with a studio set aside to enable him to carry on with his teaching activities. This was the time he changed from the banjo to zither-banjo and although Oakley remained essentially a banjoist for the rest of his life he played on a zither-banjo.

His position at Windsor & Taylor's allowed him to undertake engagements and before long he had performed at all the theatres and concert halls in Birmingham several times - at the Town Hall, the Masonic Hall, the Midland Institute etc. He had been appointed leader of the Windsor & Taylor amateur orchestra and, in addition, was conducting two bands (each of about twenty members) made up of his pupils - the Warwick Amateur Pierrot Band and the Walsall Pierrot Orchestra.

The increasing number of professional 'dates' meant that the well-appointed studio in the Windsor factory saw less and less of Oakley and throughout the summer months he was a featured soloist at many of the larger seaside resorts; often appearing with famous Municipal Orchestras.

In 1895 he shared honours with his teacher Cammeyer at a Windsor & Taylor 'Grand Banjo Concert' held in Birmingham in April. The local press said, "We must not omit to mention the fine performance of our young local artist Olly Oakley whose management of the zither-banjo exhibited wonderful skill for so young a player."

On May 6th 1896 he was again taking part in a London Essex & Cammeyer Festival held in the St. James's Hall, Piccadilly. As a report of the concert said, "Mr. Olly Oakley (Cammeyer's professional pupil) played with great ability. His selection were the 'Andante & Waltz' and 'En Route' of his master, whilst for an encore he revived the 'Gallopade'."

The writer sounded a small note of criticism and a warning - which was often echoed throughout Oakley's brilliant career - when he added, "Strength of tone and capacity for speed were more demonstrated than the musicianly feeling which will come in time, but as yet a lack of expression is the only flaw in a fine young artist."

In January 1898 Oakley was able to write in 'Banjo World', "My time is now fully occupied with pupils, almost more than I can cope with. This, coupled with engagements entirely occupies my time. I am now booked up as far as March. My Pierrot Orchestras, too, are well to the front for, besides having given several successful shows in and around Birmingham, they are already booked forward into the year."

On March 31st 1898 he organised his first Banjo Concert at the Victoria Hall Aston, Birmingham. The 'Birmingham Daily' reported, "Olly Oakley, the well-known zither-banjoist, has every reason to be satisfied with his first banjo concert. A capital programme was admirably presented before a numerous and appreciative audience."

Soon after, an engagement at Killarney in southern Ireland, gave Oakley the idea of forming a concert party and taking it to the Emerald Isle for the summer. After 'try-outs' at the North Pier, Blackpool and the Pier Pavilions at Plymouth and Southend-on-Sea, Oakley took his little band of entertainers to Killarney where they enjoyed considerable success throughout the summer months.

In the December of that year Oakley gave his first solo recital in Birmingham and sponsored by Windsor and Taylor, when he proved by playing a long and varied programme that he had reached the virtuoso class at the age of 21!

On February 1st 1899, Windsor & Taylor brought the Birmingham Banjo Orchestra to the St. Martin's Town Hall in London. Oakley was the leader of the orchestra, which was conducted by Arthur J. Taylor. Naturally, Oakley was among the soloists at this Concert and commenting upon his contribution, Home Gordon wrote, "Oakley gave the

most remarkable exhibition of the evening. He gave two forgotten pieces by his master, Cammeyer - 'Romance' and 'Kenilworth' - the former with tenderness and the latter with much ability; whilst as an encore he gave an unaccompanied tremolo (probably his own 'Melodie') in finished fashion. Later came a subtly sweet rendering of Hauser's 'Cradle Song' and then a triumphant account of Kowalski's 'Marche Hongroise'. Recalled, he gave absolutely the finest rendition of the finale to the Overture of 'William Tell' it has ever been my lot to hear. Five recalls would not satisfy an audience excited to a frantic delight, so Mr. Windsor finally yielded and gave permission for one more solo. This proved to be a truly wonderful rendition of Cammeyer's 'En Avant'. After this display Mr Olly Oakley must certainly rank as the first English virtuoso."

