

MOVIE NIGHT



#7

The Silent comedy, slapstick and music hall magazine



"Turned Out Nice Again!"

THE FILMS OF GEORGE FORMBY



*Also
featuring*

BILLY

ANDY

BUSTER

LAUREL

BEVAN

CLYDE

KEATON

&

HARDY

Welcome, again, to another issue of 'MOVIE NIGHT'. Thanks to all who have contributed, especially to David Wyatt for providing his regular column. This is the longest issue to date, thanks in no small measure to the many exciting events, DVD releases and pieces of news that have been happening lately. It's a good time to be a silent comedy fan! As always, please do get in touch with articles, story submissions, or opinions and ideas. Your contributions are really appreciated. In case you missed it, there's a new email: movienightmag@gmail.com. Alternatively, you can still use my old address, matthewross22@googlemail.com. Thanks for your continued support, and happy reading!



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Cover photo: George Formby, Cyril Ritchard and Kay Walsh in 'I SEE ICE' (1938).

STOP PRESS! AN AMAZING BUSTER KEATON DISCOVERY!

The International Buster Keaton Society (The Damfinos) have announced a fantastic, unexpected find in a new press release:

A treasure trove of previously unknown behind-the-scenes material documenting the making of Buster Keaton's *The General*, long considered one of the greatest films ever made, has recently been discovered by a member of the International Buster Keaton Society Inc.

In the summer of 1926, Cottage Grove, Oregon, a local photographer was given unprecedented access to the filming of the classic, and his vast collection of photographs and nitrate negatives remained stored in a box until found recently by one of his descendants. The collection was obtained by the member of the Buster Keaton Society, and rights to publish the materials were donated to the group. In addition, the only known script for the film, the personal copy of one of the film's writers, Clyde Bruckman, complete with his and Keaton's handwritten notes, recently surfaced at auction and rights for it were obtained by the Keaton Society, which plans to publish a book in the near future, featuring both the photographs and the script, along with other rare, previously unpublished material about the making of the film.

The combination of the photographs and the script provide an exceptional glimpse into the making of Keaton's 1926 masterpiece *The General*, and as such, they are an unprecedented find.

An unprecedented find, indeed. Until someone invents a time machine, this is the nearest we'll get to being on the set of a masterpiece with a master. Looking forward to that book!



SONS OF THE DESERT takes to the stage!

Here's a first: a stage production of a Laurel and Hardy film! 'SONS OF THE DESERT' took to the stage of the Liverpool Empire in October 2013.

An ambitious notion that could have been a huge let-down, this was actually a fantastic show in every way. Sets were cleverly designed on a split-level system to allow for the climatic scenes where the boys hide in the attic above their wives, and there was creative use of clips from the original film. The cast were superb, especially Michael Starke as Ollie. Roy Brandon's Stan fell into that Laurel impersonator trap of grimacing a little too much rather than just looking blank, but this was a minor quibble. Many of the cast also did double duty; to expand the show into a full length performance, the first half replicated a variety bill. As well as singers and an extra sketch from 'L & H', there were also many homages to other music hall entertainers, such as local heroes George Formby, Eric Morecambe and "the Egyptian Sand Dancers", Wilson, Keppel & Betty.

All in all, a great concept pulled off with flair and finesse, as near as we'll get to seeing the real L & H on stage. Here's hoping for another run.

CHAPLIN CELEBRATED IN STEEL CITY

Sheffield University, in association with the National Fairground Archive, has just celebrated Chaplin's celluloid centenary with a festival during the Spring Bank Holiday week. Highlights included:

- *CITY LIGHTS with a live orchestra.
- *A David Robinson talk and introduction to 'THE CIRCUS'
- *A programme of Keystone's accompanied by Neil Brand.
- *Chances to see films in quirky locations, including 'MODERN TIMES' in the appropriately industrial setting of Kelham Island Museum.

Great stuff, and the turnout was generally very good. Nice to see Chaplin still packing 'em in 100 years on.

BRITISH PATHE OPENS THE ARCHIVE

The wonderful free resource that is the British Pathe film collection has been made available on YouTube. Containing a vast bank of newsreels, along with filmed variety acts and some odds and ends of fiction films (RADIO PARADE, reviewed in the last issue for instance), it is now more searchable, and accessible. Take a look at youtube.com/BritishPathe

SUCCESS IN BO'NESS!

The Hippodrome Festival of Silent Cinema is becoming a beloved annual event. This year was the most successful yet, winning 5 star reviews and publicity that extended to prominent posters of Buster Keaton spread throughout Edinburgh. B.K. featured in the newly discovered version of 'THE BLACKSMITH', alongside Chase's LIMOUSINE LOVE and Charley Bowers' THERE IT IS. What great choices! Congratulations to all the team at Bo'ness for a great event.



**MISSING
FOUND!**
IN ACTION

LOVE, LIFE AND LAUGHTER (1923)



I'm hugely excited to have yet more lost film news to write about in this issue. The glut of rediscoveries continues apace, with perhaps the most important find for several years. 'LOVE, LIFE AND LAUGHTER' is a 1923 British feature starring Betty Balfour. Balfour was somewhere between being the British Mabel Normand and Mary Pickford; she had seen her greatest fame playing a chorus girl character 'Squibs' in several films, under the aegis of director George Pearson. Pearson was one of the most talented and innovative of British directors, and has even been credited with developing the travelling shot. Sadly, many of his films are lost, so this is an important discovery for his cannon of work.

Aside from this, it is a work that offers much promise. There was a lavish budget, and the film was praised roundly at the time for its mixture of comedy and pathos. Balfour is again in chorus girl mode, albeit not as 'Squibs'. As a dancer struggling to achieve her artistic ambitions she finds romance with a poet who has similar dreams. A review from the Manchester Guardian sums up the film loquaciously:

"This fantasy of a chorus girl and a young poet is clever, but chiefly clever in simulating cleverness, in tickling the intellectual vanity of its audience with a goose feather, coloured peacock by imagination."

The BFI included 'LOVE, LIFE AND LAUGHTER' in their list of 75 'most wanted' missing films. A handful of the others on the list have turned up, but often in fragments. 'LOVE, LIFE AND LAUGHTER' is, happily, a complete print. The film is apparently tinted and toned, but does have Dutch intertitles, so will require some restoration. Hopefully details of showings (and maybe a DVD release?) will be announced in due course. It certainly is wonderful to see such an important film turning up. Perhaps the recent surge of new interest in silent cinema is inspiring people to look a little harder at what they have. We can only wonder what will turn up next!

The ever-wonderful Silent London blog has a great article on the film: <http://silentlondon.co.uk/2014/04/03/lost-betty-balfour-film-discovered-by-eye-love-life-and-laughter-1923/>

WHOOZIT (1928)

More exciting news, about one of my favourite silent comedy stars, Charley Bowers! In issue 4 of MOVIE NIGHT, I wrote about Bowers' exhilaratingly surreal live comedy/animation shorts.

Bowers' rediscovery has been dogged by frustrating gaps in his filmography. He made but 19 of his gems, and roughly half of these are missing. However, rediscoveries continue. It's recently come to light that 'WHOOZIT', one of Bowers' 1928 Educational comedies, has turned up and been restored by Lobster films.

It was Lobster who spearheaded the Bowers revival, with their superior DVD set collating all his surviving work. This brilliant set has been out of print for some time, but a trailer has just appeared on YouTube, containing clips from 'WHOOZIT'! A 2014 release date is given, but with no mention yet of exactly when. I'm hopeful that, as well as 'WHOOZIT', the rediscovered first reel of 'MANY A SLIP' will be included. I await more details eagerly.

Speaking of WHOOZIT, here's a nice ad from 'THE FILM DAILY', describing it as "Even better than 'THERE IT IS!'" As the latter film is generally considered one of Bowers' very best, the rediscovery is exciting news indeed!

**MISSING
FOUND!**
IN ACTION

Charley BOWERS COMEDY that's
"even better than 'THERE IT IS'...
and that is saying a pageful"
"WHOOZIT"

As all other is lagging behind it's inevitable a leader like Charley Bowers example of how comedy can be made more effective with just the right amount of novelty and originality. It's the last Bowers comedy we've seen, even better than "There It Is," and that is saying a pageful to be remembered how good that Bowers comedy was.

When you can make an entire world! Many you can build a whole new world! We had never seen these things before and we never will! "Whoozit" is a comedy that is saying a pageful to be remembered how good that Bowers comedy was.

Charley Bowers introduces us to a world of his own. Bowers has also utilized the idea of a human as a story person, always fascinating. This is not a new idea under the "Famous Players" name. Bowers' originality is a long sought after for the moment. He brought all sorts of things - the entire nothing, the whole thing success. There will be a great deal of the result of you which Bowers has simply stated. When he has brought them the whole thing that of an idea into the the process of comedy, nothing through it of which he is the human comedy figure. (Especially different) when you, reader, just comedy.

—MOTION PICTURE NEWS

EDUCATIONAL FILM EXCHANGES, INC.
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MOTION PICTURE NEWS

FORMBY'S FILMS

**George Formby: gormless ukulele player, or "The Lancashire Chaplin"?
Decide for yourself as we take a look at George's sometimes undervalued
film career....**



It seems incredible now that, for 4 years, Britain's #1 box office attraction was a ukulele player with, to quote one of his films, "a face like a horse and a row of teeth like a graveyard". Yet, from 1938 until 1942, George Formby was the number 1 star in films of *any* genre in the U.K, and remained among the top money-makers for even longer! It's even more implausible when you consider that Formby (born in Wigan, Lancashire) spoke with a thick provincial accent at a time when anyone failing to speak the Queen's English was considered hopelessly hick.

Formby was technically George Formby, Jr*, the son of famous music hall comedian George Formby, Sr. The elder Formby had been a famous provincial star; as his son would after him, he made much of his Northern England roots. Playing a gormless working class type, one of his trademarks became the hacking cough of a miner, accompanied by the plaintive catchphrase, "I'm coughing better tonight!" The cough was genuine, an early symptom of the Tuberculosis that killed him in 1921. Formby Jr initially trained as a jockey, before carrying on the family trade after his father's death. Starting out as a sketchy recreation of his father's act, he later came to learn the ukulele and began incorporating it into his act. This proved a much greater hit, and became his unique selling point.

By the early 1930s, he had become a very different entertainer to his father. Accompanied by the bouncy rhythm of his ukulele-banjo, he became the happy-go-lucky flipside to his father's gritty pathos; often he wore smart tuxedos in contrast to his father's slap-shoed miner costume. He had also taken to singing cheeky little ditties with risqué lyrics. The catchy, bouncy tunes and George's cheeky, naughty boy-style delivery helped him to get away with murder in some racy lines:

***"I wonder who's under her balcony now,
Who's kissing my girl?
Will she kiss him under the nose, or underneath the archway where her sweet William grows?"***

As a new father, in 'My Ukelele':
***"My heart, it filled with joy.
I could see it was a boy,
For he had a ukulele in his hand!"***

Or, most famously

***"She pulls her hair all down behind,
Then pulls down her – never mind
Then finally pulls down the blind,
When I'm Cleaning Windows."***

All pretty mild stuff now, but in po-faced '30s Britain, too near the knuckle for comfort! The last song was even banned by the BBC! Formby's songs are his most lasting legacy today, re-recorded, pastiched and parodied continuously, often mercilessly, since his heyday.

In fact, Formby is often reduced to a bit of a running joke in British culture. Yet, he still has legions of admirers who gather to sing and play his songs. Although he undoubtedly seems a little quaint and dated today, the charisma in his singing and playing, and his seaside postcard humour, have somehow withstood changing times in a way that few other '30s comedians have.

Meanwhile, however, his films tend to take a backseat to his songs. They are often forgotten entirely, or dismissed as populist, lightweight fluff not worthy of attention. While it's true that they were pretty straightforward and often formulaic films, they were slickly made comedies with an infectious sense of fun. This article is an attempt to view George Formby's films as comedies in their own right, rather than through the lens of his musical or wider showbiz career. In fact, the Formby comedies fit within 'MOVIE NIGHT'S remit very snugly indeed. Of course influenced by Formby's heritage in music hall and Variety, they also bore a clear stylistic influence from classic silent comedy features, especially the works of Harold Lloyd or Monty Banks. The nearest contemporary comparison was probably Joe E Brown; Brown and Formby stayed in the "classic fool" mode notwithstanding film comedy's metamorphosis into slick dialogue and screwball situations.

Yet, Formby's first few films were far from this template. In fact, his celluloid baptism had been at a callow eleven years old, in a horse-racing drama called 'BY THE SHORTEST OF HEADS' (1915). Formby Jr's showbiz connections and prowess as a jockey helped win him the role, but no more films resulted and we cannot judge now as the film appears to be lost. A gap of almost two decades followed before his next appearance, by which time he had achieved success as a variety and recording artist.

By the early 1930s, Formby was keen to get involved in film-making, but discovered that his regional success meant little to

*Professionally, at least. If we're being strict about it, he's actually George Booth, as the elder Formby's real name was James Booth.

London studios. As he later recalled in 1960, "I wrote my own script with [his wife] Beryl and a chap called Arthur Mertz, and off we went 'round the studios, but no-one had heard of George Formby. They didn't even want to hear about him!"

Finally, he garnered some interest:

"Later, in a place called Warrington, a man called John E Blakeley came up to me and said "I'd like to make pictures with you". I nearly grabbed his hand off!"

Mr Blakeley was John E. Blakeley, president of Britain's first regional film company, Mancunian Films. Mancunian specialised in picking up popular Northern Variety stars and filming their sketches. Formby was making big waves in the provinces, and it was natural that Mancunian would snap him up. However, this was hardly MGM; 'BOOTS! BOOTS!', Formby's first effort, had a budget of £2,000. As you might expect, it showed, right from the first day of production...

George: "So down we went to the studio.. Huh, studio! Two rooms over a garage in Albany Street! And when we wanted to start filming we'd have to press a button and it'd ring a bell downstairs. Then the men would stop working so we could film!"

George's summary of the finished film was wonderfully offhand: "Ooh, it was a lousy picture!" In a cinematic sense, he was absolutely right; 'BOOTS! BOOTS!' is a patchwork of badly filmed and edited scenes where cardboard sets rattle and unknown actors stumble about, mumbling stilted dialogue. On another level, however, it is absolutely fascinating as a cultural artefact. As little more than a series of sketches tied together by a loose plot about a show in a hotel, it gives us a good idea of what George was up to on stage at the time. Secondly, we can see that the on-screen charisma and talent are shining through this early in George's film career. To save money (and probably to keep him away from leading ladies), George's legendarily domineering wife Beryl appears as his romantic interest. There is a great chemistry between them, and plenty of songs (plus some tap dance from Beryl!) that pull the film above its lowly status. George's star potential and reputation ensured that the film packed out box offices across the north of England. The success of the similar follow-up, 'OFF THE DOLE', was pretty much guaranteed.

In 'BOOTS, BOOTS' and 'OFF THE DOLE', Formby is far from the character he would eventually play. Much like the early Stan Laurel, he is cocky, almost aggressive. In 'BOOTS, BOOTS', he slaps about a midget co-worker, and mocks a stereotypically limp-wristed character, while OFF THE DOLE sees him as a workshy layabout haranguing the superiors who try to make him find a job. He even banter with a policeman, mimicking his bobbing movements. This self assured George, cocking-the-snook at authority and the middle classes, is firmly in the mould of the Northern music hall raconteur. He is much closer to his father, or the anarchic Frank Randle, than the pleasant everyman he would come to portray. While this was lapped up by regional audiences, it was hardly the key to nationwide success.

Basil Dean, from Associated Talking Pictures (later Ealing Studios), recognised the box office potential of Formby and proposed a contract. However, Dean also recognised that, to transfer to nationwide success, there would have to be changes. To be accepted outside the provinces, a working class northern comedian had to be sympathetic rather than a non-conformist threat to polite society. The policeman-baiting and midget-slapping were out, doggedly trying to achieve goals through hard work was in. The only threats the new George character posed were through his naïve bumbling and slapstick carelessness. He would also be made more sympathetic through the provision of a more glamorous leading lady to moon over; this would invariably be an impossibly upper class girl called Mary or Anne. Out went the baggy pants costume, and

he began dressing more like a respectable white collar worker. Finally, the biggest obstacle to acceptance in Middle England were the nudge-nudge, wink-wink aspects of his character, associated with the innuendos of his songs. Of course, George would still sing his songs in the films, but his character at ATP was far from the Northern lothario of his songs like 'The Lancashire Toreador' or 'The Window Cleaner'; instead he was bashful, naïve and totally in awe of girls. A parallel might be made with Harold Lloyd's character in 'GIRL SHY'. In that film, Harold writes a book about the ways to woo women and recalls his many fictional affairs, although in actuality he is cripplingly shy. George's risqué songs perhaps fit into his new character best if thought of in this way, an outlet for the frustrations of a virginal young man unable to garner the confidence with women that he dreams of. As his song 'I DON'T LIKE', put it:

**"I've never loved a girl before,
I'd take you home and lock the door, but I don't like!"**

In fact, George would often be placed in situations where he was im-



The Formby of 'BOOTS! BOOTS!' and 'OFF THE DOLE' was a brash Northern upstart, far from his eventual image.



George and wife Beryl in 'BOOTS! BOOTS!'. By most accounts, things weren't always this blissful in real life...



Formby and Florence Desmond in 'NO LIMIT!', his first big hit.

probably seduced, or caught in ladies' bedrooms, his panic contrasting comically with the sly bravado of his songs. In this way, the risqué elements of his persona and songs were skilfully subverted to become harmless comic fantasy, George's default mode now naïve clumsiness and bashfulness.

Awkwardness became a Formby specialty. Not just in sexual matters, either; he was hilariously awkward at, well, everything! The Formby comic specialty became a rising panic akin to a distressed hen seeing a fox, enabling him to yell his catchphrase, "Ooooh, Mother!"

'NO LIMIT!' was his first film for ATP, and shows the Dean formula being implemented for the first time. To smooth the transition, the film has a provincial setting and story written by Northern author Walter Greenwood, who had just seen success with the realist novel 'LOVE ON THE DOLE'. Greenwood came up with a realistic story, with chimney sweep George dreaming of success as a motorcyclist in the Isle of Man's TT races. While Greenwood provided the familiar elements for George's northern audiences, ATP added the polish to make the film a wider success, including casting established comedienne Florence Desmond* as his leading lady. Brought in to direct was silent comedian Monty Banks. Banks was an ideal fit for the Lloyd-inspired comedy vehicle, having made a run of his own Lloyd-esque silent comedies matching laughs with thrills. The most famous of these was 'PLAY SAFE' (1927), with an epic train chase. Banks' knack with speed and thrills would be crucial to this motorbiking film.

George is intent on taking his own homemade bike "The Shuttleworth Snap" to the races, but dreams of being sponsored by the Rainbow Motorbike company.

