

As a new documentary chronicles the struggles of Black Lace frontman Dene Michael, JAMES RAMPTON looks back on a national phenomenon and the pitfalls of instant fame

IT IS ARGUABLY the best-known novelty pop song of all time yet party anthem Agadoo was actually named the worst track of all time in a poll in 2003.

Labelling the 1984 smash hit as "magnificently dreadful", respected music magazine Q continued: "It sounded like the school disco you were forced to attend."

"Your middle-aged relatives forming a conga at a wedding party...a travelling DJ act based in Wolverhampton...every party cliché you ever heard."

And yet the band appeared to revel in the notoriety.

On a TV programme in the 1980s, Dene was asked what he thought about being the most mocked person in music.

Grinning from ear to ear, he replied: "We are very, very honoured."

In a comic advert from the time, Dene was struck by a wrecking ball as Gary Lineker walked obliviously in front of him smiling and scoffing crisps.

Spitting Image were responsible for a biting parody of Agadoo, called The Chicken Song, in 1986. It referred to Dene and his singing partner Alan Barton as: "Those two wet gits, with their girly curly hair."

Unbelievably, The Chicken Song went to number one for three weeks that year.

Despite Agadoo being widely mocked it sold a million copies and reached number two in the charts in 1984. It was only kept off the top spot by George Michael's classic Careless Whisper.

Accompanied by an equally iconic dance routine, Agadoo remained in the UK top 75 for an eye-watering 30 weeks.

Dene recalls that when the song was released, "it was like a tiger being unleashed. Novelty music – people wanted that."

The documentary – titled *Still Pushing Pineapples* after a typically nonsense line from Agadoo – catches up with Dene, 68, the sole surviving member of Black Lace.

The film, which is in cinemas now, poses questions like what comes after a fleeting dalliance with fame? How do you cope with growing old while still pursuing a dream? And after you have created one of the most cringe-inducing songs in history, what's next?

Yet it is a poignant documentary about the damaging long-term effects of transient fame. It also reflects on why some people are so desperate to chase celebrity long after it has left the building.

The cameras follow Dene, known as Mr Agadoo, as he clutches on to the dwindling remains of the celebrity he briefly enjoyed in the 1980s.

In their heyday, the band also produced such novelty hits as Do The Conga, Superman, Wig Wam Bam and I Am The Music Man. At the height of this fame Dene owned multiple houses, including a flat in Benidorm, a Rolls-Royce, a boat and went on holiday six times a year.

The singer, who actually has a good voice, looks back fondly on those halcyon

'I would now like to do something more credible...and clever'



Dene Michael now; and back in his 1980s heyday as part of Black Lace

days: "It was my chance at stardom. I went from doing pubs and working men's clubs to being a pop star."

Now dressed in a gaudy, pineapple-patterned shirt, Dene is belting out Black Lace's hits to an ever-shrinking, elderly crowd in some of the UK's most run-down towns and cities. He urges audiences: "Get ready to push your pineapples!"

But, increasingly disillusioned with the artistic limitations of these gigs, he is anxious to reinvent himself as a credible musician and evade the grip of Black Lace's unkillable hit. He no longer wants to be known as Mr Agadoo.

Encouraged by his adoring mother Anne, 89, to whom he is touchingly devoted, Dene is intent on reviving his pop career.

"It's my ambition to have another hit record,"

he says. "Everybody wants a piece of you when you're up there in the charts. I've still got that hope." His loyal girlfriend Hayley is his biggest cheerleader. She is so devoted to Dene that after just two months together she has a huge picture of his face next to a pineapple tattooed on her bicep.

But disaster strikes, when Dene is brutally sacked via text by the manager of Black Lace and replaced by someone younger. Hayley is furious, exclaiming, "That was the thanks he got!"

Unfailing positive, Dene tries to see the upside of his dismissal, describing it as: "A weight off my shoulders." The singer attempts to view his sacking as an opportunity rather than a setback: "I could now do what I'd like to do – something a bit more credible and clever. I

could use my voice." Disdaining the simplicity of Black Lace's previous hits, he declares: "Anybody could sing those songs." Very quickly, though, Dene starts to struggle. He is reduced to attending a Comic Con fan convention to sign Black Lace memorabilia. At one point, a Dalek sweeps past the musician crooning Agadoo in its menacing, metallic voice.

Dene begins to spiral, spending all day at home in his dressing gown. He tells Hayley: "I worry about how I'm going to survive."

Heartbreakingly, the return to fame that Dene yearns for continues to elude him.

At one particularly sad moment, as they drive past a bus, Dene's mother asks him: "Do you remember when there were pictures of you on the bus?"

You have to love Dene's unquenchable optimism. But perhaps he should have followed the advice of Mick Jagger and moved on. The Stones singer once memorably declared: "I'd rather be dead than singing Satisfaction when I'm 45."

● *Still Pushing Pineapples* is in cinemas now.



Dene with loyal girlfriend Hayley, who has two tattoos dedicated to the band