1901 – 1904 Contract with Gramophone & Typewriter Co.; touring France and Italy

In 1901 Oakley was approached by the Gramophone & Typewriter Company (later 'His Master's Voice') and was put under a three-years contract with them, with a retaining fee of £50 per annum! When this contract expired it was renewed for a further three years and the fee increased to £90 a year. It was during this period of Oakley's career he made some of the finest records of banjo solos ever committed to wax and it is interesting to note the accompaniment on many of them was played by an up-and-coming pianist named Landon Ronald, who was later knighted and became world-famous for his compositions and conducting of well-known symphony orchestras.

On March 4th 1901 Oakley travelled to Liverpool to give a solo recital at Messrs Rushworth & Dreaper's Saloons. He played two dances from Edward German's 'Henry VIII', 'Imperial Patrol' (Welfare), 'Ordered Out' (Cammeyer), 'Marche Hongroise' (Kowalski), a MS mazurka of his own, three other pieces by Cammeyer - 'Cape Boys', 'En Route' and 'En Evant' - the pizzicato from 'Sylvia', Hauser's 'Cradle Song' and the spirited overture to 'Zampa'. He was given an ovation he never forgot. He often returned to Liverpool and, three years later, decided to make Merseyside his home - but more of that anon.

In 1902 he decided to appear on Continental stages and, with San Remo as his headquarters, for two seasons he scored success after success at such places as Nice, Mentone, Cannes, Beaulieu, Hyeres, Paris, Monte Carlo, Bordighera, Ospedaletti and other places in France and Italy.

After the summer season of 1903 he returned to England and in Manchester that year was guest soloist of the Minnehaha Minstrels at their Annual Smoking Concert. A contemporary report says he was so successful he had to give twelve encores, and finally had to appeal to his audience to allow him a rest.

Following Easter week, 1904, Oakley made one of his rare music-hall appearances at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Liverpool. One report said, "He has become quite a Liverpool favourite."

1905 – 1908 Meets Winifred; moves to Liverpool

The following year he was appearing in a summer production on the pier at Llandudno when, after one of the shows, Oakley was introduced to a young lady, Winifred Marsland, who was later to become his wife. She came from Liverpool and at the end of the season at the North Wales seaside resorts, young Oakley decided to make Liverpool his home.

He lived in Liverpool for eight years and built up quite a large teaching connection and often appeared at the exclusive concerts and recitals arranged by Rushworth & Dreaper at their own concert hall and the much larger St. George's Hall.

On July 9th 1908 Olly Oakley and Winifred Marsland were married at St. Margaret's Church, Princes Road, Liverpool and set up home in a residence in the Mosley Hill district.

1908 – 1914 Recording Heyday; Duets with Joe Morley

Eventually Oakley's services were required in London so frequently he decided to give up teaching and move to the Metropolis.

At the end of his recording contract with the Gramophone & Typewriter Co., the question of a renewal was broached but the name of Olly Oakley had become so well known throughout the country - and so many recording companies were wanting his services - that the greatly increased offer was declined, leaving him free to record for any company willing to pay for his services.

As a November 1905 writer said, "Mr. Oakley, at an age when other men are getting their feet on the ladder, has already given up teaching and retired from orchestral work. He confines himself to concert engagements and to record making."

It is during this period of his career that Olly Oakley cut so many of the hundreds of records he made. Recording conditions in this country in those halcyon days were vastly different from those existing today. The City Road area of London was fairly bristling with 'recording studios' - often a couple of fairly large-size rooms; one suitably draped and fitted with the huge recording horn which went through the wall into the other room in which the primitive recording equipment of that time would be housed.