On the Manx Ferry, George saves the life of Florrie (Desmond), a secretary for the Rainbow company who is involved with boorish biker Tyldesley (Jack Hobbs). In the race trials, George's throttle breaks, causing him to ride faster and faster and into a giant crash. By this fluke, he breaks speed records, and while he recuperates, Florrie is able to persuade her boss to give him a Rainbow contract. However, the crash has left George with a motorbike phobia, and he announces that he will never get on a bike again.

Meanwhile, Tyldesley has been replaced by George and vows revenge. He signs with a rival company, and sets about conning George into accepting a bribe not to ride. Now the comedy begins picking up speed, as George sets about dodging the Rainbow boss wanting him to ride, the hoods wanting him to smash up his bike, his landlady pestering for the rent, and his newly arrived mother and Grandfather! Eventually, the truth comes out, and George faces his fears for the love of Florrie, arriving at the race track just in time to begin.

The climactic race sequences are the highlight of NO LIMIT, filmed on location around the TT races track. Banks' direction injects speed and thrills into the proceedings, as well as an array of gags. The results are excellent, a genuinely exciting finale to the film, showing the influence of Banks as well as Harold Lloyd. Motorbikes were a genuine passion of Formby's, and he does much of the stunt riding himself, further adding to the effectiveness.

The sunny atmosphere and chemistry in the film are even more remarkable considering that Formby and Desmond loathed each other, and Beryl Formby allegedly alienated everyone on the film with her domineering ways. Nevertheless, NO LIMIT! broke records and the team of Formby, Desmond and Banks was reassembled for a follow-up.

'KEEP YOUR SEATS PLEASE' abandoned the speed and thrills of motorcycle chases for out-and-out comedy. An episodic structure equally reminiscent of silent comedies took its place, in this adaptation of Iif and Petrov's Russian play, 'THE TWELVE CHAIRS'. George's Aunt leaves a fortune sewn into one of a set of 6 dining chairs to avoid her money-grabbing relatives getting their hands on it. As George is the only relative not to have scrounged money from her, she leaves him a note to tip him off. Unfortunately, the chairs have been sent for auction and George does not have the money to buy the set. When the set is split, he must go chasing after each chair, trying to examine its contents. Gormless George seeks help about his plight, attracting conman Gus McNaughton to "help" him, and his Aunt's lawyer (a young Alastair Sim) to try and beat him to it. Along the way he also picks up Florence Desmond and her orphaned niece (Binkie Stewart).

The episodic structure allowed plenty of opportunities for some great character actors to stand up and play their part, adding to the fun. Gus McNaughton plays the first of several similar roles as an opportunist who befriends George; Alastair Sim is wonderful as the slimeball lawyer; Hal Gordon essays a drunken sailor, and music hall legend Harry Tate a raucous auctioneer.

The comedy scenes themselves are fast-moving and action-packed. Poor George suffers here perhaps more than in any other film he made! Various, he is chased by a matronly nurse who is trying to undress him, attacked by a vicious duck as part of a magician's act, mauled by a jealous husband and ends up carrying a goat on a bus! All the while, his conman friend Gus is squeezing in for a greater percentage of his fortune, to George's unwitting pleasure. His gleeful innocence in this film is almost Langdonesque, as he is abused at every twist and turn. The contrast between this and the harsh oppor-

*For more information on Florence Desmond, see issue 6, 'SCREENING NOTES'.



Innocent George is being hoodwinked once again by Gus MacNaughton. KEEP YOUR SEATS, PLEASE! (1936)

tunism of those around him, as well as the strong cast, make for some great comedy and 'KEEP YOUR SEATS, PLEASE' is one of Formby's funniest.

Despite the success of this vehicle, the template was changed for his next vehicle; firstly, there was a change of personnel. Formby was now a big enough success to do without Desmond, and both of them were happy to part company. Director Monty Banks was also out, allegedly due to his hatred of Beryl Formby and her domineering ways. His replacement was the affable American William Beaudine, also a veteran of silent comedy. After the manic fantasy of 'KEEP YOUR SEATS PLEASE', Beaudine's 'FEATHER YOUR NEST' is a more down-to-earth domestic comedy, returning to the humble settings of 'NO LIMIT'. The story of young mortgage holders struggling to get by is somewhat flat, and Beaudine's journeyman direction doesn't really help matters; FEATHER YOUR NEST remains a lesser Formby effort. George does, however, get to sing one of his signature songs, 'LEANING ON A LAMPPOST'. Ironically, though, he only gets to sing it second-hand in the film, to cover up for his smashing a gramophone recording of the song by a big star.

Up until now, there had been some experimentation with finding a format that suited George's character. Results had been from middling to excellent, but a strong, consistent theme emerged with the appointment of a new director. Anthony Kimmins would be responsible for streamlining the Formby films into a formula that smashed box office records. These were pleasant, if unremarkable, love triangle stories, usually factoring in a current craze, often a sport, for George to succeed at against adversity. Of course, he also won the girl at the fade-out, uttering his other catchphrase, "Turned Out Nice Again, hasn't it?". Along the way, there was room for George's songs, the ukulele suddenly appearing in ever more contrived circumstances. As George said, "I always felt the films came to a halt for the songs, then we could get back on with the fun!". As randomly inserted as they were, the songs of course add greatly to the films' appeal.

Although the stories wouldn't win any Oscars for originality, the ingredients of the films make them somewhat greater than the sum of their parts. Kimmins' direction was snappy, especially in the quirkily made 'KEEP FIT', which abounds in curious camera angles and cute linking devices between scenes. Kimmins' run of 5 films remain some of George's freshest, most fun films, and 'KEEP FIT' is typical of the template. George is a lowly barber's assistant in love with a manicurist (Kay Walsh, another of his impossibly upper class leading ladies). Kay is more interested in burly, bullying Hector Kent from the sporting department, denizen of the keep fit movement. George bemoans his lack of strength in the song 'BICEPS, MUSCLES AND BRAWN', but his friend Ernie encourages him to enter the keep fit trials. George fails totally, and is snapped by a newspaper photographer; his exhausted, slack shouldered profile becomes the 'BEFORE' image to Kent's barrel-chested 'AFTER' photo on a poster for the keep fit campaign. However, as Kent mocks George by the poster, George accidentally knocks him out. A rival newspaper photographer seizes his chance, and snaps the reversed image. The two newspapers back a grudge match in the boxing ring between George and Kent, and George begins training. Despite various setbacks, including a failed attempt to impress Kay as a hero, and being framed in a robbery by Kent, George emerges triumphant in the ring.



The polished Formby at the height of his popularity, c. 1938

Despite the various plot contrivances and complications, KEEP FIT was essentially a well-made, humorous love triangle story. With slight adaptation, it became the model for 'I SEE ICE'; Here, George is a photographer's assistant who is secretly working on his own spy camera. He meets Kay Walsh again, but she is more interested in her burly ice skating partner (Cyril Ritchard). When George is sacked, Kay persuades Cyril to take him on as their prop man, but George makes a mess of the whole thing. George takes photos of Kay and attempts to sell them to a newspaper man (Garry Marsh, who became a regular Formby foil). However, Marsh thinks he is trying to blackmail him, as he appears with the editor's wife in the background of one of them! After more complications, George ends up facing (and defeating) Cyril in an ice hockey match.

'IT'S IN THE AIR' is the first of several Formby comedies to feature him in the services. He accidentally finds himself stuck in a borrowed uniform at an aerodrome, and ends up aboard an aeroplane test flight. Jam-packed with incident and amusing characters, it also benefits from Kimmins' effective direction and some tight editing. The "comedian-let-loose-in-an-aeroplane" finale has always been one of my least favourite aspects of old comedies, but the example here is actually pretty good, intercutting swiftly between George's peril, some genuine aerial shots and scenes on the ground, rather than dwelling on back projection. Along the way, there are some excellent gags involving George's run-ins with his beleaguered Sergeant Major. There is an especially good sequence integrating his songs into the action for a change; George has been caught singing his mocking character assas-



Scenes from the Anthony Kimmins films: 'KEEP FIT', 'I SEE ICE!', 'IT'S IN THE AIR'.

sination song 'OUR SERGEANT MAJOR'. When the furious Sergeant calls before the commanders to repeat the song, George thinks on his feet and changes the words to be a glowing character reference, leaving the sergeant red-faced.

'COME ON GEORGE' is essentially 'NO LIMIT', with a horse substituted for the motorcycle, giving Formby the chance to show off his considerable real life jockey skills. Although a lesser effort overall, it is noticeable for giving Formby a brief moment to play a different variation on his character. As in the earlier film, he has been frightened out of racing, and is taken to a therapist to cure him. This works rather too well, and soon he is strutting around with his chest puffed up, on some precarious scaffolding, proclaiming "In the rational human mind, there is no such thing as fear!". His new found fearlessness extends to arguing with a policeman and smashing window panes with a hammer! It only lasts for a few minutes, but briefly we see that Formby was capable of much more than mere comic gormlessness. In fact, his performing skill is often taken for granted. George always showed great verve and his timing remained excellent. These facets of his performing skill tend to be overlooked when assessing his films.

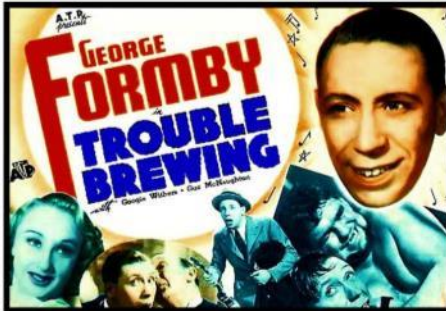
Another facet similarly overlooked is his physical ability. The sporting plots of his films not only gave interest by following current crazes, but also gave George the chance to do some great stunts in exciting climactic scenes. Again in common with the silent clowns, he insisted on doing risky stunts himself. Though these weren't quite the extremes Keaton and Lloyd went to, he takes some tricky pratfalls from horses, motorbikes and down stairs across his film career. As John Fisher put it, "apart from Harry Langdon, no other performer so unathletic in appearance proved in fact to be so spry".

Continuing the Langdon reference, the undervaluing of Formby is concomitant with what we might term 'Harry Langdon Syndrome', namely people being unable to distinguish between the performer and the performance. Just as Langdon has been viewed as a naïve innocent incapable of managing his own destiny, so too the real Formby is often considered to be the exact goofy Northern halfwit he played in his films. This is unfair. After all, we don't assume that Chaplin really was a tramp, that Stan Laurel cried all the time, or that Snub Pollard had a fetish for ridiculous facial hair! It's hard to believe that Formby could function in the high pressure worlds of variety, recording studio and film studio simultaneously if he was a directionless goofball.

Of course George, like many great comics, did use *some* elements of himself in his character; the homespun, unpretentious nature, or elements of his Northern upbringing, for instance. This is only comparable to W.C Fields presenting a caricatured view of his dipsomaniac, cynical side, or Tony Hancock's ingrained British pessimism fuelling *his* comedy. Just as Chaplin used his roots on the streets of London to form the backdrop for his tramp, so Formby played on his upbringing amongst the smoke stacks and fore ale bars of the industrial North. While I'm not claiming that Formby was in any way the creative equal of these three, he was a talented enough individual to take aspects of himself and exaggerate them for comic effect. George had a down-to-earth view of life, happily seeing himself as "a bit daft", and later saying "I wasn't much good but I had something the public seemed to want." In fact, the evidence for the real George Formby points to a canny and hard-nosed individual, not a helpless simpleton. Not wanting to be carried on his father's coat tails, he had doggedly worked his way up the showbiz ladder under his birth name George Hoy. Originally, he only learned his signature ukulele for a bet, and he was certainly tight with his pennies, pulling the strings on deals he wanted. Moreover, his live appearances reveal him playing the audience like a Stradivarius. This is especially true of his farewell appearance on 'THE FRIDAY SHOW', downplaying his considerable achievements to fit the 'Gormless George' image and win the audience's sympathy. How much of George's perceived gormlessness was modesty, and how much was playing up to a popular image?

Anyway, off the soapbox and back to the films! 1939's TROUBLE BREWING is maybe the best of all the Kimmins films. It has a strong cast, good plot, a measure of suspense and some great, original gags. George's understated athleticism is showcased beautifully in the opening gag: called down from the top of a flight of stairs, George swings his legs over the railings, sliding down gracefully, his motion slowed only by the open newspaper of a man reading on the bottom stair, which George whisks away as he passes.

The whole film is full of great set-pieces, reminiscent in style of 'KEEP YOUR SEATS PLEASE'. Further echoing the earlier film is the presence of Gus MacNaughton, revived as George's partner. The pair are amateur detectives on the trail of some money forgers. George ("Sherlock Holmes and Sexton Blake rolled into one!") has invented a fingerprint detector, and is determined to prove its use. After adventures marking and trying to spy on a variety of suspects, the pair stumble on the



TRUBLE BREWING was one of the best Formby comedies.

real culprits, whose operation is masked by a brewery. The final scenes are a magnificent slapstick free-for-all around said brewery, ending with George embracing Google Withers in a giant vat of beer. This is one of the rare occasions he actually got to kiss a leading lady, and Mrs Formby apparently hit the roof!

'TROUBLE BREWING' is typical of George's carefree and (in this case, literally) frothy 30's vehicles. However, the storm clouds of war were brewing and The outbreak of WW2 would prove pivotal to George's career. Changes were afoot in his film career, too. Anthony Kimmins was called up for service in the Navy and George required a new director. Britain's number 1 comedy director by this time was Marcel Varnel, fresh from a run of brilliant comedies with Will Hay and the Crazy Gang. Varnel's first film with George, 'LET GEORGE DO IT' is still generally regarded as his best. Significantly, this first wartime Formby film takes its inspiration from the conflict, and is a tale of espionage and saboteurs.

'LET GEORGE DO IT' begins in the offices of MI5; it seems that the orchestra leader Mendez (Garry Marsh) is sending out some sort of code to U-boats in his broadcasts from Bergen. British agent Bill Norman is sent to infiltrate his orchestra posing as a ukulele player, and is told he will be briefed and given tickets at Dover Docks. We move to Dover station, in the blackout. The 'Dinky Do's' concert party, including Our George, are also awaiting briefing, for an engagement in Blackpool. Of course, there is confusion in the darkness, and George ends up on his way to Bergen, expecting to see Blackpool! When he gets there, beautiful agent Phyllis Calvert persuades the reluctant George to stay, and soon he is infiltrating the hidden code, which is cleverly relayed by musical tempos and

flourishes hidden in the broadcasts. The villainous Mendez gets wise to George, and drugs him with a truth serum to get a confession out of him. This leads into a fantastically lysergic dream sequence, as George hallucinates a journey to Berlin via hot air balloon to personally plant a knuckle sandwich on the Führer!

Waking up, he finds that Mary has been recalled and left for the troop ship heading back to England; she has left a note for George to join her. George, however, is aware that Mendez is planning to have the Macauley blown up in his next broadcast. Stowing away in a U-boat, he tries to intermittently sabotage the U-boat whilst sending distress signals on the radio. Unfortunately, the only signal he can receive on his wireless is a radio station blasting out Opera music, giving away his position. Ultimately, he gets through to Mary, alerting her of the U-boat's position and saving the day. George, however, manages to get locked inside one of the torpedo tubes. The captured Mendez tries to enact one last revenge and fires the torpedo tube; George hurtles through the air, landing in an awning on the ship and falling into Mary's arms. Turned out nice again!

'LET GEORGE DO IT' is action packed. Although there is plenty of story to contend with, there is also room for a variety of comic and musical set pieces, all of which fit perfectly and never seem superfluous. Early on we have fun scenes on-board ship, dealing with George's seasickness and accidental intrusion into a lady's cabin. Later on, we have a superbly choreographed sequence of just-missed encounters as George sneaks around Mendez's room looking for his secret code. He manages to photograph it, but drops his camera out of the window and through the skylight of a bakery. This leads to a great sequence wherein George searches for the camera in the bakery, ending up being mixed in with the vat of the dough.

Even the normally arbitrary musical numbers slot neatly into the plot. George has a reason to sing and play as part of Mendez's band, and gets to perform some of his very best songs. Special mention needs to go to his performance of 'OH DON'T THE WIND BLOW COLD', which comes at the point where Mendez has rumbled him. George is trying to edge his way towards the exit doors of the theatre while playing, but as he reaches each exit point, Mendez has arranged for brass players to surprise him with a musical flourish, blocking his way. Cornered on the theatre's balcony, he takes a risky leap onto a chandelier that crashes to the floor at the song's close, allowing him to escape in the chaos. This scene masterfully mixes musical interlude with narrative, and George's timing is spot-on to arrive at each door in time for the conclusion of each verse.

In fact, throughout the film, Formby's performance is just right. He matches his gormless cheer with convincingly portrayed fear, and ultimately determination, not to mention some risky stunting along the way. This is the first film of his career to pit his character against more than suburban villains and love rats. The peril George faces is very real, making his setbacks and triumph pack more of a punch. The move from happy-go-lucky pre-war capers to a scenario filled with real danger only heightens the contrast of George versus hostile world and makes him more appealing, a parallel to what the real Formby was undergoing at



The iconic Formby vs Hitler moment was used to sell 'LET GEORGE DO IT' in the USA. It was also given a suitably combative new title.



In trouble again: a scene from 'SPARE A COPPER'.

the time. A very potent moment in 'LET GEORGE DO IT' occurs when he is discovered on the U-boat. Rather than shouting 'OOH Mother!' and running, George defiantly grins at his enemy with the greeting 'Turned out nice again hasn't it?' and elects to fight. Suddenly, that giant cheery, tooth-filled grin was a giant two-fingers to the Nazis' attempts to destroy hope, and he was transformed from a lightweight jester to a national icon, an embodiment of his song 'COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS AND SMILE'. This was echoed in the real Formby's equally perilous wartime exploits, fearlessly entertaining troops on the front lines, or folks at home sheltering in the bowels of the London Underground. The dark days of the Blitz were made that bit more bearable by George's homespun optimism, and it is arguably this that secured his place as national treasure more than any of his films or songs.

While Formby busied himself with boosting morale, preparations were underway for his next film. Unfortunately, Marcel Varnel was unavailable for SPARE A COPPER. His replacement was John Paddy

Carstairs, who later helmed the film career of Formby's successor, Norman Wisdom. Carstairs was a poor substitute indeed for experienced comedy director Varnel, or even for Anthony Kimmins. A giant step backwards from the sparkling 'LET GEORGE DO IT', 'SPARE A COPPER' is riddled with some of the most inept expositions and terribly faked stunts in all of Formby's films. Furthermore, the story of reserve policeman Formby thwarting saboteurs was similar to the earlier film, but without situations or directorial flair to match, it compares very badly.

