

Extract From Chapter Four: When You Grow Up, Little Lady



In the summer of 1934, Lew took the band on the road again, and they played to sell-out audiences in Manchester, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Portsmouth and Nottingham, where Tiny Winters recalled that ‘people were scrambling for autographs in the interval, it was a near-riot. It really did bring home to us how people felt about the band.’ When Al Bowly sang, the dancers stopped dancing, and clustered ten-deep in front of the band-stand. In Bradford, he left the stage during an instrumental number, and was besieged by girls. He couldn’t fight his way back to the microphone in time for his next vocal, and the band had to fill in for 32 bars.

In that same year, Bowly went to the USA, with Bill Harty, to sing with a new Ray Noble band. Alan Kane became the band’s regular vocalist, while Jock Jacobson took over the drummer’s stool. Albert Harris joined as guitarist, and Stanley Black was now on piano. In February 1935 the new band opened at the Hollywood Restaurant in Piccadilly. In March, trumpeter Nat Gonella left, to launch his career as a band-leader, with a smaller jazzier ensemble - The Georgians. Tommy McQuater took his place.

At the Holborn Empire, Lew Stone made his debut as a comedian, with a languidly elegant rendering of the comedy song ‘Algernon Whifflesnoop John’, complete with monocle, and supported by trumpeter Alfie Noakes as his obsequious butler.



His deadpan vocal delivery also enhanced ‘The Gentleman Obviously Doesn’t Believe’, ‘Knock Knock’, and most memorably ‘I’ll be-BBCing You’.

Interviewed for *Topical Times*, this reluctant celebrity band-leader was persuaded to reveal some of his private passions:

Favourite motto – live and let live

Greatest ambition – to swim the English Channel

Lucky day – my birthday

Earliest recollection – wearing breeches for the first time

Ideal spot – Chorley Wood

Favourite dish – rice pudding

Favourite film actor – Lewis Stone

Ideal holiday - drifting

Favourite author – H.G. Wells

Alternative career – film producer

In November Lew Stone and his band returned to the Decca record label. The band also began to broadcast regularly for the commercial radio stations based in Normandy and Luxembourg. The *New York Herald* reported: ‘Lew Stone’s band is without a peer in London. Although evening dress is required in the floor downstairs, you may dine in mufti on the balcony and there is a smaller dance floor up there, too, to keep you happy.’ But *Melody Maker* took a more

controversial line on the musical policy adopted by the leader for his new residency:

‘LEW STONE OUTRAGES HIS FANS.

Apparently the ears of most of Lew Stone’s fans were excitedly cocked last Friday night when his slightly reduced band gave its first broadcast from the Café de Paris. But next morning, Lew woke up to take account of an enormous post and, as he opened the letters one by one, it dawned upon him that, no matter what else he had done, he had certainly succeeded in upsetting the rhythm fans among whom, in the past, he had numbered so many adherents.

Truth to tell, however, Lew is unrepentant. He had decided when he took over the Café that his music would have to revert to that quiet society style which is inevitably demanded in these Mayfair resorts, and since this was not a studio broadcast, he saw no reason to change the style which he had set himself. He says that a rhythm fan following is not sufficient to keep a band commercially successful, and that, in future he is going to keep the music sweet and melodic...’



In April, 1937, the band room at the Cafe was devastated to hear that saxophonist Harry Berly had taken his own life. He was only 31. At the inquest

it was disclosed that, despite his great success in the dance band milieu, he had become obsessed with the idea that he wouldn't ever attain the top rank as a classical viola player. Plagued by insomnia and depression, he threw himself under a tube train at the Oval. Before joining Lew Stone, Berly had already achieved great distinction in the original Hylton band.

In 1937, Jack Hylton took his band on an extended tour of Europe. They played to delighted audiences in Prague and Vienna before settling into the Scala Theatre in Berlin for a month long run. There they were to break box office records, often playing to more than three thousand people per performance. Both Herman Goering and Dr. Goebbels enjoyed concerts on the tour: however, the Nazi authorities had insisted that there should be no Jewish players in the Hylton Tanz Orchester. So sax players Freddie Schweitzer and Benny Daniels stayed at home.

In London, there was trouble looming for the aristocrats of the dance band world, who had become a bit of a 'magic circle', monopolising not only the recording sessions with their own bands, but moonlighting with other bands as well. On spare afternoons, they would take on lucrative film sessions, and would even make themselves available for a theatre show, if they could fit that in with their nightclub commitments.

Melody Maker complained (February 5th 1938):

'These star instrumentalists are worn out by hectic and constant rushing about from studio to studio, playing all hours of the day and night with insufficient sleep. So they come to their resident jobs listlessly and unenthusiastically, and in many cases positively ill. It is not an uncommon sight to see such players nodding off to sleep during their 'tacet' periods.

Ambrose, one of the worst victims of the practice, is now doing something about it. Whole sections of his band have appeared under the names of other leaders who only work with scratch combinations for jobs which would otherwise fall to established bands. Ambrose told *The Melody Maker* this week:

"I have warned every man in my band that if he works sessions without my permission, he will be fired incontinently without notice and irrevocably. I am going to the extent of having

watchers on duty at sessions to see if my men are on them. I hope all band leaders will follow my example. Such an action would be good for the whole profession. By stopping these players from monopolising the outside work and wearing themselves out in the process, there will be new opportunities for young players to get a share of the work and to become just as efficient in it.

I have issued this ultimatum because I understood that some of my band were going to do a broadcast with Lew Stone, who has no dance band available. I am sorry I have had to take this step in a case in which a so-well-respected and right-thinking fellow as Lew Stone is concerned, and wish it were anyone else. But I will make no exception in anybody's favour."'

No other documentation is available to validate Ambrose's criticism, although a BBC studio session of Lew Stone and his band three days earlier certainly included a nucleus of Stone alumni, led by Joe Crossoman, Alfie Noakes and Lew Davis. They recorded 'Nice Work If You Can Get It'! The band was also working for Decca at their new recording studios in West Hampstead, where newly recruited guitarist Sid Colin recorded 'The Flat Foot Floogie'.