When a session was arranged, the artist rarely knew under which label(s) his solos were going to appear. The studio might be rented by all types of individual (often square-headed with strong Teutonic connections) who would sell the resulting matrices to any company willing to issue the records. Sometimes they arranged for the records to be pressed abroad and labelled to be sold in this country by a firm not in the record manufacturing business in the true sense of the word. 'Pressed in Hanover' often appeared on records of the period issued by some of the smaller 'record companies' with no 'works' of their own.

It was at this time that Oakley made a number of duet records with Joe Morley and it is interesting to note that in all these discs both artists play the solo part in unison! (Except 'Darkie Chuckle' where Morley plays a chord tremolo obbligato to the Andante Movement).

The happy-go-lucky state of affairs in the recording world did not, of course, apply to the larger established recording companies but it proved highly profitable to the many 'name' free-lance artists making records at the time.

Such recording artists would, engagements permitting, congregate in the various drinking houses in the City Road area and would often pick up a few useful guineas by being 'on the spot' when one or other of the recording managers of the day found they had a few spare 'waxes' (the masters on which records at that time were cut) on their hands.

They would rush out to the 'local' and seeing Oakley (for instance) ask him to come across the road and cut a couple of titles' for them. Often they would ask him to play titles they knew were selling on a well-known label and what are known as 'cover discs' today came into being sixty years ago! This accounts, too, for Oakley's numerous recordings of many of his popular solos.

Having obliged – and Oakley told your author that he sometimes would 'wax' four titles in less than an hour in such circumstances – he would collect his fee – and seldom know (or care) if and when the records were issued.

Whilst it must be said that Oakley (like many other of the popular recording artists of the day) found nothing at which to grumble in this state of affairs, the people really to benefit were the publishers of the music they recorded. With the passing of the Copyright Act, a royalty was payable for every record issued (remember the small adhesive stamps stuck to the records of the time, showing a royalty of 1/8d or even 1/4d!?). Matrices would sometimes be re-sold to another company after a number of records had been sold. Small companies would go out of business and another small company, having purchased the master would start pressing records from them. Even the large companies (i.e. Zonophone), when they decided to delete a record from its lists, sometimes would undertake to supply pressings for issue under another firm's private label.

The task of tracing any one recording of this period is wrought with difficulties, as the original identifying matrix number would often be removed or substituted by another of the new company's.

Despite this, it would appear that Olly Oakley made more banjo records during his career than any other British player of the banjo. He recorded over two hundred different titles (many as often as fifteen times) for over fifty different labels. In addition to his own name, his solos were issued by Fred Bayliss, F. Leggett, Fred Taylor, Arthur C. Price and Joe Zealand. The Imperial Co. even re-issued four titles recorded by

J. J. Ashton using Oakley's name.

Ninety per cent of the tunes Olly Oakley recorded (and played at his public appearances) were original banjo solos - unlike Ossman who invariably played arrangements of 'known' melodies.

Oakley magic

Here it might not be amiss to try to explain the great hold Oakley had on an audience - something which 'came through' on his records. Today it might be summed up in the one word 'showmanship'; in his day it was a keen understanding of his audience, coupled with outstanding ability, which prompted him to carry his audience with him, no matter what 'unknown' tune he played.

He would stride on to the platform as if eager to commence playing his beloved banjo. Acknowledging the applause of his expectant audience with a radiant smile he would start to quietly tune his banjo and, as his listeners fell silent, his tuning would almost imperceptibly develop into 'Tell Me, Pretty Malden', 'The Honeysuckle and the Bee' or some other popular 'hit' of the day. A buzz of amusement would run through the house, which would be acknowledged by a wry smile from the player and then, with a quick turn and an almost unseen nod to his pianist, his hearers were being carried away with enthusiasm as, say, 'La Matichiche' or 'Gallopade' is being played in a style and speed that almost defies imitation.