Happily, Varnel returned for the next film. Perhaps realising that the Formby films ran the risk of becoming formulaic, the new effort was based on an existing play with a story not tailor-made to the innocent Formby character. In a change of direction, it also made no mention of the ongoing hostilities. 'AS YOU ARE' was a play about the Northern textile industries, and specifically, the micro-drama of a newly wed couple playing out against that background. With some adaptation and a rechristening with his catchphrase, it became TURNED OUT NICE AGAIN.

Although not his funniest comedy, this might just be Formby's best overall film. Much less a broad comedy, it is a well-directed, down-to-earth realist piece, allowing George to flesh out his character. He has officially grown up, having won the girl already and married her in the opening reel, and soon after getting a promotion at work. His relationship with his wife Lydia (Peggy Bryan) is much more fleshed out too, a genuinely loving relationship with ups and downs, rather than the bland hero worship usually afforded his leading ladies. There's less slapstick and far-fetched plot contrivance in this tale of millworker George's attempts to find a new yarn for the mill, whilst trying to juggle his wife and mother-in-law's squabbling and keep up his furniture payments, not to mention coping with his uncle's troublesome pigeons! More than any of George's films for Ealing, this points to the direction the studio was taking towards its later famous comedies. Indeed, there is more than a hint of 1951's 'THE MAN IN THE WHITE SUIT' in that textile-based plot. It would be interesting to see the direction that Ealing and Formby might have continued to take together, but this turned out to be his last film for the studio.

George now signed a 5 year contract with Columbia-British. These later films have been somewhat lesser seen than the ATP/Ealing efforts, and have tended to get a pretty bad rap. While, as a group, it's true they don't match up in quality, the blanket assessment is hardly fair. Though they lack the freshness and exuberance of his earlier work, there are some very interesting and funny films amongst George's seven efforts for the studio. Marcel Varnel was on hand too, to add his directorial polish.

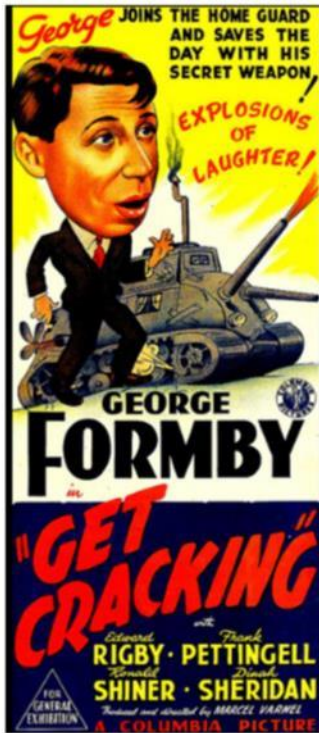
Part of the problem was that the Formby formula was beginning to grow stale. Accordingly, the Columbia films that followed the tried and true "Gormless George gets the girl" plots fell flat. 'MUCH TOO SHY' has some interesting ideas, especially teaming George with diminutive comedian Jimmy Clitheroe, but it ultimately lacks something. 'BELL BOTTOM GEORGE' is ok, but the service comedy had been done before and better at Ealing.

Perhaps realising that things were in need of a shake up, Columbia alternated the warmed over plots with some new ideas, to varying degrees of success. 'SOUTH AMERICAN GEORGE', Formby's first Columbia, has him in a dual role; he plays his normal character and, implausibly, a South American Opera singer! This was not a successful experiment, however, being over-long and short of genuine fun. 'I DIDN'T DO IT' is a surprisingly dark story of a boarding house murder, with George planted as suspect number one. It's a slickly made film, and as an attempt to put George in a new genre, works quite well. However, while it is a good whodunit, there isn't a whole lot of comedy to be had.

There were three of the Columbia films that did successfully pull off some new ideas, reaching close to the high standards of his earlier work. Significantly, they went less for gimmicky plots than ones adapted to an adjusted George screen presence, if not character. As we have seen, buoyed on by



'TURNED OUT NICE AGAIN' featured a nemesis almost as dastardly as the Nazis: George's conniving mother! George intervenes as Peggy Bryan speaks her mind.



that right hook to Herr Hitler, Wartime was transforming him from a gormless clown into a folk hero and voice of the common man. The most effective later films embraced this rather than stifling his old naïve character in warmed-over 1938 films. This unifying power is seen in 'HE SNOOPS TO CONQUER', and also in 'GET CRACKING'.

'HE SNOOPS TO CONQUER' for years had a poor reputation, partly down to existing only in splicey, Dutch-subtitled prints. A superior copy has recently been released to DVD. It also had a topical bent, being concerned with the British new towns scheme of the 1940s. A George Formby comedy about town planning doesn't exactly sound like a riot, but this is actually a really fun story of a little man up against bureaucracy.

George is a dogsbody for an indifferent town council who are more interested in their own vested interests than improving conditions for the many slum-dwelling residents. To pay lip service to public demand, George is ordered to carry out a housing survey, the results he is told to destroy when they incriminate the council. In disposing of them, he accidentally litters the papers everywhere, causing the angry townsfolk to turn on him when they discover they are being ignored. George takes refuge in the house of eccentric recluse inventor Sir Timothy Strawbridge (the wonderful character actor Robertson Hare). After exploring the bizarre inventions, George is persuaded by Sir Timothy's daughter to stand as mayor, and he ultimately wins over the town, ensuring that new houses are built.

With many entertaining scenes and a compelling story of little people winning through, 'HE SNOOPS...' is a most watchable effort, wholly undeserving of its negative reputation.

'GET CRACKING' is something of a forerunner of the beloved sitcom 'DAD'S ARMY', following as it does the misadventures of George in the home guard. This is probably the most accurate

depiction of the wartime Formby on film. While still prone to slapstick calamities, he is from the outset more self-assured and confident; he already has the girl at the outset of the film, and has worked his way up to being a corporal. He is responsible enough to be looking after an evacuee and is even resourceful enough to be designing his own home-made tank!

The film kicks off with an interesting sequence, showcasing this new, assured George. A po-faced, BBC-voiced narrator intones about the dark days of the Second World War, in what seems to be a typical example of war film exposition. As the narration goes on to introduce Minor Wallop's home guard, however, it becomes apparent that this is not the case at all; George begins to break the fourth wall and banter with the narrator, including references to several Formby songs. The narrator eventually tells George that he's in for a delivery of new uniforms; when George asks how he knows, the narrator replies that he is reading the script! He then goes on to exert his unseen power by freezing the frame of film when the platoon makes a dash for their new outfits. Such self-referential moments are a surprise indeed, belonging more to The Goons, or later hip 60's comedies like 'HELP!' or 'THE MONKEES' than an unfashionable little Formby comedy.

While the rest of the film is more conventional, it moves smoothly, the rivalries between George's home guard and that of the next village making for some good, human comedy. The comically futile DIY aspects of the Home Guard, later such a crucial part of DAD'S ARMY, are here too. There is a private with a domineering mother, platoon members are absent from parade because they are at the pictures, and there is this classic exchange between George and Irene Handl:

GEORGE: We need your Ben here on Wednesday! We're fighting the invasion!

IRENE: What, with two of you?

GEORGE (exasperated): No, there'll be six of us!

Formby's more assured, almost cocky demeanour also adds greatly to the realistic feel of the film, making it one of the best of his later efforts.

A similar direction proved profitable in 'GEORGE IN CIVVY STREET'. This was the last, and in many ways the best, of George's Columbia films. As a soldier returning from the war, he is again a more mature, assured man, far from the helpless, gormless young man of the '30s. Returning to his old family pub The Unicorn with pickpocket Army buddy Fingers (Ronald Shiner), he finds that it is gone to rack and ruin. Not only that, but George's only remaining customer is an artist who pays for his beer with paintings. It seems that rival pub The Lion is taking all the business. The Lion was formerly owned by George's sweetheart, but is being controlled by some shady characters. A war develops between the two pubs, with some dastardly plots to spike the beer and put George out of business. All ends happily when the crooks are thwarted, and the artists' paintings are proclaimed masterpieces, allowing George to sell them for a small fortune.



Wartime bravery elevated Formby beyond mere clown status and to a national treasure. This is just one of many examples of him entertaining troops on the front lines.

Deftly directed by Marcel Varnel, this film again tried some new



ideas. Drifting off to sleep whilst reading 'ALICE IN WONDERLAND', George's slumbers lead him into a bizarre dream where the characters in the film become characters from Wonderland. After singing 'THE MAD MARCH HARE', George watches as the Unicorn symbolically tackles a lion in a boxing ring, knocking it cold as George comes to. Hated by some Formby fans, I personally find this sequence wonderfully kooky, and a refreshing attempt to try something different. The bizarre sight of George dressed in a hare costume is worth the price of admission alone! What a shame that original plans to film this sequence in Technicolor never came about.

'GEORGE IN CIVVY STREET' had moved some distance from the simple love triangle plots of his earlier, silent comedy-based films. It's parochial plotline of a quirky little business up against villainous competition from modernising forces is at once nostalgic, yet also forward-looking to a new era of British cinema. Similar plotlines would fuel some of the most beloved Ealing comedies, such as 'THE TITFIELD THUNDERBOLT' and 'THE MAGGIE'. 'CIVVY STREET' signalled the almost completed transformation of British films from a silent comedy influence to the nascent Ealing style. Star comedies were now becoming a thing of the past in Britain. Will Hay, Jack Hulbert and Max Miller had retired from films and Tommy Trinder's celluloid career was winding down. Now the trend moved toward ensemble comedies with more subtle comic types based in realism. Formby now dropped from being the number 1 star as audiences tried to put the war years behind them. Ability-wise, there's no reason why Formby couldn't have adapted to the new style of films, having proved his down-to-earth charm in films like 'TURNED OUT NICE AGAIN' and 'GEORGE IN CIVVY STREET'. The slapstick and songs would have probably needed phasing out, but it's easy to imagine him in avuncular comic supporting roles, especially as he got older and paunchier.

GEORGE IN CIVVY STREET featured some creative musical numbers, including an 'Alice in Wonderland' fantasy sequence.

However, this would have been a clear step down, and Formby always stubbornly clung to his own path. Showing signs of career slippage in films, he preferred to jump ship than carry on to lesser budgets. Besides which, the end of wartime travel restrictions now allowed him to play to rapturous audiences around the commonwealth. He spent the next few years touring Canada, Australia and South Africa, the latter of which caused controversy as he spoke out against apartheid and played illegal concerts to all-black audiences.

In these years, there were tentative plans for a return to the screen, most intriguingly in an unnamed Swedish project. According to David Bret's Formby biography, director Alf Sjöberg, who had recently made the drama FRÖKEN JULIE, had picked up on Formby's likeness to the silent clowns and traditional tragicomic mimes. He proposed a film that would break the Formby formula, presenting him in an almost completely silent role, allowing him to showcase his deeper talent. Such a change of pace would have proved a fascinating chance for Formby to prove his colours, but sadly the film never was made. Bret alleges that Sjöberg's desire for a closed set alienated the omnipresent Beryl Formby, but whether this is true or not remains unknown. It's a great shame that we never got to see Formby tackle a deeper role of this kind. Co-star Irene Handl once expressed the belief that Formby had "something very delicate, like a very fragile glass" inside him, a magical talent that needed coaxing out. The Danish project could have been just the thing to achieve this, but we can only wonder now.

There were still successes to be had, most notably a West End stage show, 'ZIP GOES A MILLION,' Less far out, this was based on popular standard 'BREWSTER'S MILLIONS' adapted into an ideal vehicle for the traditional Formby character. This was a smash hit throughout 1951, and it's likely that a film version could have been made, had George not suffered the first of several heart attacks. He continued to perform on TV and in summer shows for the next few years, but his best years were now behind him. He made what he intended to be his farewell appearance on 'THE FRIDAY SHOW' in December 1960. In it, he held the audience captive with songs, stories, home truths and jokes, opening up with unprecedented honesty about his life. In many ways, this was a greater performance than any of his films, and is actually a good way to begin your introduction to George Formby if you're unfamiliar with his work.

Sadly, Formby was not to get the retirement he wanted; he died 3 short months later, on 6th March 1961, aged just 56. Yet the songs are still sung, and the films still remain. Sure, they were often formulaic, light on plot and lacking technical brilliance. Yet, there is a down-to-earth charm about them, and Formby's performances are much better than he is given credit for. The missing link between silent comedy and Ealing comedy, the Formby comedies exude a warmth and charm of a bygone era. It is almost obligatory to end a George Formby article with his catchphrase. Maybe it's a cliché, but the sense of infectious fun he created, and the warmth he still leaves behind, make it somehow still seem appropriate. Turned out nice again, hasn't it?



In the late Autumn of his life, Formby rehearses for his final TV show. December 1960.

THE GEORGE FORMBY FILMS ARE NEARLY ALL AVAILABLE ON DVD IN THE UK. THERE IS ALSO THE GEORGE FORMBY SOCIETY, A VERY ACTIVE CONCERN; VISIT ONLINE AT www.georgeformby.co.uk

FORMBY'S FILMOGRAPHY

BARKER FILMS

BY THE SHORTEST OF HEADS (1915). D: Bert Haldane. Drama starring Sydney Blackmer and Valerie Hobson, with GF in small role. No copies known to exist.

MANCUNIAN FILMS:

BOOTS ! BOOTS! (1934)

D: Bert Tracey. With GF, Beryl Formby, Betty Driver, Bert Tracey.

OFF THE DOLE (1935, REISSUED 1937)

D: Bert Tracey. With GF, Beryl Formby, Dan Young.



ASSOCIATED TALKING PICTURES (A.T.P)/EALING

NO LIMIT! (Made 1935, released 1936)

D: Monty Banks. With GF, Florence Desmond, Jack Hobbs, Peter Gawthorne.

KEEP YOUR SEATS PLEASE! (1936)

D: Monty Banks. With GF, Florence Desmond, Alastair Sim, Gus MacNaughton, Binkie Stewart, Harry Tate, Hal Gordon,



FEATHER YOUR NEST (1937)

D: William Beaudine. With GF, Polly Ward, Moore Marriott, Beatrix Fielden-Kaye, Jack Barty



KEEP FIT! (1937)

D: Anthony Kimmins. With GF, Kay Walsh, George Benson, Guy Middleton, Gus MacNaughton, Hal Gordon, C Denier Warren.

I SEE ICE! (1938)

D: Anthony Kimmins. With GF, Kay Walsh, Cyril Ritchard, Garry Marsh.

IT'S IN THE AIR (made 1938, released 1939)

D: Anthony Kimmins. With GF, Polly Ward, Julien Mitchell, Jack Hobbs, Hal Gordon, Garry Marsh. US title: GEORGE TAKES THE AIR



TROUBLE BREWING (1939)

D: Anthony Kimmins. With GF, Googie Withers, Ronald Shiner, Garry Marsh, C Denier Warren, Martitia Hunt, Basil Radford, Joss Ambler.

COME ON, GEORGE! (made 1939, released 1940)

D: Anthony Kimmins. With GF, Pat Kirkwood, Ronald Stagg, Joss Ambler, George Carney, Gibb MacLaughlin



LET GEORGE DO IT (1940)

D: Marcel Varnel. With GF, Garry Marsh, Phyllis Calvert, Donald Calthrop, Torin Thatcher, Bernard Lee. US TITLE: TO HELL WITH HITLER.

SPARE A COPPER (1940)

D: John Paddy Carstairs. With GF, Dorothy Hyson, Bernard Lee.



TURNED OUT NICE AGAIN (1941)

D: Marcel Varnel. With GF, Peggy Bryan, Elliott Mason, O B Clarence, Edward Chapman.

COLUMBIA BRITISH

SOUTH AMERICAN GEORGE (1941)

D: Marcel Varnel. With GF, Linden Travers, Ronald Shiner, Felix Aylmer, Enid Stamp-Taylor,



MUCH TOO SHY (1942)

D: Marcel Varnel. With GF, Jimmy Clitheroe, Eileen Bennett, Kathleen Harrison, Hilda Bayley, Charles Hawtrey, Peter Gawthorne, Gibb MacLaughlin.

GET CRACKING (1943)

D: Marcel Varnel. With GF, Dinah Sheridan, Ronald Shiner, Edward Rigby, Irene Handl, Wally Patch, Frank Pettingell, Vera Frances.



BELL BOTTOM GEORGE (1943)

D: Marcel Varnel. With GF, Anne Firth, Charles Farrell, Peter Gawthorne, Charles Hawtrey, Dennis Wyndham.

HE SNOOPS TO CONQUER (1944)

D: Marcel Varnel. With GF, Elizabeth Allen, Robertson Hare, Claude Bailey, Aubrey Mallalieu.



I DIDN'T DO IT (1945)

D: Marcel Varnel. With GF, Marjorie Browne, Ian Fleming, Dennis Wyndham, Carl Jaffé, Jack Daly, Betty O'Rourke, The Boswell Twins, Wally Patch.

GEORGE IN CIVVY STREET (1946)

D: Marcel Varnel. With GF, Rosalyn Boulter, Ronald Shiner, Ian Fleming, Wally Patch, Jonny Claes and his band.

**MISSING
IN ACTION**



THE ROGUE SONG (1930)

Despite all the missing films that have turned up lately, 'THE ROGUE SONG', MGM'S Technicolor, all-singing, all-dancing, showcase for opera star Lawrence Tibbett, remains elusive. Few would probably care if not for Laurel and Hardy's supporting roles in the film, inserted as welcome relief from all the warbling and Ruritanian histrionics.

While we all love to see any footage of Stan and Babe, what makes 'THE ROGUE SONG' so sought after is its colour. This was the only colour film made of Stan and Babe in their peak years. Contextualised in their career, it is also of interest as perhaps the inspiration for their later 'operetta' films, such as 'FRA DIAVOLO' and 'THE BOHEMIAN GIRL'. Of course, the comedy content would be greatly magnified for

these, but the initial inspiration, and some ideas towards structure, must have come from here.

As it is, 'THE ROGUE SONG' is not an *entirely* missing film. Fragments have turned up over the years, including snippets of various scenes and the complete theatrical trailer. Frustratingly, the only extant full scene of L & H takes place in a cave. At night. So much for colour, then!

Even less visually stimulating, but hugely valuable, is the fact that the entire soundtrack of the film *has* survived. At this early juncture in the sound era, films still came with their soundtrack supplied on disk. One set of these disks has miraculously outlived the film it once accompanied, giving us at least all the dialogue. This has recently been made available on the Internet archive, and makes for rather a bizarre listening experience. Although watching films without sound seems completely natural to us silent film fans, it is quite something else to listen to a film without the accompanying images!

Of course, there are long stretches without any sound at all, not to mention the tedious dramatic dialogue and crockery-shattering singing. ("I'm always bored.... So bored!" wails one character in the film. I feel her pain). Nevertheless, the hidden nuggets of L & H are a rare treat worth the wait. To save you all the pain of 1930s opera, below you'll find details of the L & H scenes and the times they occur in the soundtrack, meaning you can spend the hour saved on something more entertaining, like walking the dog, watching paint dry, or even watching 'A HAUNTING WE WILL GO'... You're welcome.

