

THE MAN BEHIND—

"SOFT LIGHTS and
SWEET MUSIC"

Austen Croom-Johnson

NOT so very long ago the Royal College of Music housed a young man who came very near to being the despair of the whole establishment. He had rhythm on the brain, and, despite all remonstrance, would insist on rendering many of the classics in fox-trot tempo, whilst instead of studying the old masters of melody, he browsed pleasantly with Gershwin and Ellington.

The learned heads of academicians shook regretfully over him. This wayward pupil would be yet another one to add his quota of din to the "jazz racket," they said. They were right, in a sense, and yet in the main they were totally wrong, for although Austen Croom-Johnson, the young man in question, did enter the "business" as soon as the dignified portals of the R.C.M. closed behind him, he came into it as no ordinary member, but as an idealist who sought to present dance music in a quite revolutionary form.

Although at heart an intense admirer of the musical intricacies of such modernists as Duke Ellington, Austen is convinced that from the point of view of the general public, blatant and brassy jazz is wrong—and he has worked constantly to evolve forms of jazz having universal appeal through their simplicity, absence of noise, subtlety of tone colour, and striking originality.

Although he made gramophone records of a brand-new type, and produced many novel arrangements of popular numbers, the biggest step in Croom-Johnson's campaign for ultra-colourful dance music was when, in the summer of 1933, he first introduced his famous "Soft Lights and Sweet Music" feature to radioland.

With himself and John Burnaby, son of Davy Burnaby, at the two pianos, Austen collected several other instrumentalists who were each supreme solo artists in their own line. He set out to render one of the most unusual and individual programmes of dance music ever played, and the type of performance was ideally typified by his theme song, Irving Berlin's number "Soft Lights and Sweet Music."

There has been a romance behind every one of the "Soft Lights and Sweet Music" broadcasts. The whole plan was nearly wrecked on the very first performance owing to the sudden illness of Susan Bottrell, the star vocalist.

Every person who could have taken the part seemed out of town. Then Croom-Johnson, despairingly passing an upper vestibule at the B.B.C., suddenly espied no less a person than Eve Becke.

It was a stroke of fate almost without parallel. A record for descending from the upper regions of the B.B.C. to street level was established that day, and Eve not only stepped sportingly into the breach, but in the bare two hours at her disposal, rehearsed to such good effect that the turn made broadcasting history.

Illness also came very near to marring the second broadcast of the series. This time it was Helen Raymond who was suddenly ill, and Susan Bottrell reversed the previous case and stepped into the breach.

Austen Croom-Johnson has often been asked why the personnel of his company varies at every broadcast. His reply is, firstly, that some of the star people he uses are not available every time

When the orchestra fades in on your radio with the haunting "Soft Lights and Sweet Music," you expect something novel, attractive, and tantalisingly brief for the next twenty minutes. The man who is linked with these now famous radio programmes is Austen Croom-Johnson. He is a young man who has been making a name for himself recently in music. Here is his story, told by J. E. MARSHALL.

owing to pressure of work, and secondly, that the type of arrangements used are so varying that they require different personalities.

Amongst the famous people who have broadcast in this series, in addition to the ones already mentioned, are Elisabeth Welch, Harry Bentley, Sonny Miller, Carroll Gibbons, Len Fillis, Bill Shakespeare, and Eric Siday. The latter notable violin stylist, like John Burnaby, is a permanent member of the cast.

And the man who organises this galaxy of talent very nearly became a stockbroker. This loss to the musical world was prevented by the fact that in a very short time Austen developed such a loathing for stockbroking that he decided to chuck it forthwith. After only three days of big business his very professional bowler hat and umbrella hung neglected in the hall.

"They may be there still," says Austen, "for I have never worn a hat or used an umbrella since."

After much opposition from a family distinguished in the professional world, Austen was allowed to pursue his musical inclinations, at least to some extent, and was sent up to the Royal College of Music, although scarcely with the effect anticipated by his family.

Now, at only twenty-five, Austen has achieved his biggest personal ambition by his appointment as a musical adviser to the variety department at the B.B.C. Here, besides arranging the musical programmes for innumerable stars, he is encouraged by Eric Maschwitz to evoke all the orchestral novelties he can think of, and with this work, composing and the constant search for new talent, his time is exceptionally well occupied.

In private life Croom-Johnson has one serious fault—he is far too modest. Few who have seen his dynamic figure directing studios



Eve Becke at the mike during a Croom-Johnson broadcast.



A characteristic snap of "Ginger" Croom-Johnson working out a new number at the piano.

programmes would recognise the hatless, preoccupied figure that may occasionally be seen motoring or rambling in the wilds of Surrey, where he loves to spend his spare time.

Austen is essentially a countryman at heart. He hails actually from Somerset, and his occasional studied lapses into the brogue of that county bring shrieks of delight from his acquaintances.

Austen is the best example on record of a round peg in a round hole. He is the most contented fellow in the whole world, and his humour is perpetually sunny, unless, of course, some thoughtless person has the tactlessness to mention stockbroking!