He seemed almost instinctively to know what solo to play as a contrast to that which he had just finished. For instance, he would play Kowalski's 'Marche Hongroise' with expression and at a speed that almost seemed impossible. The inevitable encore would be demanded and what appears to be a simple checking of his banjo for pitch and a slight re-tuning of his strings suddenly becomes 'Salut d'Amour' so delicately rendered as to call forth another burst of tumultuous applause. And so it would go on. The naive and fairly simple 'Queen of the Burlesque' would be followed by Cammeyer's 'Bolero'; his unaccompanied 'Melodie' in slow lyrical style would be followed by the spirited 'Mountaineers' March'.

It all looked so simple and spontaneous but Oakley was a hard-working perfectionist who had really studied stage presentation. It was once said, 'This art of contrasting effects can only be attained by an intimate knowledge of the banjo and its capabilities. The dominant idea is to present the instrument at its best. rather than to show off its possibilities - and Oakley certainly knew how to do that to the best possible advantage.

On February 18th 1908 Olly Oakley appeared at the Victoria Hall, Nottingham, at a 'Zonophone Concert'. Before a large audience, the new 'Auxetaphone', invented by Parsons of turbine fame was demonstrated. It was worked and amplified by a pneumatic process. Oakley played 'Lumbrin' Luke', 'Coloured Major' and Paderewski's 'Minuet'. "All were loudly encored and then produced upon the Zonophone most faithfully." A reporter, writing about the invention, added, "If these mechanical devices give such excellent results we shall soon have them being engaged

instead of the artists themselves.”

1908 – 1910 Oakley on tour; concert successes

Oakley was now playing at concerts all over the country; his ‘date book’ being limited only to his ability to reach the towns at which he was asked to appear. Typical of his engagements were the months of October and November in 1908 - given here to show how popular he was and how busy he was kept:

Oct. 6th, Birmingham; 10th, Mossley; 14th, Middlesbrough; 15th, Ripon; 16th, Berwick-upon-Tweed; 17th, Newcastle-upon-Tyne; 18th, Sunderland; 19th, Hexham; 20th, West Hartlepool; 21st Tynemouth; 22nd Stockton-on-Tees; 23rd, Tow Law; 24th, South Shields; 26th, Consett; 27th, York; 24th, Durham; 29th, Penrith; 31st, Saddleworth.

Nov. 4th, Dursley; 5th, Tutbury; 6th, Uttoxeter; 7th, Alfreton; 11th, Ashlington; 12th, Newcastle-upon-Tyne (a quick ‘repeat’ appearance, this); 13th, Swallincote; 16th, Congleton; 18th, Radcliffe; 20th, Levenshulme; 27th, Burton-on-Trent; 28th, Salford.

Thirty Concert appearances in less than eight weeks! And during the interval between the 20th and 27th of November he was in London for recording sessions.

This was, generally, the pattern of Olly Oakley’s life for some years. He would travel the length and breadth of the country, appearing at concerts in large towns and small; drawing capacity audiences wherever he appeared - and always being asked back for a ‘repeat’.

During the last week of February 1910 he again appeared on the music-hall stage - at the London Hippodrome and whilst most music-hall acts by then were playing plectrum -banjo, it was a refreshing change to hear Oakley’s masterly finger-style playing. Sir Home Gordon, Bart. wrote in the ‘B.M.G.’, “The Hippodrome can boast attractions of the highest class. Fitly united with their names is that of the great virtuoso, Olly Oakley. Suiting himself admirably to his unaccustomed surroundings and undaunted by the rather poor acoustic properties of the auditorium, he played with his utmost brilliance and had the courage, besides characteristic contributions, to perform items of the highest class. The warm response of the delighted audiences was the best tribute to his success.”