Here we go, then. Blink and you'll miss them! Listening to these scenes works a lot better if you have the L & H 'bible' by McCabe, Kilgore and Bann handy, as this reproduces stills from these lost scenes.

02:06 THE BRAVE BANDITS

Stan and Babe's role as bumbling sidekicks is established early on as Tibbett brusquely instructs them to take care of the horses. This leads to a classic moment of faux bravado from Ollie: "He always talks to me like that... that's for the benefit of the other men." This is followed by his comically overdone tale of bravado, describing how he once rescued Tibbett from a mountain lion. "I had just finished polishing my sabre, and not wishing to dirty it... I slapped them to death!" Stan joins in with the punchline, illustrating how often Ollie wheels out this tale.

12.33 – 13.35 DOOR TROUBLE

After some establishing of plot, some singing, some wooing and, er, more singing, we pick up with the band of rogues on the move. Stan and Babe's presence is established by one of the characters commanding them, "You two... wait here!". After a brief cut back to some plot, we hear the clunks, groans and cries of a typical L & H slapstick routine. It's apparent that they are trying to close a stable door. First, Stan attempts to do so, which ends in tears. Ollie predictably admonishes him and demonstrates himself, with even worse consequences. This sort of material with gates and doors is the sort of the thing that the team did in their sleep, and would have been a simple routine to ad lib in the limited time available. Unfortunately, such a visual sequence doesn't really come off without the image.

16.20 – 17.05 A BARREL FULL OF BABE

Stills reveal this to be a scene involving mounting a horse. After some grunting from Ollie, Stan suggests that Ollie climb on a barrel to assist him. Ollie is delighted by the suggestion. What could possibly go wrong? You guessed it... the hefty splash sound enables us to visualise the punchline, and the long pause afterwards was doubtless dedicated to a Hardy camera look!

23.00 – 23.30 a brief bit of squabbling from the boys; a Laurel cry followed by a Hardy yelp of pain!



'THE ROGUE SONG' was used extensively in advertising for the Technicolor process.

29.09–30.46. Minding the horses for Tibbett, Stan and Babe arouse the suspicion of a guard. He asks Babe who Stan is, but Babe denies all knowledge of him or the horses. Enquiries directed at Stan are no more helpful... his reply is, "What horse?"!

37.48–42.00 SAY CHEESE!

Stan and Babe's longest pantomime scene begins with a totally silent segment now lost to us, as Stan and Babe purchase some cheese. The still on the right gives us some idea of what goes on, though...



This leads in to a sequence where Stan's enjoyment of dairy produce is hindered by a bee, continually buzzing around and producing a louder sound each time he opens his mouth, leading us to the conclusion that he has swallowed it...

Happily, 30 seconds of this is preserved in the trailer, with some priceless facial expressions from Stan as he contemplates the source of buzzing. Ollie joins in, prodding Stan's stomach to produce a buzzing sound. (This is somewhat reminiscent of a later 'guest sequence', in PICK A STAR, when Ollie swallows a harmonica). Stan's panic rises as he concludes "I think I swallowed a bee... or something!!".

After this, their most sizeable scene, Stan and Babe disappear for a good four reels, while the warbling and heroics and romance continue. Do yourself a favour and skip to...

1.17.30 A CLOSE SHAVE

Here, Stan and Ollie are discussing their trip across the desert, with some more pomposity from Ollie.

OLLIE: Why, he [Tibbett] was so tired, he wouldn't even talk to *me!*

STAN: I noticed that...

This leads into a shaving routine, preceded with Ollie's warning, "And don't dip your brush in the soup!". Another visual routine, here the essence is preserved by sandpaper sound effects, some Ollie 'glub-glub-glub' noises, and a variation of one of Ollie's catchphrases – 'Why don't you SHAVE me?!'. Stan eventually drops his razor down Ollie's shirt back and attempts to retrieve it. The routine concludes at 1.21.26 with the sound of ripping...

1.25.00 STORM'S A-BREWING.

A storm blows into the bandit camp, and at this point we are again blessed with some surviving footage... As a storm blows in to the bandits' camp, Stan and Ollie are revealed in bed when their tent blows away. Seeking shelter, they make their way into a cave. Typically for one of the rare surviving scenes, the shot now plays out in complete darkness! We hear the dialogue enacted in darkness as Ollie asks Stan where he found his fur coat. Stan replies that he has no fur coat. Shortly hereafter, Ollie's confusion is explained by the roar of a bear, sending the boys running into the night again.

At this early point in the sound era, it was still a novel effect to supply humour purely through dialogue and the audience's imagination in such "blackout" scenes. Harold Lloyd had played with this in 'WELCOME DANGER' (1929), and L & H would expand on this scene in 'PARDON US' (1931). The gag of picture without dialogue, perhaps a pithy comment on the "all-talking" revolution, was also an ironically prescient foretelling of the film's eventual state; almost the entirety of the 'THE ROGUE SONG' now plays out in this way!

1.38.00 THE END.

Stan and Babe play a fairly prominent role in the film's climax. They witness Tibbett's capture and relay the news to the bandit gang. Ollie pretends that Tibbett's last wish was for him to be in charge, but is met with derisive laughter as the bandit king returns. After a final song, L & H return for one final scene as the bandit gang move on at the film's fade. Told once more to "Take care of the horses!", their role is finally revealed in its full glory as they select their shovels and make their way down the line of animals... The stills preserve a typical L & H grace note as Babe judiciously selects the smallest shovel for himself.



Passing time and the instability of early colour footage make it increasingly unlikely that we'll see the full version of 'THE ROGUE SONG'. But, with all the incredible film discoveries lately, who knows? At least the fragments and soundtrack we are left with provide us with something.



Screen-caps of the two surviving L & H scenes from 'THE ROGUE SONG'. The trailer preserves the cheese scene, and the cave sequence exists as an isolated fragment.

INSPECTOR WYATT INVESTIGATES...

(OR WHAT THE -? WHO THE? WHERE?)



The only person who answered any of the queries last issue from David Glass was ... er ... David Glass. Remember those retitled Bobby Dunn extracts in the 'Laff a Bits' tv series he asked about? Well, Steve Massa identified two of them for him and they're both from the same film. TOP POSITION with B.D. up on the scaffolding and THE BIG KIDNAP CAPER with B.D. rescuing a girl from a band of thugs both come from NO DANGER (1923) - director Eddie Lyons.

Confusingly, Glen Cavender plays a cop in the first extract and the head of the band of kidnapers (somewhat disguised) in the second one, which made it difficult to guess that they were from the same film. But now all is revealed and you can see more or less the complete film on YouTube.

Dave Glass (Bobby Dunn's greatest fan possibly only fan?) has put more of his films on You Tube including FLAPPER FEVER, ALL IS LOST, and THE UNMOUNTED POLICEMAN but several more still need to be identified, so please take a look. There is even one - 'Bobby Blanchisseur' with B.D. working in a Chinese laundry, which seems to come from a French titled 9.5mm print.

Which brings me neatly to another query I can answer (for once!), from Ian Taylor. He wants to know the original title for a Hall Room Boys comedy which he's got in an edited version on 9.5mm as CRAZY VILLA.

The answer is OH! MA THE RENT TAKER. This seemingly meaningless title was a pun on a then current feature title - OMAR THE TENT MAKER. Many titles of short comedies were similar puns - LIZZIES OF THE FIELD, FEET OF MUD, MADAME SANS JANE, THE IRON NAG etc etc - and usually, as here, the comedy had no connection with the title being spoofed.; another thing which makes it so hard to guess the right titles of comedy shorts if they've been changed somewhere along the line.



Who were the Hall Room Boys?, I hear you cry.

The Hall Room Boys was a long running series made by poverty row company CBC (for Cohn, Brandt, Cohn - Harry Cohn, his brother Jack plus Joe Brandt) which finally became Columbia Pictures. Based on a newspaper cartoon strip by H.A.McGill, the films were cheap but surprisingly popular -

especially since the stars kept changing.

The original team of Ed Flanagan and Neely Edwards soon became Hugh Fay and Edwards, then Sid Smith and Harry McCoy, Smith and Jimmie Adams, Smith and George Williams and finally Williams and Al Alt. Not the best way to produce a series based on a two man comedy team, I would have thought!

OH! MA THE RENT TAKER(1923) is a late entry in the series starring the last (and least talented) team - Al Alt & George Williams. By now the company was putting most of its efforts into establishing production of drama features, the short comedies were winding down - and it showed. The series ended five films and four months later.

In this one the Boys are evicted from their lodgings (a recurring theme) but are offered a house by a millionaire who's off on a trip to Europe. Meanwhile his caretaker has rented the same house to a spiritualist (Bud Jamison) who



Al Alt, one of the later actors to pass through 'THE HALL ROOM BOYS'.

Mr Alt appears in this issue's mystery film, 'OH MA, THE RENT TAKER'.

naturally holds a séance on the night they arrive. Cue second reel of spooky house gags until our heroes are frightened off into the distance.

CRAZY VILLA is mostly the second reel of spooky stuff, so no millionaire, plot set up or credits. Many of the Hall Room Boys comedies were sold like this in 9.5mm home movie versions & some only exist thanks to these extracts. But as Pathescope changed all the titles (and sometimes the plots!) we're left with some problems. I've sorted a load of them out and will be printing a complete catalogue one day identifying these and most of the other comedies released on 9.5mm. You'll be the first to hear about it and you better all buy it (or else) (or else who will?)

Meanwhile here are the Hall Room Boys reels that I'm still trying to identify for the catalogue:

GOWNS LTD - Sid Smith and George Williams. With Billy Franey. Set in a fashion show with Bud Jamison in the audience. Sitting on some glue, he loses most of his clothes trying to get free and chases them for the rest of the film.

THE RENT PROBLEM - Smith and Williams. Various boarding house gags as they try to avoid paying the bill delivered by Dick Sutherland. They escape him hiding in some barrels which are carted away on a truck.

UP FOR AUCTION - Smith and Williams escape their landlady - Williams disappears in the rest of the film which has Sid Smith being auctioned to a guy who insures him for \$1000, then tries to injure him in a car accident, with gunpowder and leaving him blindfolded on top of a half built sky scraper. When finally making a claim, he finds the insurance company has gone bust. With Billy Franey.

ACCIDENTS WILL HAPPEN - Al Alt and Williams. In hospital after an accident - Bud Jamison is a surgeon who provides rough treatment and chases them when they escape. Billy Franey is a patient with a gun in the 'Bootleg Ward'.

LUNCH FOR THE FAMILY - Alt and Williams visit sister Thelma Hill, married to Bud Jamison. Jamison is stingy with food and eventually throws them out. My guess is that this may be from ONLY A HUSBAND, 1923.

It seems the trade magazines stopped reviewing the films as the series wore on ("wore" on is right - probably exactly the reason, as they wore out their welcome and there were better things to review by then) So it's really a case of either finding the complete films (as I said, few exist), hearing from someone who remembers seeing them (unlikely, - the plots are decidedly unmemorable to say the least) or checking all the films that do exist to rule out all the titles that aren't these ones - if you see what I mean. So if anyone has any Hall Room Boys comedies anywhere, except for those on 9.5mm, I'd be pleased to hear from them.

And if I don't find the right title soon for a Bobby Ray comedy, also on 9.5mm and retitled 'Oh For the Noble Art' - I'll scream! Send in more queries - or I'll be forced to rant on about that one next time.



Many thanks to DW for some more sterling detective work. Please keep those enquiries coming in (we need to keep him busy somehow!). Now, are there any Bobby Ray experts out there??



Looking for **LLOYD HAMILTON**...



In the last issue, we examined the films of forgotten silent comedy hero Lloyd Hamilton. As you may remember, many of Hamilton's films are long lost, leaving only scattered remains. I

thought it might be useful to provide a list of his classic silent shorts, with brief synopses and an indication of their survival (as well as DVD availability). This is by no means an exhaustive list; for one thing, I've skipped over his early films, the primitive Ham & Bud shorts, the embryonic Fox comedies and his later talkies. This is principally a summary of his Educational series, the films that really entrenched his reputation as a clown of the first water. This is more a list for quick reference, and for this reason I've skipped over full technical details. You can find these, along with a complete filmography, in Anthony Balducci's excellent book, 'LLOYD HAMILTON, POOR BOY COMEDIAN OF SILENT CINEMA'.

*I've compiled my list and synopses principally from the trade magazines at lantern.mediahist.org, though Mr Balducci's book helped to provide details of which films still exist in archives. You'll notice that many of the synopses sound extremely rudimentary. It was Hamilton's reaction comedy that was able to turn these into something special; many of his best films, like 'MOVE ALONG', share similarly limited plots, meaning that the synopses can barely even capture the flavour of films. If only we knew what we were missing! As usual, titles in **green** exist in full, those in **orange** only exist partially and those in **red** are not known to exist in any form. Prepare yourself for a lot of red in this list!*

1920

DUCK INN – Lloyd attempts to bag a rare duck to win a hunter's daughter.

DYNAMITE – Lloyd inherits a power plant which is the target for saboteurs.

APRIL FOOL – Lloyd endures a barrage of practical jokes, before finding himself on board ship as a cabin boy.

THE SIMP – Playboy Lloyd is thrown out of the house by his father, and takes to the streets. He has misadventures with a girl, a thief and a dog. **Available on Looser Than Loose's 'HAMADDENDA, VOL 1' DVD.**

1921

MOONSHINE – In this backwoods tale, moonshiner Ham is constantly at odds with the revenuers. **Available on Looser Than Loose's 'HAMADDENDA, VOL 1' DVD.**

THE GREENHORN – Lloyd is an immigrant coming to collect an inheritance. He has troubles trying to escape Ellis Island, until fortune hunters find him...

ROBINSON CRUSOE, LTD – Lloyd retells the story of

his time as a modern-day Robinson Crusoe. (remade as Hamilton's talkie 'ROBINSON CRUSOE & SON' in 1932.)

THE VAGRANT – Ham, the eponymous drifter, is constantly moved along by a cop (remade by Hamilton as 'MOVE ALONG' in 1926)

THE ADVISOR – Lloyd as an inept lawyer with dreams of grandeur. A former client seeks him out to gain revenge. (A very similar plotline to the later Will Hay vehicle 'MY LEARNED FRIEND'. Coincidence or did someone remember the earlier film? Hay's and Hamilton's styles certainly shared similarities.)

1922

ROLLING STONES – Lloyd and his kid brother embark on a number of money-making escapades.

THE RAINMAKER – Lloyd is mistaken for a rainmaker in a desert town.

POOR BOY – It's Sunday morning in a small town, and hobo Lloyd helps out in Church to please a pretty girl.

THE EDUCATOR – The inhabitants of Angelville are enthusiastically opposed to education. Enter Lloyd, the new schoolteacher... (Basic premise remade by Charley Chase as 'TEACHER'S PEST')

THE SPEEDER – Lloyd is the proud owner of a new sports car.

1923

NO LUCK – Lloyd dreams of being invited to a society gathering.

Hamilton in his standard costume, and with Irene Dalton in 'THE RAINMAKER'.



EXTRA! EXTRA! - Lloyd is an eager reporter looking for a scoop.

UNEASY FEET – Country boy Lloyd’s adventures in the city, principally his unsuccessful attempts to buy a new suit.

F.O.B. – Lloyd and his dog ride the rails with a bunch of hoboes.

THE OPTIMIST – A spoof of the Pilgrim fathers, as Lloyd recounts the tale of his ancestors.

1924

MY FRIEND – Lloyd tries to eat lunch whilst avoiding a plague of dogs, then finds employment as a butler.

LONESOME – Wastrels Lloyd and Ruth Hiatt try to find food and shelter on a wet night.

KILLING TIME – Lloyd is engaged to teach table manners to newly rich Dick Sutherland.

GOING EAST – Lloyd has a disastrous train journey, made especially worse by the presence of a skunk...

GOOD MORNING – After saving the townsfolk from a bear, Lloyd is invited to officiate at a charity bazaar. It does not go well for him. Reel 2 exists.

JONAH JONES – Lloyd and sweetheart Babe London have adventures on the farm and in the city. Available on *‘AMERICAN SLAPSTICK VOL 2’* and *Looser Than Looser’s Lloyd Hamilton Collection*.

1925

HOOKED – Lloyd attempts to go fishing, but all he catches is a squirrel in his suit! Only a cutdown fragment of this film exists.

CRUSHED – In between getting married to a harridan and inventing an anti-mosquito device, Lloyd has misadventures on the NY Subway system. Available in *Looser Than Looser’s Lloyd Hamilton Collection*.

HALF A HERO – Perhaps the archetypal random-plot-twists Hamilton comedy. He is by turns a tramp, a policeman and a prizefighter!

KING COTTON – Hamilton on a cotton plantation.

WAITING – When Lloyd’s girl goes out for a meal with another man, he follows them as a waiter.

THE MOVIES – Hamilton plays his own double in a film. Available on *‘THE FORGOTTEN FILMS OF ROSCOE ‘FATTY’ ARBUCKLE’*.

1926

CAREFUL, PLEASE – Debt collector Lloyd attempts to repossess some furniture, but ends up rescuing a kidnapped heiress. Available in *Looser Than Looser’s Lloyd Hamilton Collection*.

NOBODY’S BUSINESS – Lloyd’s typically catastrophic morning routine – dressing himself, a streetcar ride, and working at his lunch counter, which ends up in the sea. Available in *Looser Than Looser’s Lloyd Hamilton Collection*.

NOTHING MATTERS – Private detective Lloyd is lured into an opium den.

MOVE ALONG – Lloyd is a hapless bum constantly moved on by a cop. A remake of *‘THE VAGRANT’*. Available in *Looser Than Looser’s Lloyd Hamilton Collection*.

JOLLY TARS - Lloyd as helpless recruit #2; now it’s the navy’s turn.

AT EASE – Lloyd as helpless recruit #1; the army suffers.

TEACHER, TEACHER – Lloyd is a less-than-outstanding schoolteacher. Probably reuses elements of *‘THE EDUCATOR’*.

ONE SUNDAY MORNING – Lloyd and family set out for a Sunday outing. Thanks to continued problems with a faulty car, they never make it there. This almost sounds like a forerunner of Laurel and Hardy’s *‘PERFECT DAY’*.

1927

PEACEFUL OSCAR – Peaceful Oscar has his temper riled...

HERE COMES CHARLIE – Lloyd as shoe salesman. This film marks Lloyd phasing out his trademark ‘poor boy’ flat cap and check tie.

GOOSE FLESH – Lloyd is, again, a private detective. This time, he guards a necklace in a spooky mansion.

NEW WRINKLES – Lloyd’s misadventures include attempts to buy a new hat.

HIS BETTER HALF – Lloyd is persuaded to dress in drag and pose as a wife.



