

Behind the "MIKE" with

"SONGS from the FILMS"

These ingenious "song cocktails" called "Songs From the Shows" and "Songs From the Films" have proved to be two of the most popular B.B.C. items in recent years. Here is an intimate glimpse of the man who produces them at work.

SOME people hoard away the theatre programmes of shows they have seen, and most of us have a niche in our memories for certain songs we have heard in the theatre. It is pleasant to wander down Memory Lane to music.

That has been, I think, the secret of the success of John Watt's two radio series, his "Songs From the Shows" of recent memory and his present "Songs From the Films."

I have just been behind the mike with John Watt to see how these programmes evolve, for simple though they may sound I had guessed that there was a good deal more to them than met the ear.

"Songs From" are now in their third year and still going strong, but they have retained that gay almost impromptu family party touch which makes them so attractive to listen to.

And, making allowance for the microphone art that conceals art, the "Songs" are a happy party affair.

Producer Watt got the germ of his Shows series from a Memories programme he did in Belfast some years ago. They went well, and soon he was doing research on the song history of all the famous London theatres. And a very interesting bit of research work, too, he says.

A Listener's Idea.

Then one day a keen listener sent in a long list of songs from talkie films and said he would like to hear some. The list was shown to Mr. Watt, and the upshot was "Songs From the Films."

Not that it is really as simple as that, though Mr. Watt says it is the sort of hard work he enjoys most. But there is a good deal of work before the hour's programme comes over in its nice, casual, half-impromptu, very jolly style.

Thus for every hour of programme there is eighteen hours of rehearsal, usually in bursts of three hours each. Chorus are first put through their paces by themselves; then the Shows Gang, people like Anona Winn, Olive Groves, George Baker, have their turn; after which the whole act is whipped into shape.

Then John Watt goes away into a corner and writes out his compère-commentary, learns it, rehearses it carefully, and finally joins in with the others in a grand rehearsal.

And that compère announcing is very definitely not impromptu. Mr. Watt writes himself a very complete script and sticks to it, and every one of his pauses, chuckles, gags and comments is strictly as per the script. It doesn't deviate from the matinée performance to the night. Mr. Watt will never go before the "mike" without knowing what he is going to say.

The selection of the numbers for an hour's programme is quite a job, too. For the "Films" series Mr. Watt went along to Wardour Street and plunged back through five years

of movie history, from Al Jolson to Bing Crosby. Through long lists of musical pictures he went, noting their theme songs and hit numbers, and lining them up in chronological order of general release date.

After selection comes the question of who will sing what! The tenor must have his correct song, the baritone, the soprano, and so on. Then follows the making of the musical scores and arrangements, the grouping of the songs, and the important problem of running time.

Before the programme can go into rehearsal, Mr. Watt, with the assistance of Doris Arnold, who makes all the chorus and Carlyle Cousins arrangements for these shows, has literally to go through hundreds of songs and dozens of vocal scores. The numbers have to be juggled with so that the various artists each get their share of the programme, and then the whole thing goes into rehearsal, and this is what it means when it says in the programme "produced by John Watt."

Now for the studio, usually one of the small basement ones, where Mr. Watt takes over the listening room and studio mike and starts rehearsing. And soon the famous "Songs From" signature tune heralds another programme.

There is, by the way, an interesting little story connected with that tune. As in the case of Eric Coates' "Knightsbridge" march of "In Town To-night" fame, lots of listeners wonder what it is.

It happened this way. Two or three years ago John Watt did a radio show called "The Stage Revolves," for which he wanted a theme song or tune. So he went along to see his friend Harry Pepper, and said:

"Harry, I am doing a big show with a sort of revolving stage effect—and I want a symbolic theme tune for it."

And Harry said:

"Ah, yes, I know, something like this," and sat down at the piano and strummed out the first few bars of a tune.

"That's not like it. It is it," said John.

In a few minutes the tune was sketched out, and a few hours later was all ready for putting over the "mike." It was then duly played in "The Stage Revolves," and that, apparently, was that. The tune went into the vast B.B.C. band-part stock,



John Watt, producer and compère of "Songs from the Films," and (left) Anona Winn, one of the stars of his company.



But when John Watt was searching for a signature tune for his first "Songs From the Shows" he suddenly thought of "The Stage Revolves," and it was hauled forth again. Now it is famous, and its creators have quite an affection for it.

All sorts of famous radio stars have taken part in the Watt series. Regulars like Eve Becke, Anona Winn, George Baker, Olive Groves, Gordon Little and the Carlyle Cousins, and visiting celebrities like George Crossmith, Clarice Mayne, Jessie Matthews, Sonnie Hale, Gene Gerrard, Phyllis Dare, Marta Eggerth, Huntley Wright, Florence Smithson, Harry Welchman, Elsie Randolph, Nelson Keys and Edith Day.

Requests from listeners have poured in, too, and out of the mass of tunes two numbers stand out as clear favourites among the Shows programmes: "Oh, Listen To The Band" (which the sapient Jack Hylton had chosen as his signature tune some years before), and the "My Hero" waltz from the "Chocolate Soldier."

Another great favourite has been the "King of Jazz" selection among films.

Meet Mr. Watt.

They are a "matey" crowd, the "Songs From" people. Since they are experienced "mike" artistes, they work well with Mr. Producer Watt, and rehearsals are pleasant in the decorative dungeons of Broadcasting House.

John Watt himself is a short, dynamic, dark young man, who is crazy about all sides of radio show business. He used to be an actor himself once. "A very bad one," he admits, with a grin. Then he was a newspaper man, a reporter in Paris and London, after which he came into radio in Belfast.

There isn't much in radio that he hasn't at one time or another tackled. He is cheerful, friendly and keen. Only complaint his friends have about him is that he smokes what they call "impossible" French cigarettes, specially imported for him. After smoking a great many of them—I still like John Watt.

A Special "Popular Music"
Interview

By H. W.
**SHIRLEY
LONG**

NEXT WEEK'S STAR ATTRACTIONS!

MOOD INDIGO. SCARECROW.

CUPID. FARE THEE WELL.

LITTLE BLACK SHAWL.

I LAUGHED WHEN WE PARTED.

BELLS OF NORMANDY (Chorus).

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