1910 – 1912 The Humoresks; moves to London

In the summer of 1910 Oakley again formed a concert party and, calling it ‘The Humoresks’, its appearances at several of the better-known seaside resorts was met with such appreciation that bookings for 1911 - up to the third week in October - were taken before the season ended. It was reported at the time that because of the success of the show, Oakley was considering arranging for a second company and the writer added, “We presume he will have to divide his own contributions to the programmes.” It was undoubtedly Oakley’s presence that made the shows and a second company was never formed because it would have been impossible for the maestro to be in two places at the

same time.

'The Humoresks' season for 1911 started at Manchester on June 5th and for the following three weeks they played at Aberystwyth, New Brighton and Newport, Mon., appearing for a week in each place. Their July dates were Weston-Super-Mare, Mumbles, Tenby, Plymouth and the North Pier, Blackpool, followed in August by weeks at Manchester, Ilfracombe, Torquay and Penarth and during September giving their highly-successful show at Cromer, Lowestoft, Yarmouth and Felixstowe. On October 2nd they commenced a week at Barrow-in-Furness and the following week appeared at Scarborough.

It was after this summer season that Oakley decided to make London his permanent home.

Living in London made little difference to Oakley's concert appearances throughout the country. Again typical of his travels, in February 1912 he performed in Birmingham (on two different occasions), Manchester, Cheltenham., Northampton, Rochdale and the Criterion Restaurant, London.

From April 1st to 6th, 1912, he appeared at the famous London variety theatre, the 'Canterbury Music Hall', where he "proved a most successful attraction". It was said "his banjo solos with orchestral accompaniment and also with pianoforte accompaniment (by Mr. Harvey Brinton) were given in a masterly manner and were evidently enjoyed and appreciated. The 'turn' is very effectively presented as regards its musical and lighting effects and adapted in a manner to appeal to the mixed audience of the Variety Hall."

It was at the time a well-known musical critic wrote, "Olly Oakley is the only player of the zither-banjo who has achieved the art of loud and clear playing on the zither-banjo for stage work." We reiterate: this stood him in good stead for recording, where a machine-gun-like delivery resulted in perfect masters.

Oakley's 'Humoresks' started their summer season at Torquay and after a strenuous season at the principal coastal resorts all over the country with his concert party, Oakley returned to London on October 14th. After several important engagements in and around London by November he was reported as being busy "making records for the Beka, Thomas A. Edison and Pathéphone companies".

On December 2nd he started a week of variety at the Kingston Empire, which was followed by another week's music-hall work at the Coventry Hippodrome. After appearing in Liverpool, we hear of him again in variety: week commencing January 6th, 1913 at the 'Empire', Bedford and the following week scoring a success at the Aston Hippodrome in Birmingham.

The summer season was again spent with his 'Humoresks' all over the country.

1914 – 1917 Duets with Cammeyer; entertaining the troupes; Humoresks tour South Africa

It was on February 5th 1914 he recorded the six titles with Cammeyer for the Zonophone company. In three Oakley played the solo part to Cammeyer's accompaniment; in the other titles, Oakley played the accompaniment.

When war was declared in 1914 Olly Oakley was one of the first artists to be engaged for the Broadwood Concerts (for the entertainment of serving personnel) and, in addition to spasmodically entertaining at home camps all over the country for three years, in 1917 he went to France and appeared in tin huts, barns, town halls and every conceivable kind of place where troops could congregate to be entertained.

After his 1915 summer season with the 'Humoresks' - greatly restricted because of war conditions - Oakley took the party to South Africa where he toured the principal towns of the Union, scoring an enormous success. The tour lasted six months and when he returned to England, Oakley resumed his concert work, recording and entertaining the troops at home camps.

1920 – 1943 Forms dance band; radio broadcasts; last recordings

By 1920 Olly Oakley had succumbed to the current trend and was playing 'ragtime'. In July of that year it was reported he was playing in a ragtime dance orchestra: "everybody's doing it" said a reporter using the title of one of the current hit tunes. From this time on Oakley seems to have 'cashed in' on the dance craze for there are reports of him and his own dance orchestra being kept busy with engagements. In 1922 'Olly Oakley's Dance Orchestra' appeared throughout the summer months at the Pier Winter Gardens, Southend-on Sea.