Unwanted company in ‘NOBODY’S BUSINESS’.

BREEZING ALONG – Lloyd finds work as a butler to a rich family. He butts, with less than spectacular results. Available on 'AMERICAN SLAPSTICK, VOL 2'.

SOMEBODY'S FAULT – Lloyd gets a job as an electrician's apprentice. As you might have guessed, his attitude to safety safety in the workplace ranges from casual to non-existent.

PAPA'S BOY – Bespectacled, butterfly-chasing Lloyd is sent to the backwoods to toughen up. Available on 'ACCIDENTALLY PRESERVED, VOL 2'.



A scene from 'NEW WRINKLES'; another lost two-reeler.

1928

ALMOST A GENTLEMAN – A golf course comedy.

BETWEEN JOBS – Lloyd is enlisted to build a home. Take a guess how well-constructed it turns out to be.

BLAZING AWAY – Lloyd and Kewpie Morgan are rival taxi drivers as well as opponents in a football game.

A HOME MADE MAN – Lloyd is engaged by Kewpie Morgan to work as a soda jerk, then is promoted to gym instructor.

LISTEN, CHILDREN – Lloyd takes a job at a military academy.

So there you have it. A dismayingly amount of red, especially in those early years of 1922-1923, when Hamilton's most revered films were made. Still, at least we do have at least some examples of Hamilton the idiosyncratic comic at work. Of course, not all of the existing films are available to Joe public. Many remain locked away in archives, but there are an increasing number available on DVD. .



LOOSER THAN LOOSE DVD provide the most extensive range of Hamilton's work. Chief amongst this is their 5 disc set, 'HAM: THE LOST MAGIC OF LLOYD HAMILTON'. It's pricy at \$65.00 but these films are very rare, and you can pick up each disc separately for \$19.99. Discs 2 and 3 are where the goldmine is to be found, featuring his best 1920s work.

Disc 1: Ham & Bud shorts: HAM IN A HAREM/HAM AND THE SAUSAGE FACTORY/THE SPOOK RAISERS/THE LOVE MAGNET/THE GREAT DETECTIVE/THE DEADLY DOUGHNUT/THE BATHTUB BANDIT

Disc 2: Classic 1920s shorts. JONAH JONES/CAREFUL, PLEASE/NOBODY'S BUSINESS/ NOTHING MATTERS (reel 1 only)/A FLYER IN FLAPJACKS (Ham & Bud)

DISC 3: Classic 1920s shorts . MOVE ALONG/CRUSHED/HIS DARKER SELF (2reel version)/HOOKED (fragment)/GOOD MORNING JUDGE (Ham & Bud)

DISC 4: Talkie shorts. GOOD MORNING SHERIFF/ TOOT SWEET/ DON'T BE NERVOUS/ HOLLYWOOD ON PARADE/ THE MODEL JANITOR (Ham & Bud).

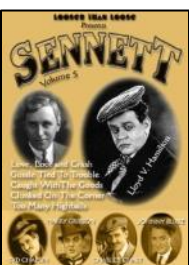
Disc 5: Extras, including a fragment of APRIL FOOL, Ham & Bud shorts THE PHONEY CANNIBAL and RASKEY'S ROAD SHOW, Bud Duncan solo shorts, unidentified clips and press sheets, etc.

LOOSER THAN LOOSE have also released a follow up volume, 'HAMADDENDA'. This features Hamilton's MOONSHINE and THE SIMP, plus several Ham and Bud shorts and his talkie 'PRIZE PUPPIES'. Finally, 'SENNETT volume 3' includes his excellent talkie short 'TOO MANY HIGHBALLS'.

AMERICAN SLAPSTICK VOL 2 features Hamilton's JONAH JONES and BREEZING ALONG, as well as lots of other great silent comedies.

Grapevine Video has a collection of 5 Ham talkies: DON'T BE NERVOUS, PRIZE PUPPIES, FALSE IMPRESSIONS, DOUBLING IN THE QUICKIES and POP'S PAL. They are reportedly also working on a DVD of silent Ham shorts.

Finally, In this month's DVD news, you can find information on two recently released DVDs featuring Ham's films. He's out there, in bits and pieces!



TREASURES FROM THE TRADE MAGAZINES

The trade magazines are a great source for rarely seen pictures and adverts. Here are some more fantastic archival images, courtesy of THE MEDIA HISTORY DIGITAL LIBRARY.

Right: A nicely stylised cartoon advertising Harry Langdon's feature 'HIS FIRST FLAME' (made 1925, released in 1927).

Below: Believe it or not, these 4 young, sober men are the Marx Brothers! From Variety, December 1914.



A trio of rare L & H items. From L-R, Stan laurel in 'MOTHER'S JOY' (1924), rarely seen postes for two shorts. The artists have done a fantastic job of capturing Ollie's gallant courtliness, an integral part of both films.



Right: some nice Harold Lloyd Paramount publicity, from 1931.

You can find all these pictures, and millions more, in the searchable database at :

lantern.mediahist.org.



Keaton & Karl

Every picture tells a story. We all know the iconic pictures from the silent comedy era and the stories behind them, but there were literally millions of other photographs taken of comedians during the 20s and 30s, each with a story to tell. Aside from the still photographs from films, there are candid pictures, behind the scenes shots and some mystery ones that don't seem to fit into either category. Here's a shot of Buster Keaton from 1928, opens up an interesting, and ultimately tragic, tale...



First, a bit of background to the picture: you might recognize the other chap in the picture as Karl Dane. Dane was (appropriately) a Danish actor working at MGM. Originally a carpenter, and then a farmer, his lumbering size had him handpicked for a role as a blustering sergeant in 'THE BIG PARADE'. Subsequently, MGM kept him on playing comedic variations on this role. In 1927 they decided to team Dane with moon-faced English actor George K Arthur. Their initial teaming vehicle, 'ROOKIES', was a smash success. In the wake of this, and of Laurel & Hardy's success, comedy teams were the in-thing and the partnership was assured of continuing. Several other films followed, including 'ALL AT SEA', 'DETECTIVES' and 'BROTHERLY LOVE' (1928) which is where this photograph is believed to originate.

This still has caused a bit of consternation; does it merely show MGM's newest comic dropping in to visit the set of another comedy? Is it an off-the-cuff gag shot? Or, does it show an unknown scene from this missing film? It certainly seems to show the middle of a scene. Certainly, reviews of the film mention a barbershop scene. However, there is no mention of Keaton. Of course, there is the possibility that such a scene was filmed but deleted from the release print. Certainly, Keaton made several other cameos in MGM films in this period; he craved performing and was frustrated with the lengthy process of getting films started at the studios. In the period between 1928 and 1930 he performed a stunt in the Lew Cody vehicle 'THE BABY CYCLONE' (1928), a routine in 'HOLLYWOOD REVUE OF 1929' and a small part in an unfinished film 'TIDE OF EMPIRE'. It is distinctly likely that the po-faced studio heads of MGM frowned on ad-hoc scenes being added to their prestigious and rigorously plotted films (a difficulty that Keaton would come to know all too well). If this were true, a Buster scene in 'BROTHERLY LOVE' could well have been removed. They may also have been concerned that Keaton could devalue his box office appeal if he appeared too frequently in small parts. Of course, this is just speculation on my part and it is just as likely that no such scene was ever filmed.

Supporting the still-only hypothesis is a theory dating the photograph to 1930. Keaton's costume seems to match the suit he wears in that year's 'FREE AND EASY'. In the scenes in which Keaton's hapless 'Elmer' crashes MGM's studios, an array of personalities make cameos: Fred Niblo, Dorothy Sebastian, Cecil B DeMille and... Karl Dane. Dane is filming a scene involving an explosion. In walks Buster and accidentally steps on the plunger... Could the still be taken as a gag while Keaton and Dane were on the set together?

One thing that is certain, however, is that this photograph is a potent reminder of the power of MGM. Here, the two comedians were at the height of their fame and success; neither could have known that the studio would leave him on the scrapheap within a few short years. Keaton's difficulties at the studios and in his personal life are well-known and by 1933 he was unemployed, divorced and an alcoholic. As we know, Keaton had the resilience to bounce back, but Karl Dane's fate was more tragic. His Danish accent hampered his success in talkies, and despite some early attempts by MGM to use him, he was quickly dropped.



Karl as he appears in 'FREE AND EASY';

It's a real shame that this had to be the case. Karl Dane was a talented comic actor with real charisma. His accent, while undeniably thick, is hardly impenetrable; Greta Garbo did alright for herself in talkies, after all! In fact, it's a good match for his lumbering but good-natured burliness. But, of course, elocution was everything in early Hollywood, and although one of the most tragic cases, Karl Dane was one of many to be brushed aside by the talking craze.

The Dane-Arthur partnership initially continued, reduced to appearing in shorts, which mostly remain obscure. By 1932, even this work had dried up. In a final connection with Keaton, one of Dane's last (if not *the* last) appearances was in a tinybit part in Keaton's 'SPEAK EASILY'. It's a shame MGM didn't actually team Dane with Keaton; he certainly would have been a better match than Jimmy Durante and his limited English wouldn't have been a problem in Keaton's dialogue-free idiom.

Such a venture was not to be, and Karl embarked on a doomed mining venture. When that failed he wound up, incredibly, operating a hot dog stand outside the studio gates where once he was a star. Such an enterprise was an unpleasant reminder of the perilous nature of celebrity, and MGM's stars stayed away in droves. Depression and self-loathing engulfed poor Karl, and he put a pistol to his head in April 1934.

Forget whether Keaton appeared in 'BROTHERLY LOVE' or not, the photograph of Keaton and Dane together is more important as a chilling reminder of the studio system's dark side. MGM could destroy not just careers, but lives as well.



Karl Dane has achieved some belated love lately. Laura Balogh maintains a website, www.karl-dane.com, and has written the first biography of a man who went from rags to riches to rags again. Drop by and find out some more about this unjustly forgotten star.

Buster & Karl: one more connection

On a happier note, there is one more comedic connection between Buster Keaton and Karl Dane.

One of the Paramount shorts made by Dane and Arthur, 1931's 'A PUT-UP JOB' is a partial remake of Keaton's classic 'ONE WEEK'.

Karl and George find work as builders assembling a flatpack house for Neely Edwards and Marjorie Beebe. Of course, things don't go to plan and, after several catastrophes, the house ends up with all the rooms assembled upside down. The topper comes when it turns out that George has accidentally nailed the side of the house to their truck. As they drive away, congratulating themselves on a job well done, they take the whole wall with them!

While inevitably nowhere near the standard of Buster's original, this is a really fun short with some lovely sight gags and an excellent supporting cast. Karl is excellent as the gum-chewing goofy strongman, with a great line in pop-eyed double takes. He even gets to do a patented Keaton gag from the original (at right).

'A PUT UP JOB' has been made available on Kino's 'PARAMOUNT CAV-ALCADE OF COMEDY'. Check it out, it's a good one and a reminder of Karl Dane's engaging talent.





Billy Bevan

BEVAN & CLYDE



Almost a team!



Andy Clyde

One of the most iconic of silent comedy gags sees two tramps slumbering on a dusty railroad track. Their alarm clock rings, and they roll off the tracks, just in time for the express train to thunder by. Once the train has gone, they roll back onto the tracks and resume their dreamless sleep. The two tramps are Billy Bevan and Andy Clyde, and this great scene is from the 1926 Mack Sennett short, *WHISPERING WHISKERS*. If that title doesn't ring a bell, you might recall its more widely circulated aliases: *'RAILROAD STOWAWAYS'*, a Castle films home movie edition; *'A TRAIN'D CHEF'*, another reissue, or maybe *'THE CRYSTAL BALL'*, an edition of *'COMEDY CAPERS'*.

On a personal note, I've always had a great fondness for this short, as it (as part of *'COMEDY CAPERS'*) was one of the very first silent shorts I ever saw. I knew nothing of the film's real title or its stars, but I was struck by the bowler-hatted team of tramp comedians. Already a fan of Laurel and Hardy, I assumed that they were another well known comedy team from the same era.

Bevan (with and without Clyde), popped up again and again in *Comedy Capers*, silent comedy compilations and excerpts, especially those of Robert Youngson. To a novice, this prominence suggested that he was among the major players of silent comedy. In actuality, he was far from this, but there does remain something vaguely totemic about him and his soup-straining moustache. Part of this is his presence in some of the most iconic and frequently excerpted Sennett comedies. As well as on the railroad tracks, he's there at the centre of the car chases, or battling stubborn clams. Along with Ben Turpin, Bevan WAS Sennett comedy in the 20s. Paradoxically, this is why he wasn't a bigger star in his own right. With rare exceptions for idiosyncratic performers like Langdon or Chaplin, the name of Sennett was the most important element, and the comedians performing the material were interchangeable.

Nevertheless, the Australian Bevan, born William Bevan Harris in ..., was a hard working and consistently popular star in Sennett comedies from 1919 onwards. Scotsman Andy Clyde (born 1891) was a little later to join the studio, but carved out a niche for himself as a master of makeup and characterisation. He was Sennett's Lon Chaney, a man of a thousand faces equally at home playing cantankerous granddads, scruffy hoboes or prim and proper priests. Frequently, you can spot him portraying several of these within the same film! As the 20s went on he worked up to bigger and bigger supporting roles, opposite Ben Turpin, Harry Langdon and Bevan. Bevan and Clyde made dozens of films together; though brush-moustached Bevan was always recognisable, it's easy to miss Clyde in his many disguises. For example, the famous car comedy *'SUPER HOOPER DOOPER DYNE LIZZIES'* has Bevan in his usual guise, but Clyde is hidden behind a heavy beard as the mad inventor of a radio controlled car. The short was directed by Del Lord, who directed Sennett's wildest, gag-packed '20s films.

In late 1925, Lord would continue working with Bevan and Clyde, but in an embryonic team format. These shorts allowed Clyde to emerge from behind his various disguises and take a larger role, as the two men worked together playing a pair of drifters constantly on the run from someone. The group of films that resulted have been widely excerpted since, and for many people are the quintessence of Mack Sennett comedy in the 1920s. However, they were ultimately to be a surprisingly small group of films. Really, there were only 7 comedies made in this mould.

In fact, looking at the trade magazines, they weren't really thought of as a team by the studio at all. Even though he has a featured role, sharing almost equal screen time with Bevan, starring billing eluded Clyde. The films were branded as starring Bevan, or just as Mack Sennett comedies. No matter, the chemistry between Bevan and Clyde is excellent enough for them to seem like a comedy team, even if they weren't billed in this way. despite being few in number they are a very entertaining group of comedies, featuring some of the most loved moments in all of silent comedy.



A big shout out must also go to the prowess of Del Lord, for his knack for handling speedy scenes with flair, and to the gagmen, such as Jefferson Mof-fitt, who kept the scenes funny as well as fast-moving.



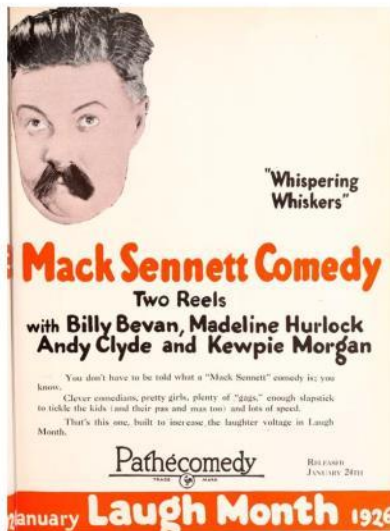
Out of work hours, both Bevan and Clyde were almost unrecognisable.

WHISPERING WHISKERS - 24 January 1926



This gag shot on the set of 'WHISPERING WHISKERS' kids Bevan's iconic 'tache.

Standing L-R: Del Lord, Thelma Parr, Clyde, gag man Jefferson Moffitt.



The first of these films to be made, and indeed released, was the aforementioned 'WHISPERING WHISKERS'. In common with most of the films that followed, Bevan and Clyde are presented as scruffy drifters, rolling across the dustbowl from one improbable situation to the next. This format was an ideal fit for the 'anything goes' nature of Lord's directorial style, allowing for quick changes in locale and gag situation, often motivated by the need to escape the law!

WHISPERING WHISKERS is a perfect example of this, being a classic example of the Sennett film structure of the 20s: reels 1 and 2 coexist in name only, otherwise occupying their own totally separate worlds. 'WHISPERING WHISKERS' constituent parts are so schizophrenic that there has even been debate over the order they should be placed in. Brent Walker, in 'MACK SENNETT'S FUN FACTORY', claims that the current reel 2 was in fact intended as reel 1, a claim that has yet to be verified from elsewhere.

As it is, current versions open with a classic 'trick' sight gag. Bevan is seen in close up, framed by what appears to be the cab window of a train. As the camera pulls back, we see he is actually a janitor cleaning picture frames. He and Clyde are employed as janitors in an office block containing a detective agency. While they are sweeping, a mysterious client arrives with details of a stolen ruby. The pair assume the identity of detectives and make their way to the spooky house. With the aid of clairvoyant Madeline Hurlock they attempt to pinpoint the location of the ruby. Unfortunately, their attempts lead to the destruction of the house.

The second schizophrenic part of the film is ushered in by a title: "It was only a short leap from that to this...", leading in to the iconic shot of the duo asleep on the railroad tracks. (I always thought that the Comedy Capers version was missing a huge chunk of footage when it suddenly shifted locale... little did I know!)

Finally boarding the train, the duo dodge ticket collector Tiny Ward until being put to work in the dining car. This leads to some entertaining food preparation gags. Bevan loses the yolks from fried eggs, and substitutes tinned peach halves. When fish is ordered, the pair stick fishing rods out of the window as the train passes a lake. When their still-live catch escapes into the passenger cars, the pair are thrown off the train. They attempt to make their way on a railroad handcart, right into the face of an oncoming express train. In a typical Del Lord 'impossible' gag, their handcart leaps right over the train, and the duo continue on their way.

A real mishmash of gags, plots, situations and styles, 'WHISPERING WHISKERS' nevertheless moves with great verve and speed, the many entertaining moments more than compensating for its lack of coherence.

Though they may have appeared to be a team, Bevan's name (and even Madeline Hurlock's) appeared before Clyde's in adverts. All performers were second to the name of Sennett, however.

WANDERING WILLIES—28th March 1926

This short was made hot on the heels of 'WHISPERING WHISKERS' in late 1925 but was held for release until march 28th the following year. In costume, setting and even title, it is very much the sibling of the earlier film.

We meet Bevan and Clyde as Percy Nudge and Dusty Duncan, and yet again their al fresco sleeping arrangements provide a memorable gag. This time, they have piled two park benches to create bunk beds. This is a most Laurel-and-Hardy like gag, indeed in 'ANOTHER FINE MESS', a cop alludes to the pair having "pushed two benches together so they could have twin beds".

