

TWO HOURS TO PREPARE FOR MY FIRST BROADCAST



Joining The B.B.C. Dance Orchestra

And My Entry Into Variety

MY joining the B.B.C. was a shining example of Fate's funny little ways. Henry Hall first heard me at second-hand; he heard a record of mine being broadcast.

At that time I was with Howard Jacob's band at the Berkeley Hotel, London, where I was saxophonist, occasionally doing vocal numbers. "Crooning" was still a very young idea then.

Henry seemed to like the number he heard on the radio, and he got into touch with me. We had an interview, and, like so many other interviews, it ended with something like, "Well, thanks very much for calling; I will let you know." What a hopeless phrase that can be!

Henry, however, gave it a different meaning, for sure enough, not many days after I did hear from him.

Very urgently, too. He came through on the 'phone one afternoon, at about half-past two. Val Rosing, his usual vocalist, had been taken suddenly ill, and could not manage to turn up at the tea-time broadcast. Could I possibly fill the bill? Well, I took it on like a shot, of course, and round to the studios I ran.

My First Broadcast.

I shall never forget that broadcast. I never want to go through another one like it.

I got to the studios about three o'clock, with a little more than two hours to prepare for the 5.15 broadcast. In this short time I had to learn, and rehearse with a strange band, some fifteen to eighteen numbers, fully a dozen of which were new to me.

Heaven knows how I did it. I only know that I didn't have time to be nervous.

But I can't say the same about my next broadcast with the B.B.C. boys. A fortnight later I was installed as the new vocalist of the band. Having plenty of time to think about it beforehand, I was as nervous as a kitten.

This feeling hung on for a day or two; it wasn't only "first-night" nerves. You see, all of a sudden I had found fame.

Hitherto I had been known only to a comparative handful of people, though I had broadcast with other bands often enough. Now I was a star—and I couldn't believe it! Fan mail poured in. Love-sick maidens poured out their hearts to me.

How would you feel?

Still, fortunately I weathered the storm, and managed to keep my size in hats down. For one thing, I still had plenty of work to

keep my mind occupied, and for another—well, there's a sort of atmosphere about Henry Hall's combination that keeps you level-headed.

Henry is, to my mind, one of the greatest



personalities in the dance band business. He was in those days my guide, philosopher, and friend, as he was to all the other lads under his baton. He has that calm, debonair smoothness of manner that can only be described by the catch-title of "fine old English gentleman." But with Henry the title really does mean something.

None of us ever minded how much effort we had to put into our work. We would go through interminable rehearsals under any kind of difficulties, simply because Henry told us he thought we should.

Everything he got from his band was got by kind words and requests which he knew would not be refused. Never demands or bullying tactics such as can be employed by a leader who does not know his men.

But don't get the idea that the rehearsal studio had anything of the schoolroom about it. No, Henry can enjoy, and crack, a joke with the best of 'em.

He was one of the very few leaders I have known who made it his business to know his boys away from the studios as well as inside. If ever you wanted advice, or were in any kind of difficulty, you could always treat Henry as your big brother. You knew that he would straighten out your worries for you. A real good fellow.

So were the rest of the lads.

The "Same Audience" Problem.

The work was more difficult than you might imagine, for me. We had, by the very fact that we were broadcasting regularly to practically the same audience every day of the week, to keep constantly changing our programmes.

Often we would put across twelve to fifteen new numbers a day.

My trouble was that I found it intensely difficult to get always the greatest depth of

feeling into numbers that I had only learned a couple of hours before broadcasting. It did not give me time to let the atmosphere of the lyric sink in. Still, hard work is a good thing, and I was too happy to complain.

It was a hard business, breaking with this grand combination, and I might never have done had I not, once again, been trapped in a flood of circumstances.

It started after Radiolympia, when Julius Darewski, the agent, wrote to me, asking whether I had thought of turning myself into a variety act. Just then my head was too full to seriously think of this, because I was shortly due to go home and see my folks in Toronto again, after an absence of nine years.

Accordingly, I passed this letter along to my brother-in-law, who is now my manager, asking him to look after things.

I got an occasional cable from him during my visit, and when at the end of four weeks I returned to this country, I found that he had negotiated a contract for me with George Black, of the General Theatres Corporation.

Booked for Thirty-Three Weeks.

It was an amazing contract, booking me up for thirty-three weeks—which I believe is a record booking for this circuit.

Of course, I had to approach Henry, and tell him of my position. He might have made difficulties, but, instead, was the real good pal he always had been, and gave me his blessing in my new venture. If ever I was in need of help, he told me, I only had to ask.

Well, more rushing about. I was due to appear in variety within two weeks of my return, and I had to find an act.

It wasn't without a good deal of hard labour that we finally hit upon the idea of the Melody Four. I was glad to be able to rope in Jackie Phillips and Cyril Hellier, who were special pals of mine in the B.B.C. combination. It made us a very happy family.

We were together for a year—or rather for a year all but a day. Then in September of this year the Canadian Bachelors "came into my life."

No matter how good an act may be, it seems to me to be a fact that variety is not only the spice, but the essence of a successful stage and radio life. The public demands that you give them the same, recognisable sort of act, but it also demands that that act be ever new. Difficult, paradoxical if you like, but then, my dear public, you are like that!

So here we are—and I hope you like us.

Les Opens His Fan Mail for You Next Week! Don't Miss It!