Oakley began to broadcast on 'the wireless' in 1924 in the old 2LO Savoy Hill days and was often engaged for a week at a time to tour the various regional stations of the British Broadcasting Company and for six years (until he could no longer play the banjo) he was a frequent broadcaster from all over the British Isles. (In those days the artist would broadcast from each regional station in turn; visiting the town in which the studios were situated).

When the impressive Empire Exhibition was opened at Wembley in 1925, Olly Oakley and his Dance Band played in the huge Stadium Restaurant and, three times daily, patrons could sit and listen to first-class dance music being led by a banjo soloist who, as an interlude to the current hits of the day, would play banjo solos with just piano accompaniment. (Incidentally, Oakley always led the band playing his banjo standing.)

It was about this time he went into partnership with Will Van Allen in a music shop at 61, Charing Cross Road, London. Van Allen was the business man and Oakley was seldom seen on the premises. The partnership did not last long.

Most of Oakley's vast output of records had been made under the old acoustic process. When electrical recordings started 1925, the Regal-Zonophone Company began to re-make some of their best-sellers, using the new method. In addition, Oakley recorded some solos for Parlophone and Broadcast by the electrical process. By comparison, these records are far from his best from a playing point of view. The six titles he cut for Parlophone in 1930 proved to be the last he was to make. The first twinges of the complaint that was to put an end to his playing were beginning to show themselves and, despite the best medical treatment available, the dreaded rheumatoid arthritis eventually crippled his hands. He was booked to appear at a John Alvey Turner Wigmore Hall concert on October 1930 but a programme note stated he was "unable to appear owing to an acute attack of rheumatoid arthritis". He last appeared on a concert platform on New Year's Day 1931 at Haltwhistle (near Carlisle).

For twelve years his banjo was silent; his fingers and, later, the whole of the lower half of his body, virtually useless. For all that long time the man whose entry on the platform had brought forth round after round of enthusiastic applause was an invalid confined to his chair, dependent upon the help of his wife and sons for carrying out the simplest of natural functions from walking across the room to taking off his jacket. It was your author's privilege to share many happy hours with Olly Oakley during his last years. He was never morose, never complaining. He enjoyed re-living the past and had many amusing anecdotes and recollections of his long and colourful career to recount.

His end came suddenly and without warning. He died on January 4th, 1943.

Oakley the accompanist; compositions and arrangements

In addition to the many solo and duet recordings made by Olly Oakley his playing of the banjo can be heard accompanying such singers as Agnes Preston, Jessie Broughton, Peter Dawson, Elaine Terrias, Albert Whelan, Stanley Kirkby, George Barry, The Premier Harmonists, Charles Bonheur, The Plantation Singers, Jack Starr ('A Baritone and a Banjo'), The Pearl Trio, etc. He also accompanied Alexander Prince on some of his instrumental records.

He was the composer of the following banjo solos:

Dashwood Quickstep
Devil May Care
Fernbank Quickstep
Les Sylphes
Marche de Concert
Melodie
Oakleigh Quickstep
Pastorale
Reveller's March
Rosamunde Waltz
Royal Windsor March
Rugby Parade
Sweet Jasmine
Spirit of the Glen
Tony
Two Cameos
White Rose
Winifred Mazurka

His arrangements include:

All the Winners (1st and 2nd Selections)
The Darkey Aristocrat
The Gondoliers
Husarenritt (Spindler)
En Passant, Intermezzo (Tennant)
In the Shadows
Home, Sweet Home (Trad.)
Marche Hongroise (Kowalski)
Zampa, Overture (Herold)
Renhegrons, Intermezzo (???)
Tales of Hoffman, Barcarolle (Offenbach)
Humoreske (Dvorak)
'Till the Boys Come Home (Novello)