The tramps' daily routine continues to breakfast, with their attempts to steal food from a grocer. When a cop comes along and helps himself, they are attracted by the perks of working on the other side of the law. With the aid of a duck disguised as a baby(!), they are able to persuade the cop to leave his uniform behind.

Bevan steals the clothes, pushing Clyde in the leftover pram, and the pair make their way to a restaurant for a free meal. While Bevan is enjoying the perks of uniform in the form of a free meal, the 'baby' reaches out and pilfers food from tables. At one point he steals a cigar, leading to the amusingly incongruous sight of tobacco smoke pillowing out from the pram. Eventually, Bevan is served with clam chowder, setting up one of the iconic Sennett/Del lord gags of the 1920s. The clams are very much alive and aren't too keen on the idea of being Bevan's lunch. They stubbornly refuse to stay still for his spoon, ultimately squirting him in the face with chowder. This nice slow-burn routine, a welcome breathing space in the film's fast pace, became a favourite Del Lord gag. He later reused it with Clyde Cook in 'THUNDERING TAXIS', and most famously by Curly Howard in 'DUTIFUL BUT DUMB'.



This scene never made it to the final version of 'WANDERING WILLIES'.

Following this pause, 'WANDERING WILLIES' again takes flight, with a chase sequence that is textbook Sennett/Del Lord. The gag-packed chase, with dodges in and out of pipes, cars swerving along dusty roads, and lines of policemen trailing behind patrol wagons, is extremely well done. It has been excerpted countless times, not least in the title sequence for 'COMEDY CAPERS'. In fact, it is often used to represent the Keystone Kops, even though this film was made almost a decade after the Keystone name was abandoned.

David Shepherd's notes for the Slapstick Encyclopaedia series note that "production was completed when the subtitle motivating the climatic chase was rewritten several times, including "he was stealing my diploma as winner of beauty contests!"; "This proves he is president of the kidnappers corporation!" and "The Big Clam was trying to get a corner on the muscle shoals". Phoned in at the last minute was the eventual solution : "It's the deed to Niagara Falls! We must stop him before he shuts off the water!"

It speaks volumes about the mad, gagged-up style of these Del lord films that such a plot point could be so changed around and still not really impact on the film. However, it is equally telling that 'WANDERING WILLIES' succeeds as an excellent comedy regardless of such considerations. Indeed, the random nature of these comedies is part of their madcap charm.

TRIMMED IN GOLD 14 February 1926

'TRIMMED IN GOLD' is one of the more scarce films from this group. Like 'WHISPERING WHISKERS', it is a film of two distinct halves, and the title is a pun that reflects both. Billy and Andy are not bums, but barbers. When prospector Kewpie Morgan visits the barber shop, he spins a tale of riches aplenty, inspiring the pair to make a road trip.

Once there, they find that there is no gold, and that Kewpie actually makes his riches from gambling. This is the set up for a complex visual gag sequence, described by Motion Picture News:

"As [Morgan] rakes in the pots, an assistant pours the money down a chute that leads to the vault. Billy and Andy, in their explorations, find this vault and believe they have discovered a mine. Taking some of the money, they go to the gamblers' room and sit in on the game. Thus, the money continues to circulate—from the mine to Billy—from Billy to the gambler—and back down the chute again.

CIRCUS TODAY 7 March 1926

CIRCUS TODAY is another one of the most familiar of these films. In terms of Bevan and Clyde working together, it is also something of a step backward. Nevertheless, it remains a fine comedy with some very memorable moments, if not quite up to the standard of 'WHISPERING WHISKERS' or 'WANDERING WILLIES'.

As circus roustabouts, Bevan and Clyde (as 'Gus' and 'Slim') mess up several tricks, finding themselves again at the mercy of blustering Kewpie Morgan, who this time plays the circus owner. Also present is Madeline Hurlock, who steals the film from under everyone else's noses during her incredible scene with a lion. Required to climb into the lion's cage, she vamps the lion until he lays down gently on top of her! Miss Hurlock was a very talented lady in need of further appreciation, and this is perhaps her finest moment.

Aside from this fantastic scene, CIRCUS TODAY benefits from another wildly imaginative climax. This time it's less of a chase than a finale. It's easy to imagine the Sennett gagwriters picking nouns out of a hat as they dreamed up the bizarre but hilarious and thrilling climactic scene:

"Hey guys, this scene has bicycles, horses, runaway wagons, a locked cabin and an angry lion... What else does it need?"

"Hmm... How does a hot air balloon sound..?"

On the run from Morgan, Bevan commandeers a horse that turns out to be pulling the lions' cage. Crashing into Clyde's balancing trick, he acquires him as a passenger on the roof of the cage. After a hair-raising ride down the highway, there is a crash and the lions get loose; Billy and Andy seek refuge inside a cabin. Nailing the doors and windows shut, they are unaware that the lion has gained entrance through the back door. At this point the scene seems (literally) closed to new developments, but never underestimate the Sennett gag department! Along comes Madeline Hurlock in the circus's hot air balloon; it's anchor catches on the roof of the cabin, ripping it from it's moorings and carrying it into the air. As this is happening, Billy and Andy become aware of the lion and try to escape; the result is Andy stuck on the roof, and Billy dangling from the open cabin door as the cabin flies away!

The very improbability of this sequence is part of the sheer joy of it. Lord excelled at these live action cartoons, but its easy to see how he and the Sennett clowns found themselves falling from favour as comedy strove for greater realism. Compare Laurel and Hardy's antics with a crab on a skyscraper three years later in 'LIBERTY'; a similarly improbable combination of height, thrills, comedy and animals, but it remains purely rooted in character. The setup is meticulously and believably planned rather than inserted at random as in 'CIRCUS TODAY'. Both approaches are entertaining, but the L & H method is ultimately more enduring. But, as I've said before, the fact that such different approach to comedy could exist side by side is merely testament to the diversity of the silent comedy field.

HAYFOOT, STRAWFOOT—18 April 1926

'HAYFOOT, STRAWFOOT' sees Bevan and Clyde working on more equal footing. Another of the lesser seen entries from this group of films, it has a somewhat more down-to-earth situation and setting. There are no elephants or lions here; instead we get the tried and tested format of an army comedy. Perhaps Sennett ordered less expenditure after the extravagant settings and chases of the previous films. Significantly, this film was not directed by the master of chases and destruction, but as a joint effort between Gil Pratt and regular gagman Jefferson Moffitt. The result is a film that is more subtle in its approach, but that mainly lacks the iconic images and wild ideas of Lord's films. In their usual hobo guise, Billy and Andy stumble across



Kewpie Morgan wants a quiet word with his employees in 'CIRCUS TODAY'...

an empty tailor's shop. The shop belongs to their usual nemesis Kewpie Morgan, who has joined the army as a sergeant. Seeing an opportunity in the empty shop, the pair kit themselves out in suits. When Morgan returns, they pose as tailors and start to fit him up in a suit. When the penny drops, Sgt Morgan has two new unwilling recruits for the army! From here, the film potters along through army drill jokes and succeeds in being an entertaining 20 minutes, but without the more memorably outlandish gags of the lord-directed films. The closing gag is more in line with Lord's style, as the pair uncover a secret weapon, a rocket. Of course, they end up igniting it, and the fade out has them riding it into the sunset on top of it.

The generally more prosaic settings and situation allows the Bevan-Clyde team to grow a little. As buddies on the run from a common threat who wind up trapped in a believable situation, this film perhaps has the strongest sense of teamwork and friendship between the two characters. However, just as this was allowed to develop, the team was already being dismantled: Bevan had already starred in 'FIGHT NIGHT' opposite another comic, Dave Morris, before this film went into production.

ICE COLD COCOS— 20 June 1926

Those Sennett gagman were busy making their lists again. 'ICE COLD COCOS', which sees the return of Del Lord to helm the series, seems to have a script written as a spider diagram headed 'ice'. Billy and Andy are ice delivery man, who need to deliver ice, then find themselves as waiters on ice skates, and finally involved in an ice hockey match. It's another one of those schizophrenic Del Lord plots, but it also has the Lord touch of many excellent scenes.

Arguably, the Bevan-Clyde team was already over by this film. Although on paper they are partners, working together as icemen, Bevan gets the lion's share of footage. Furthermore, they no longer share a common makeup, Clyde being more inconspicuous with normal clothes and toothbrush moustache. The opening scenes establish clearly that Bevan was again the main attraction; Clyde is only seen briefly, before the action focuses on Bevan, taking off in pursuit of a runaway block of ice. After a spectacular chase through the streets, the pair reunite to deliver the ice. The scenes that follow are a pre-cursor of 'THE MUSIC BOX', as they attempt to deliver ice to the top of a long flight of stairs. Again, Bevan gets most of the action. More stunt-filled than the L & H film, the sequence has a great punchline; by the time they struggle up the stairs, the block of ice is reduced to a small ice cube. By the way, yes, it's *that* staircase! Lord reused this gag idea (and the stairs) in the Three Stooges' 'AN ACHE IN EVERY STAKE' (1941).

During their ice delivery work, the boys have run afoul of (you guessed it) Kewpie Morgan. Morgan reappears in the finale as one of the ice hockey players, and he's out for vengeance. The ice hockey scenes allow much scope for stunting and slapstick, providing an effective climax to 'ICE COLD COCOS'. Clyde is now out of the picture completely, at least as Bevan's partner. For the rink scenes, he reappears as the match referee, hiding beneath a bushy beard. This is symbolic of the way the films were headed; Bevan was again taking centre stage, Clyde retreating into supporting character roles. This was the last film the pair made together as semi-partners, but they continued appearing together, notably in Bevan's 'THE BEST MAN'. Although the teamwork never quite coalesced fully, these remain a great bunch of films with many hilarious moments.



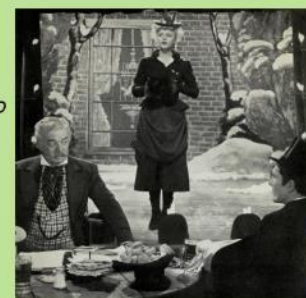
Scenes from 'ICE COLD COCOS'.
Clyde does double duty as the referee (above on the right).

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Although their series of films together didn't last long, both Bevan and Clyde continued long and fruitful careers. In the immediate years following these films, the status quo seemed to return to its previous form; Bevan continued to star in Sennett shorts while Clyde continued in less prominent character roles. Although never Sennett's biggest attraction, Bevan was a reliable draw with audiences, continuing to appear in fun shorts like 'HOBOKEN TO HOLLYWOOD', 'FLIRTY FOURFLUSHERS' and 'THE BEST MAN'. However, as sound appeared on the horizon, the two men's fortunes began to change. Bevan remained for Sennett's initial talkies, but quickly found himself out of step with changing times. As the trend moved towards sophistication and realism, his brush moustache and gag-happy style were too much of an overt throwback to the slapstick which was rapidly becoming looked down upon. Removing the 'tache did little to help, as Bevan's plump partridge face was too bland without it, and he'd never really worked up much of a strong personality. He was let go by Sennett, and although a reunion with Del Lord for the Taxi Boys films at Hal Roach came to nothing, he found plentiful work as a supporting character actor. He popped up in many films for the next two decades, frequently as British characters (even though he was Australian!). You can spot him, amongst others, in 'THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY' (1945), the Sherlock Holmes films 'THE PEARL OF DEATH' and 'TERROR BY NIGHT' (1945) as well as 'CLUNY BROWN' (1946). He died in 1957.

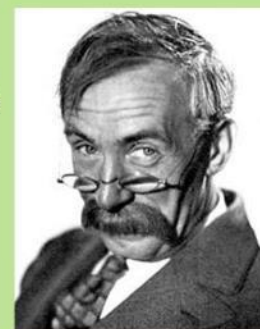
In an ironic twist, the eternal character actor Clyde would see his fate swapping with Bevan as he finally achieved stardom. As sound arrived, he hit on a character makeup that stuck, that of a befuddled old man known as Ed 'Pop' Martin. This believable, funny character was more subtle and warm than the average Sennett character and fitted the new era well. From 1929 onwards, his roles began to increase in size until he was one of Sennett's major stars. By 1932, he was able to command a higher salary, and jumped ship to Educational, then later Columbia, where he became a mainstay of the shorts department. As Leonard Maltin noted, he beauty of his 'old man' makeup was that he could gracefully age into it. Indeed, he did so with relish, lasting almost as long as the Three Stooges at Columbia, a whopping 22 years! Many of his Columbia films reunited him with Del Lord, bringing our story full circle.

Andy also kept busy in supporting roles, particularly on Westerns, and made the transition to television, notably in 'LASSIE', and taking a fine dramatic guest role for 'THE ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW'. He died in 1967, after appearing in more than 300 films.



Above: Billy Bevan with Hurd Hatfield and a young Angela Lansbury in 'THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY'.

Below: Andy Clyde in the makeup that came to define him.



Before we move on from the Sennett comedies of the 20s, here's a gorgeous full page ad from THE FILM DAILY, 1926. Note how the name of Mack Sennett appears roughly 20x the size of the performers in his films...

Mack Sennett Comedies

Two Reels

Billy Bevan, Madeline Hurlock, Natalie Kingston, Andy Clyde and Marvin Lobach, five sure tricks in any hand.

No one knew what high speed comedy was until Mack Sennett put out these provokers of uncontrolled risibilities.

No one knew what perfection in feminine beauty was until Sennett presented the pearls of pulchritude who adorn these comedies.

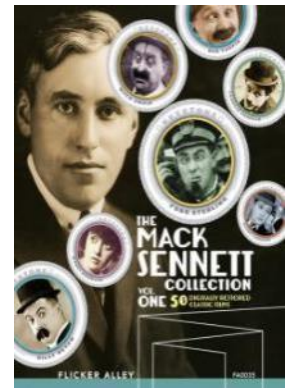
For laughs and lovely lassies, Mack Sennetts every time.

Pathécomedy
TRADE MARK



MACK SENNETT COLLECTION ARRIVES!

It seems like I've been writing about Cinemuseum's Mack Sennett Collection forever. Such care has been lavished on it that it has been a long time coming, and now finally a release date is in sight. A good chunk of the films have aired on TCM, showcasing the beautifully restored new versions with great music scores. Cinemuseum head Paul Gierucki has posted the contents of the set on www.silentcomedymania.com, and there has since been cover art and a street date revealed. Here are the 50 (!) films that make up THE MACK SENNETT COLLECTION VOLUME 1:



THE CURTAIN POLE	14 THE NOISE OF BOMBS	27 HEARTS AND FLOWERS	40 HOBOKEN TO HOLLYWOOD
2 THE MANICURE LADY	15 AMBROSE'S FIRST FALSEHOOD	28 DOWN ON THE FARM	41 ICE COLD COCOS
3 A DASH THROUGH THE CLOUDS	16 A BIRD'S A BIRD	29 DON'T WEAKEN	42 BROKE IN CHINA
4 THE WATER NYMPH	17 GUSSLE'S DAY OF REST	30 GYMNASIUM JIM	43 THE PRIDE OF PIKEVILLE
5 A GROCERY CLERK'S ROMANCE	18 DO-RE-MI-BOOM!	31 THE EXTRA GIRL	44 FIDDLESTICKS
6 ON HIS WEDDING DAY	19 A LOVER'S LOST CONTROL	32 THE DARE-DEVIL	45 RUN, GIRL, RUN
7 BANGVILLE POLICE	20 A SUBMARINE PIRATE	33 BLACK OXFORDS	46 TAXI FORTWO
8 A FISHY AFFAIR	21 FATTY AND MABEL ADRIFT	34 GALLOPING BUNGALOWS	47 THE BLUFFER
9 THE SPEED KINGS	22 HIS BITTER PILL	35 HIS MARRIAGE WOW	48 THE DENTIST
10 A THIEF CATCHER	23 MADCAP AMBROSE	36 SUPER-HOOPER-DYNE LIZZIES	49 DON'T PLAY BRIDGE WITH YOUR WIFE
11 THE GREAT TOE MYSTERY	24 TEDDY AT THE THROTTLE	37 A RAINY KNIGHT	50 THE FATAL GLASS OF BEER
12 RECREATION	25 HER TORPEDOED LOVE	38 SATURDAY AFTERNOON	
13 SHOT IN THE EXCITEMENT	26 A CLEVER DUMMY	39 A SEA DOG'S TALE	

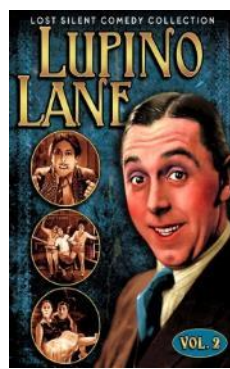
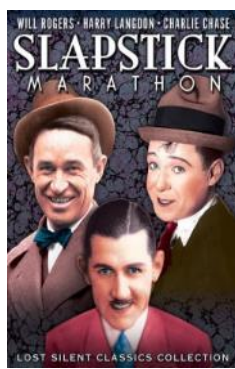
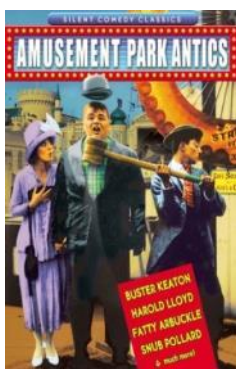
Whew! That's quite a haul. Lots to be excited about, but it's especially thrilling to see the Chaplin rediscovery 'A THIEF CATCHER' in there, as well as rare shorts like 'TAXI FORTWO' and 'BLACK OXFORDS', not to mention restored versions of 'THE EXTRA GIRL' and 'THE DENTIST'. There are also extra features promised. More details (and pre-order) at www.flickeralley.com. Interesting that it's called Volume 1; I'm greedily hoping for volume 2 already! The only catch is that, apparently, this will only be released on Blu-Ray and not DVD.

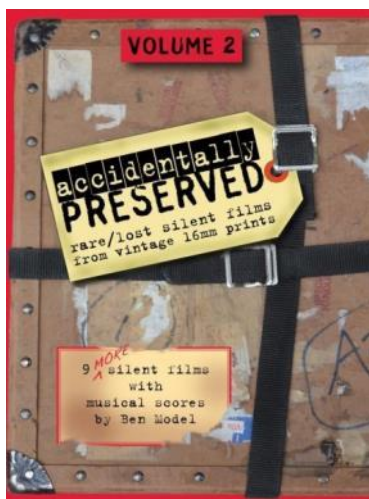
MORE RARE RELEASES FROM ALPHA VIDEO

Unlike the meticulously restored Mack Sennett collection, Alpha Video releases are somewhat more rough and ready, being sourced from all sorts of collector prints. Still, they do offer many rare talents, and on some releases the quality is surprisingly good. Here are some of the most interesting recent releases:

1. **AMUSEMENT PARK ANTICS.** As well as the well known Arbuckle-Keaton 'CONEY ISLAND', this includes a rare short with Wallace Lupino, amongst others
2. **SLAPSTICK MARATHON** – contains some rare-ish shorts, including Lloyd Hamilton's 'MOVE ALONG'.
3. **LUPINO LANE VOL 2.** Features the classic 'SWORD POINTS', alongside 'DRAMA DELUXE', 'SUMMER SAPS' and 'THE FIGHTING DUDE'. Quality not up to the last Alpha Lane collection, but a great selection of films.
4. **BIG BOY COMEDIES-** 4 of the rare kid comedies starring Malcolm 'Big Boy' Sebastian: "*Raisin' Cain*" (1926), "*She's a Boy*" (1927), "*My Kid*" (1926) and "*Baby Be Good*" (1925).

Visit www.oldies.com for these and other releases...





ACCIDENTALLY PRESERVED, VOL 2

Last issue, we reviewed Ben Model's great collection of Silent Comedy odds and ends, 'ACCIDENTALLY PRESERVED'. Well, there's good news as Ben has released a second volume with an even better selection of films! Again spotlighting some lesser known comedians, several of these films are from the overlooked Educational Studios, including a rare Lloyd Hamilton short. Here's the lowdown on contents...

PAPA'S BOY (aka WHO'S KIDDING WHO?) This 1927 Lloyd Hamilton short is just a bit too late to be from his great period, but still has lots to recommend it. Hamilton plays an effete, butterfly-chasing milksop sent to the backwoods to toughen up.

HELTER SKELTER (1927) Malcolm 'Big Boy' Sebastian was Educational's child star in the late 1920s. This is one of his rarely seen shorts.

THE LITTLE PEST (1927). The small, eternally harassed Neely Edwards in a one-reel short.

COOK, PAPA, COOK. (1928) One of the Educational one-reel Cameo comedies, which specialised in domestic situation comedies. This features forgotten comic Henry Murdock doing battle with a new-fangled electric toaster.

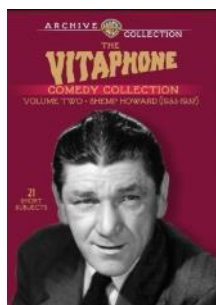
WHY WILD MEN GO WILD (1920) Bobby Vernon stars.

SHERLOCK'S HOME. (1924) Alberta Vaughn, sometime Langdon leading lady, stars in one of the 'Telephone Girls' series. A rare series starring female comediennes, these are an overlooked group of films veering more to situation than slapstick.

CHARLEY ON THE FARM (1919) One of the Charlie Chaplin cartoons made in the teens.

Finally, there are two non-comedies, one a safety information film and the other a 'Christmas Seals' film. A fascinating collection of rarities and unfairly neglected comics, all complete with Mr Model's wonderful piano scores.

But that's not all from Ben Model! He also has two other releases ready. Firstly, there's a collection of the surreal, forgotten 'MUSTY SUFFER' shorts. Finally, he's also just released a rare Monty Banks feature, FLYING LUCK, with his own score. Hats off to Ben for doing so much to make so many rare films available at a good price, with great music scores, too!



Following on from their collection of Roscoe Arbuckle and Shemp Howard Vitaphone shorts, Warner Archive have followed this up with a second collection devoted solely to Shemp. This features him starring solo, as well as in support of other comics, and in the 'Joe Palooka' series.

Shorts include: Gobs of Fun (1933); Daredevil O'Dare, My Mummy's Arms, Smoked Hams, So You Won't T-T-T-Talk, A Peach of a Pair, His First Flame (1934), Dizzy and Daffy, Why Pay Rent?, Serves You Right, On the Wagon, The Officer's Mess (1935) When the Cat's Away, Absorbing Junior, Joe Palooka: For the Love of Pete, Joe Palooka: Here's Howe, Joe Palooka: Punch and Beauty, Joe Palooka: The Choke's on You, Joe Palooka: The Blonde Bomber (1936), Joe Palooka: Kick Me Again, Joe Palooka: Taking the Count (1937).

Finally, Warner Archive have released a real rarity from their vaults. Buster Keaton's FREE AND EASY has previously been on DVD as part of the TCM Buster Keaton collection, but as a bonus feature a new release of the film features 'ESTRELLADOS'. This is the phonetically filmed Spanish language version of 'FREE AND EASY'. Excerpts have been seen in 'BUSTER KEATON: A HARD ACT TO FOLLOW', but the whole film has rarely, if ever, been seen. As MGM's rigorous production methods were carried into their foreign language versions, it is unlikely to contain any vastly different scenes, but a real curio nonetheless for the Keaton Kompletist!





The JOURS DE FETE film festival

and some reflections on French film comedy

The Jours de Fête film festival in Scarborough is an annual event focusing on French cinema. This year, amongst the offerings were several rare French silent films, comedies and later films influenced by the slapstick masters.

No overview of French comedy films would be complete without mention of the man described by Chaplin as 'the professor'. Max Linder, one of the very first major screen comedians, had made around 170 films before Chaplin ever stepped in front of a camera. Considering how early they came in screen comedy's history, the majority of his films are remarkably well directed (by Linder himself). This weekend there was but one offering, *MAX ET LA DOCTRESSE* ('MAX AND THE LADY DOCTOR'). This was the story of Max inventing ailments in order to visit the title character. There were some very funny sequences of Max turning bashful as she attempts a physical examination of him. Eventually, he marries her, but is soon driven to fury by the queues of male patients lining up to be examined by his wife.



Every time I see a Linder film, I'm amazed at how fresh and sophisticated they seem, given his limited resources. Apart from the clothes and sets, it was hard to imagine this film was almost 110 years old! Max was an expert at mixing sophisticated and gentle comedy with vulgar touches and sight gag belly laughs. It's easy to see why Chaplin admired him so much, and Charley Chase was surely influenced as well.

There were several other silent s shown, including Fritz Lang's 'DER KRIEMHELDEN' and a selection of early Pathe shorts. Occasional non-French films also turned up to augment the programme, one such example being Clara Bow's *THE PLASTIC AGE*. I was keen to see this, having heard it was a light comedy drama in the vein of 'MANTRAP' and 'IT'. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a bit of a let-down. The story of a college football hero distracted from his studies by Bow had too much sporting drama and too few funny moments for my liking. Worse, there was precious little of Clara Bow; more footage seemed to be given to the bland leading man! Still, Clara was vivacious as always and there were some great moments. One lovely sequence had Clara and her man out for a moonlit walk, but constantly stumbling into other couples, their presence given away by legs dangling from tree branches and shoes dropping from above.

A survey of French comedies would also be incomplete without an appearance by the other premier Gallic comedian, Jacques Tati. First up was 'L'ECOLE DES FACTEURS' ('SCHOOL FOR POSTMEN'). Made in 1946,, this two-reel short was Tati's first independent production for his outlet Cady Films. It's a really fun short, very much influenced by the silent clowns, and especially Buster Keaton. The title is really the whole plot: Tati's gangly postman graduates from the eponymous school and tries to deliver his first round of mail.

Lots of great gags in this one, and it has a conciseness to it that Tati's later work sometimes lacked. He reworked the short into a feature, *JOUR DE FETE*, a year later, adding more background colouring to the village setting, and (slightly) more plot. This time around, a travelling show visits the village, bringing with it a film show about the hyper-modern American postal service. After everyone sees the film, Francois' laconic delivery methods are derided; he endeavours to speed up his round, working into a comic frenzy of letter delivery. He also adds in some fantastic sight gags, my personal favourite being his drunken attempts to mount his bicycle, unaware that it has become entangled in a fence.



Shades of Laurel & Hardy in 'PARTIE A CAMPAGNE'

It was instructive to see the two films side by side, and witness how Tati fleshed out a comic sketch into a carefully painted, comically realist view of French village life. I'd also never noticed that, as well as recycling gags from the earlier short, he actually reuses the same footage in 'JOUR DE FETE'! Also interesting was the chance to see a 'new version' of the film. In all, three versions and reissues exist; a black and white original, a colour version filmed simultaneously but unseen for many years, and a 1964 b/w reissue adding extra footage of an artist narrator and some colour stencilling. This 1964 version was new to me, and I have to say the edits were a disappointment. The artist narrator is an onlooker in separately shot footage, and adds a dubbed English commentary to the proceedings. He

has an impossibly cloying accent, and takes delight in pointing out the obvious: "Uh-oh, here comes a shopkeeper. He doesn't look happy. Look out, that's wet paint! Oh dear, he's sat in it!". Presumably, this was a concession for audiences put off by the prospect of a French film with subtitles. Nevertheless, it's deeply sad and inappropriate that such a talented visual storyteller and pantomimist had to have a running commentary added to his film. Not even this intrusive addition could ruin the golden comedy moments in the film, though.

Although not all French comedies have embraced the essence of silent comedy as fully as Jacques Tati's canon, there are many lingering overtones in works by other filmmakers. Jean Renoir's 'PARTIE A CAMPAGNE' (1936) is a delightful light comedy featurette about a 19th century family's day out to the river. A blissfully idyllic portrait of summers gone by, it is enlivened periodically by a pair of classic fools; their slapstick endeavours in pursuit of fish totally distract them from the pair of boatmen romancing their wives. The most striking thing about the pair is their undeniably resemblance to Mr Laurel and Mr Hardy. M Dupont's courtly veneer hides a short-tempered bossiness; his skinny sidekick Anatole wanders about vacuously, trying his best to please. Both wear bowler hats. At the time of 'PARTIE DE CAMPAGNE's release, L & H were riding the crest of their popularity, especially in Europe, so this is surely more than mere coincidence.

Another river-based story was 'L'ATALANTE' (1934, dir Jean Vigo). A beautiful realist portrait of life on a canal boat, comic relief was here provided by Michel Simon, a great character actor in such films as 'BOUDOU SAVED FROM DROWNING'. Simon added a charming comic pathos to his scenes, and there were several lovely instances of visual humour.

Simon was also featured in 'LA POISON', an extremely black comedy about a husband and wife who detest each other and plan to kill one another. Yet again there were echoes of a silent clown, as the film trod similar ground to Chaplin's 'MONSIEUR VERDOUX'. 'LA POISON' followed a similar vein of cold detachment and business-like approach to murder. Chaplin's views that 'numbers sanctify' killings in war, and that. In a parallel In recently war-torn France, such a view probably had increased credence, and no doubt helped to allow Simon's even more controversial musings to pass muster.

Chaplin, or 'Charlot', as the French nicknamed him, loomed as large as Keaton over much French cinema. One explicit example came in LE SCHPOUNTZ. Starring horse-faced comedian Fernandel, this was directed by Marcel Pagnol. Pagnol was a film super-fan, starting the magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* before beginning his directing career. LE SCHPOUNTZ is yet another variation on the old plot of a gormless fool aspiring to be a dramatic star but accidentally making a success in comedy. Here it is given greater interest by the space given to the philosophical viewpoint of Pagnol. Downhearted when he learns he will 'only' be a comedian, Fernandel is given a talking to by the leading lady, during which he inspires him to the noble art of comedy by praising Chaplin and his art.

The reverent attitude to clowning and visual humour has seen the influence of silent comedy continue to pop up in French cinema to this day, several examples of which appeared in the festival's programme. 'ZAZIE DANS LE METRO' (1960) is an exuberant and fantastic celebration of chaos, as the title character, a naughty young girl, turns the world of her Uncle and his friends upside down on a visit to Paris. A series of surreal, poster-paint coloured vignettes, it makes much out of visual material. This is especially so in a fantasy chase scene, that makes warm, tongue-in-cheek references to silent comedy and cartoons in a kaleidoscope of action around the Paris streets.



A silent comedy chase in 'ZAZIE DANS LE METRO'

Less explicitly visual, but still retaining a warmly familiar sense of classic comedy is recent release 'RIEN A DECLARER', directed by Dany Boon. A vaguely updated version of JOUR DE FETE, it features a mobile Customs unit in a decrepit little car, who decide to modernise in order to catch drug traffickers. With some wonderful visual humour, it proves that the silent comedy tradition is alive and well in French cinema.

THE PICTURE PALACES

A new feature for this issue, wherein we give some space to some of the surviving cinemas from the golden age of cinema-going, with an especial nod to those that still regularly show classic comedies.

THE STOCKPORT PLAZA

Stockport, near Manchester, hosts an art deco jewel in the Plaza. This really is a temple to the lost art of cinema-going, a 'Super Cinema' designed to be the last word in luxury. Opening in 1932 with a double bill of Laurel & Hardy's 'JAILBIRDS' (the UK title for 'PARDON US') and the Gene Gerrard vehicle 'OUT OF THE BLUE', it was replete with a balcony, ornately plastered walls and ceilings and a rising Compton organ.



In common with many other cinemas, it was reduced to a humble bingo hall; in the 1960s, and when that too closed, demolition looked likely. Fortunately, a group of local enthusiasts were determined to save it. Set up as a charitable trust, the Stockport Plaza received grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund and now hosts theatre shows and cinema showings. The period atmosphere is beautifully maintained, and the helpful volunteers provide usher duties with all the flair of the golden age of movie-going. In addition, the Compton Organ is played before each film showing..



The attention to detail continues to the choice of film showings, which very much fit the Plaza's original glory days. As well as acknowledged classics, there are regular showings of more obscure British comedies, recent examples including double bills of Jack Hulbert, Gracie Fields and The Crazy Gang. Talks about the films' stars are also held in the cinema's bar.

Restoration of this magnificent cinema continues, as do the great events. For more details about the cinema and its programme of events, visit www.stockportplaza.co.uk. Congratulations to everyone involved for a great job of restoration!

SCREENING NOTES

RADIO PARADE OF 1935 (1934)

A BRITISH INTERNATIONAL PICTURE. Directed by Arthur Woods. Screenplay by Reginald Purdell and John Watt. Colour sequences by DuFayColour.



Last issue, we looked at 'RADIO PARADE', the 1933 British film showcasing a cavalcade of radio and variety talent. The film was so successful that it spawned a sequel, 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935', made the following year. The success of the format proven, British International Pictures threw money at the sequel., outdoing themselves all round. An even greater roll call of performers was on hand, and there were several lavish musical numbers. Two of these were even filmed in Dufaycolour, an experimental process.

Where the plot of the earlier film had been rudimentary, 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935' was more elaborate. Although still fairly loose, the tying theme became a devastating satire of the BBC, here renamed the NBG (an in-joke, as the BBC was often referred to as "No Bloody Good"!). The NBG is presented as completely out of step with public tastes; even the Director General never listens to the programmes! The busiest man in the building is the young complaints manager Jimmy Clare, who sets about trying to revolutionise the programming with all the popular variety stars. Unfortunately, the theatres get wind of this and are unhappy with the effect it will have on their business. They force a ban on the artists, leaving Clare high and dry... that is, until he realises what talent is lurking in the technical staff of the NBG. This, and a chance encounter with an inventor who has created a pioneering television process, lead to a spectacular broadcast that proves a massive hit.

The plot is a very interesting topical one, mixing satire with finger-on-the-pulse technology; Logie Baird's first television broadcast was only two years away. The result is a dazzling whirlwind, with sizzling dialogue and snappy direction... and that's before we even mention the talent featured onscreen! There are even more performers featured than in 'RADIO PARADE', and many are even more noteworthy. Several, such as Stanelli or Clapham & Dwyer, reappear from the earlier film. As I dealt with these names last time, you won't find them listed below. Similarly, I've restricted the performers below to those who primarily dealt in comedy. If I were to deal with every talented individual featured, or who worked on the film, we'd end up with an entire book. Read on, then, to discover the comic talents who make 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935' such a treat...

WILL HAY

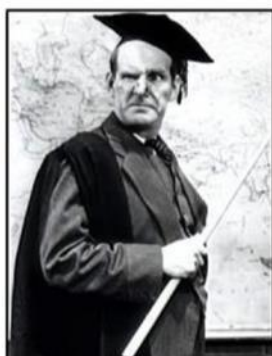


Superstar of British Variety, Will Hay was top-billed in 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935', and is today the best-known performer in the film. In fact, it is probably his appearance that has led to the film being saved from total obscurity and released on DVD.

Hay was a truly magnificent performer, an original whose comedy stands the test of time far, far better than most of his peers. In fact, one cannot do justice to him in a short article like this; consider him filed for reference as a future 'MOVIE NIGHT' cover star! In the UK, he remains fairly well known and affectionately regarded, thanks to a stream of classic comedies, but in the US at least, is relatively unknown.

Will Hay appears his dapper self in 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935' (above). He remains more familiar in costume for his schoolmaster character (below).

If you are unfamiliar with Hay's oeuvre, he specialised in seedy, corrupt characters, figures of hopeless ineptitude somehow clinging to the flimsiest authority through bluff alone. His most famous character, one developed through music hall and variety, was a bumbling schoolmaster (though, ironically, Hay was in fact an extraordinarily scholarly man). The Headmaster of St Michael's knew very little more than his pupils, and would find himself embroiled in endlessly circling confusion discussing "What is a unit of electricity?", "How high is a Chinaman?" or whether Joan of Arc was married to Noah. Such material can look thin on paper, but Hay's timing was simply unbeatable, full of pauses, sniffs and shifty glances.



Edgar Kennedy, later starred in a film with Hay, summed up his presence beautifully when catching his act on stage...

"one of the kids asks him to write 'Moses was the daughter of the pharaoh's son', and he gets as far as writing 'Moses was the daughter of --' and stops there with his back to the audience and his arm ready to write and does nothing. It gets the biggest laugh of the act."

Such subtle reaction comedy was the essence of Hay's act. It takes a special skill to make an audience laugh whilst not even facing them, relaying feelings through body language alone; only the best of the clowns could accomplish it.

Hay's act featured an eternal schoolroom trio of himself, an insolent young boy and a decrepit old man who is so backward he has not yet got round to leaving school! This template, with some adaptations, formed the basis of Hay's classic run of films for Gainsborough in the late 1930s ('OH! MR PORTER', 'WINDBAG THE SAILOR', 'ASK A POLICEMAN', etc). With Graham Moffatt as the boy and Moore Marriott as 'Harbottle', the old man, the three were let loose in the establishment. It was not just the educational authorities laid to waste by their ineptitude; variously the navy, the fire service, prison service, colonial rule and railways all came in for a thorough thrashing by Hay, Moffatt and Marriott. Although the schoolmaster was his go-to characterization, he was adaptable to any position of seedy inefficiency and questionable authority. The films went on until 1943, when ill-health forced his retirement. He was never to fully recover, dying at just 60 in 1949.

'RADIO PARADE OF 1935' came some time before this run of films. Only his second film, it sadly gives him too few opportunities to sparkle. Although the inept and out-of touch NBG director portrayed by Hay, who spends his time completing jigsaw puzzles, unaware of what his station broadcasts, has the potential to be in the mould of his classic characters, he isn't permitted enough time for the incompetent lunacy of his best routines. He does, however, get to deliver a magnificent line: "Nobody cares what kind of a job it is here...that's why we're all so competent!", as well as essaying what is possibly the first Hitler impression on film, as he idly plays with a comb in the washroom.

BILLY BENNETT

Round-faced, red-nosed Billy Bennett went under the billing 'ALMOST A GENTLEMAN'. This was a perfect tagline for his earthy, surrealistic take on the po-faced dramatic monologues of early music halls. Although he presented his character in the would-be respectable costume of a fusilier or evening dress, each costume was ill-fitting and much of what came out of his mouth was equally incongruous. One of his classic monologues was a slang-laden spoof of 'The Green Eye of the Little Yellow God':

*There's a cock-eyed yellow poodle to the north of Gongapooch,
There's a little hot cross bun that's turning green,
There's a double-jointed wop-wop doing tricks in Who-dung-flung
And you're a better man than I am Gunga Din'*

This sort of joyous word play, with a glint of madness in its eye, leads a clear path to Spike Milligan and The Goons.

Bennett is the first performer seen, a doorman at the NBG. His stiff-peak cap and brass button uniform are echoes of his usual military stage costume. He gets to deliver a short monologue in his customary style, as well as bantering with other characters and mauling the English language about in his usual comic-book slang way ("He was a bozo with a bright red konk, er, snitch, er, hooter!"). His other films included an early sound short, ALMOST A GENTLEMAN (1928). This title was reused ten years later for Bennett's only starring feature, a low-budget venture which sees him as a night watchman mistaken for a wealthy financier.

Billy Bennett died in 1942, and although no longer a household name, his monologues retain their fast-paced nonsensical joy; you can hear many of them on music hall CD compilations. One Bennett devotee was Eric Morecambe, who even used Bennett lines and namedropped him in several episodes of Morecambe and Wise's TV show.

THE THREE SAILORS

The Three Sailors play Mollison's assistants in the complaints department. They are really the odd performers out in this film, as they are in fact an American act. Little information seems to circulate about them, but their presence in a 1932 Pathe short with Naunton Wayne suggests that they either stayed in the UK for some years or made frequent visits here. Certainly, they managed to work in an appearance at a Royal Command Performance, with later publicity claiming that they "greatly amused the late King George and Queen Mary".

Their act is somewhere between the Three Stooges and Clark & McCullough, a blend of slapstick, spirited knockabout and surrealist nonsense. There are slapping routines à la the Stooges, but these are performed in a more slow-burn style than was usual for the Moe, Larry and Curly. Their timing is excellent, and their delivery is more subtle, the humour rather more sly. An example is a moment where one of the trio is told to "Take a letter to Newcastle"; judiciously selecting a letter, he fetches his hat and wanders out of the door on his way. They are also more quick-witted, breaking into random anarchic acts such as a mock duel or 'Ring-a-ring-a-roses', in the spirit of Harpo Marx or Clark & McCullough.

Their appearances throughout the film are real highlights, and it's a shame that they didn't make more film appearances. Indeed, they remained pretty obscure. By 1938, they were touring Canada in a Hollywood revue show, but I've seen no mention of them following this.



TED RAY

Ted Ray is one of the few performers in this film to have achieved his greatest success post-war. With his 1940s/50s sitcom 'RAY'S A LAUGH', he would later become a well-loved, cosy fixture of radio comedy. Many years before this, Ray (born Charlie Olden in 1905) eked out a living as a comic with a sideline in playing the violin. Originally billing himself as Nedlo, the Gypsy Violinist (Nedlo being his real surname backwards), he worked in an increasing amount of comic patter until his act became a mixture of music, novelty pieces and jokes. In the film he is presented with his violin act; at one point he makes reference to Laurel & Hardy, breaking into a snatch of 'The Ku-Ku Song' and commenting, "It must have been two other fellers..."



L-R: Billy Bennett; Clifford Mollison; Ted Ray; The Three Sailors (with Naunton Wayne, from a British Pathe clip).

CLIFFORD MOLLISON.

Clifford Mollison plays Jimmy Clare, the film's protagonist. As Complaints Manager of the NBG, he is the self-proclaimed "busiest man in the whole company". Mollison is excellent in the film, playing a comically pompous leading man. He had been a stage actor, working his way into leading man roles, including 'A SOUTHERN MAID' with Bebe Daniels and Lupino Lane. This, along with many of his other films, required him to play somewhat more bland characters, and I have yet to see a film that showcases his comic talent as well as 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935'. Nevertheless, he kept on appearing in films, albeit less prominently, as the years went by. He pops up in 1951's 'SCROOGE', and as late as 1969's 'OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR!' and 1973's 'LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR'. He retired to Cyprus, dying in 1986.

THE WESTERN BROTHERS

Kenneth and George Western were actually second cousins, rather than brothers. Originally billing themselves "the Perfectly Polite pair", they presented an affectionate mockery of upper class types so prevalent in 1930s Britain. This spoofed dignity extended to adopting deliberate upper class drawls, plus giving themselves a latin motto 'Adsum ard work' and an 'old school tie' logo. They mixed skits and topical jokes with piano-based songs; during WW2, their spoof of Lord HawHaw, 'Unce BooHoo of Moscow', would be especially successful.

Their routines often involved speaking and singing in unison, their deadpan, almost mournful incantation creating a very bizarre and humorous effect. Here, they get to do just this with a weather forecast delivered during as an interlude to a larger musical number. They appeared in several British Pathé short films, as well as appearing in (and co-writing) the Bobby Howes film, 'MR CINDERS'. One later film also billed them alongside fellow RADIO PARADE OF 1935 star Will Hay, as they had a brief cameo in Hay's 'OLD BONES OF THE RIVER'.

Although their career advanced into the 1950s, by this time the old social order they were spoofing was rapidly vanishing. In addition, George later claimed that "TV more or less finished us off." After Kenneth's death in 1963, he was sadly reduced to operating a news kiosk on Weybridge station until his own death in 1969.

There is an excellent website devoted to the Western Brothers at <http://home.earthlink.net/~twestern/Genealogy/KenGeorge/>



HAYER & LEE

Haver (pronounced Hay-ver) and Lee are one of the most obscure acts in the whole film. They perform an entertaining cross-talk act, as two sound effects men working at the NBG.

Harry Haver (real name Clay Keyes) was an American, playing the fast-talking, blustering straight man. Frank Lee (real name Frank Tulley) was a little man with a toothbrush moustache, capering around and taking abuse from Haver. Their act is an intriguing melding of styles; while Lee is the epitome of baggy-pants, Chaplinesque low comedy, Haver's machine gun-fire delivery and quick temper plant him on the sharper end of American comedy. Their disparate, transatlantic styles actually work well together, Lee's music hall puns and whimsy forming a perfect source of comic frustration for Haver's ire.

A highlight of 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935', the pair made several other film appearances following it. Shortly after, the film's director, Arthur Woods, reused them in 'ONCE IN A MILLION', a vehicle for visiting Hollywood star Charles 'Buddy' Rogers. One of their most interesting credits is 'MOTHER, DON'T RUSH ME', a 1936 film produced by Fred Karno's short-lived film company and starring Robb Wilton.

However, their most numerous (and easy to see, thanks to the Internet) credits, are several shorts that they made for British Pathe, which they continued to make as late as 1940. After that, what became of them is unknown; perhaps the war split their transatlantic partnership? Either way, they remain a different and amusing curiosity.

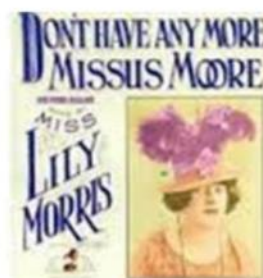
LILY MORRIS and NELLIE WALLACE

If the impressively overblown, all-smiles opening production number represents the NBG's face to the world, we are soon brought back down to earth when we meet the staff behind its glittery façade. In an amusing juxtaposition that sets the tone for the satire to follow, the scene fades to two sour-faced cleaning ladies, singing "We won't say Good Morning anymore". The two ladies are grand old dames of music hall and variety, Lily Morris and Nellie Wallace.

Lily Morris was born in 1882, and her stage career began at the age of 10. Specialising in comic songs such as 'Why am I always the bridesmaid, never the blushing bride?', and 'Don't Have any more, Missus Moore', she built a successful career that encompassed several international tours. Her popularity remained into the 1930s, although increasingly in a nostalgic capacity. In such a setting she appears in Will Hay's 'THOSE WERE THE DAYS', appearing in a music hall to sing Marie Lloyd's famous hit 'MY OLD MAN SAID FOLLOW THE VAN'. A later appearance, on Arthur Askey's 'I THANK YOU' sees her unusually as a wealthy dowager. However, she is allowed to show her true colours when breaking into old standard 'WAITING AT THE CHURCH' at the close of the film. Lily Morris retired in the '40s, dying in 1952.

Nellie Wallace enjoyed an even more successful career. Possessing another one of those physiques tailor-made for comedy, she was memorably described by John Fisher in 'FUNNY WAY TO BE A HERO':

"a nose halfway between the Duke of Wellington and Ken Dodd, to which was added a non-existent chin, a mangy scrap of hair and an even mangier wisp of fur". She came to take on the persona of an eternal spinster, who, when asked if she had been crossed in love, would reply "No, I've been run over". Her sardonic condemnation of her fate was comically matched by a mistaken hauteur and self-confidence: "I was ugly as a child... that's why I've grown up pretty". Born in 1870, she was a participant in the grand era of the music halls, and remained popular right until her death in 1948. She especially made a notable success of playing pantomime dames, usually reserved for men in drag. Film-wise, she made a handful of appearances, most noticeably in 'BOYS WILL BE GIRLS' (1937), though she had made an appearance on celluloid as early as 1902 in the short 'A LADY'S FIRST LESSON ON A BICYCLE'.



'Don't Have Any More, Missus Moore' was a popular song by Lily Morris during her headlining days. Above: Nellie Wallace.

CLAUDE DAMPIER

Gormless, toothy Claude Dampier was one of those people who probably never could have followed any other career than comedy. Born as Claude Cowan in 1879, he made his stage debut as a chorister in the Drury Lane pantomime 'DUCHESS DANTZIC'. (His biography in 'RADIO WHO'S WHO' claims 1903, but I can't help thinking he must have been younger than 24 to play this role).

Later, he worked in Concert parties, especially touring the Antipodes. he remained in Australia, scoring a success with the show 'THE ADVENTURES OF ALGY'. This show would be a milestone for several reasons. As well as raising his profile, it was during this show that he met Billie Carlyle, his future wife and comic partner. Finally, 'ALGY' also gave him his first film role, as it was adapted by an Australian film company. Dampier would also make a follow up in Oz, before returning to the UK.

Billing himself as 'THE PROFESSIONAL IDIOT', he developed his character of a sort of middle class bumpkin, the idiot brother whose existence was a shameful secret to his well-respected family, perhaps. In this mode, he worked his way to success on stage and radio, where his gormless, hangdog looks were matched by a distinctively slurring, fruity voice ("Oh, yerrrrrrrrssss"). Billie Carlyle was his frequent foil, but on radio at least, his act's most notable feminine component was the fictional character, Mrs Gibson. Claude would frequently allude to her in his monologues, and one instance of this got him in hot water, as he spoke of Mrs G's desire to have him go squeeze her oranges! He later transferred his radio success (and Mrs Gibson) to some early television shows.

Claude also made several successful film roles in his usual persona. As well as the gormless piano tuner in 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935', he has a great role as a useless school teacher in Will Hay's 'BOYS WILL BE BOYS'. Other notable roles include opposite Monty Banks in 'SO YOU WON'T TALK', as a valet in the Frances Day vehicle 'PUBLIC NUSIANCE NUMBER 1' and the Jack Hylton film 'SHE SHALL HAVE MUSIC'. He continued to make sporadic appearances as late as 1954's 'MEET MR MALCOLM', the year before his death.



BERYL ORDE

Born in Liverpool in 1912, Beryl Orde was an extremely talented impressionist, in the Florence Desmond mould. In 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935 she shows off her versions of

Beryl made only a couple more films, most noticeably 'THE DUMMY TALKS' with Claude Hulbert and Jack Warner. She died sadly young in 1966.



ALFRED DRAYTON

Bald. Burly comic actor Alfred Drayton worked in a brewery but had a passion for the stage, and at 18 changed to a theatrical career. He worked up to comic supporting and featured roles in theatre and films. In RP1935 he plays the bullying head of a theatre chain who refuses to allow his artists to broadcast,

His most notable work was in partnership with the eternally flustered Robertson Hare. The pair starred in several films, including 'BANANA RIDGE' and 'AREN'T MEN BEASTS?' (the latter two newly released to DVD by Network). The partnership lasted for 13 years, until Drayton's sudden death in 1949. Hare was quoted as saying "Ours was a happy association. I have lost a great friend and the stage has lost a grand artist."



From top: Beryl Orde, Alfred Drayton, Ronald Frankau.

RONALD FRANKAU

Suave, debonair Ronald Frankau appears to deliver droll patter and a deadpan song, 'LET'S GO WILD', the saucy lyrics contrasting amusingly with his disinterested, Etonian delivery. Well-educated Frankau specialised in such intelligent whimsy, beginning with concert parties, graduating to on radio and a series of gramophone records. The latter gave full reign to his salacious side, one example being marked by the BBC as "not to be broadcast under any circumstance!"

His innuendo also probably led to him co-writing a George Formby film, 1942's 'MUCH TOO SHY', though Frankau's humour was somewhat more sly than Formby's. Also in the wartime, he published books of humorous, morale-boosting verse.

Frankau's other sideline was one half of a radio double act with Tommy Handley, as 'Murgatroyd and Winterbottom'. Aside from 'RADIO PARADE OF 1935', his celluloid appearances were few, most notably in 'THE GHOSTS OF BERKELEY SQUARE'. He died in 1951, but the Frankau family line would go on to remain prominent in British comedy. His wife Renee Roberts would later to play Miss Gatsby in 'FAWLTY TOWERS'. Their daughter Rosemary went on to be an actress, appearing in 'TERRY AND JUNE' and 'YES MINISTER'. Grandson Nicholas Frankau appeared in 'ALLO 'ALLO!', and even in the current day, grandson Sam Bain is the co-creator and writer of the much-lauded sitcom 'PEEP SHOW'. The noble tradition of British comedy is being upheld nicely by the Frankau dynasty, bringing us to a fitting close to this article.



THE BUFF'S BOOKSHELF

LAME BRAINS AND LUNATICS by Steve Massa.

**Bear Manor Media, 492pp.
\$29.99**

Silent Comedy allsorts, masterfully researched and written.

Steve Massa's new book echoes the title of the classic silent comedy books by Kalton Lahue and Sam Gill, such as 'CLOWN PRINCES & COURT JESTERS', or 'KOPS & KUSTARDS'. Like those books, it covers a range of subjects from across the gamut of silent comedy, reaching far beyond the familiar faces. Of course, silent comedy is such a vast subject that no single volume could cover everything. Really, this is a selection box sampling from across the whole genre. At one end of this spectrum are chapters based around lesser known aspects of the great comedians' careers, or areas tangentially related to them. In this category, for instance, we have the chapter 'KEATON AND THE SILENT COMEDY GRAPEVINE', which details the ways in which other comedians learned, borrowed and stole from Buster. Mr Massa's gargantuan knowledge of silent comedy enables him to open up completely new insights on familiar subjects. In this case, the article doesn't just detail well-known Keatonites such as Larry Semon and Lupino Lane, but reveals two performers who imitated him outright. Who knew that BK had his own Billy Wests?

Other chapters in this category concern areas such as Charley Chase's career as director, or Harry Langdon's influence on Stan Laurel. Some of these chapters are familiar from DVD booklets to which Mr Massa has contributed, but are certainly worthy of inclusion, helping to give a broader spectrum of silent comedy.

The other types of chapter deal with obscure performers. These are not obscure in a Lloyd Hamilton, Lupino Lane or even Charley Bowers kind of way; the performers here are in a whole different class of anonymity. Marcel Perez? Fay Tincher? These names are known by only the staunchest buffs, and even then little else is spoken about them. But don't worry if that sounds a little too deep or obscure. There's something for everyone here, from the well-known names to those mystery figures. Even if they are completely unknown to you at the book's beginning, the tangled skeins of crossed paths and stylistic influences that litter silent comedy somehow end up linking them back to more well-known performers. Steve Massa's brilliant research, lively writing style and ample stills collection really bring these neglected performers to life. In many cases, they have few films left for him to write about, but he still manages to piece together a good idea of what they were like. In shining the investigator's flashlight into the gloomy corners of silent comedy, this book is a really important addition to the list of must-have volumes, and a more than worthy successor to the iconic books its name pays homage to. A selection box it may be, but each selection is sweet and tasty!

FUNNY WAY TO BE A HERO by John Fisher

Random House, 496pp. £35.00

A remarkable love letter to music hall and variety, revisited.

I first came across John Fisher's book 'FUNNY WAY TO BE A HERO' in a second hand book shop in Wales, years ago. I didn't recognise the title. But the dust jacket spine bore the sort of playbill font that usually signifies relation to vaudeville or variety. I wasn't disappointed, and have always been thankful that my idle curiosity caused me to take it off the shelf.

Inside is a wealth of information about a galaxy of stars, ranging from music hall stars like Dan Leno, right through to then-current (1970s) stars such as Morecambe and Wise. At the time, I was familiar with a few of the names inside (George Formby, Will Hay, Tony Hancock), but this book went far deeper into performers whose stardom had not lasted, who never appeared on film, or whose names and images had been forgotten. What makes 'FUNNY WAY TO BE A HERO' such a magnificent book is the way that John Fisher brings each and every faded jester to life. The text eloquently paints a clear picture of each performer's unique talent, striking a harmonious balance between celebration and eulogy. Performers I had never seen came jumping boldly from the pages, making me laugh even when I had never seen or heard their material. Very few books really have the ability to do this; the other one that springs to mind is Walter Kerr's 'THE SILENT CLOWNS', and indeed this book might be considered the music hall and variety version of the former.

Where Fisher and Kerr's books differ is in the remit of their coverage. Whilst Kerr's book drew a line under Chaplin's walk into the sunset at the close of 'MODERN TIMES', Fisher realises that the music hall tradition was a shape-shifting tradition that remains to this day, an inheritance of all British performers still conspiring to make audiences forget their troubles.

In this new hardback edition, he has updated the text to take account of this, adding to each chapter an afterword saying how that performer's influence has continued. This raises some really interesting parallels: Frankie Howerd's relation to Eddie Izzard, for instance, or Robb Wilton's pre-emption of David Mitchell's dithering.

Mr Fisher has also found space to include extra chapters, on The Two Ronnies and Tommy Cooper, who achieved their biggest success after the book's first edition.

This edition also benefits from the addition of many extra photographs, posters and variety bills, many of which are now reproduced in colour. A fairly hefty price tag at £35.00, yes, but a book to love, cherish and dip into again and again. A must!



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