

Extract From Chapter One: Mr Piano Man

The records show that Lew was playing with Percy Bush and his London Aeolian Band, at the Oxford Galleries in Newcastle, in July and August 1925. The line-up followed the American hot dance model: a front line of two saxes (doubling clarinets and oboes), two trumpets and trombone, underpinned by sousaphone, drums and the Stone rhythmic piano.



Lew

Percy Bush

Tony Hill
(banjo)

A life-changing musical opportunity came while Lew was playing with a band at the Cosmo Club in London. He had just got into bed at 4 a.m. one morning when two musician friends rang his doorbell and told him that a pianist was needed to play with the famous Savoy Havana Band in Brighton, under the direction of Bert Ralton. Ralton was an American saxophone player who had brought his New York Havana Band to the London Coliseum in 1922. From there he progressed to the Savoy Hotel, changing the band's name to the Savoy Havana Band. Rudy Vallée was in the original saxophone section, and Billy Mayerl played piano, before Lew took over.

It was in that same Savoy Havana Band that Lew Stone would find his musical metier, almost by accident. The band was booked for a tour of South Africa, and their recording company needed some Afrikaans songs recorded, which

they could distribute in that country before the band's arrival. Ralton needed band arrangements pronto, for a recording session on the Monday morning. He asked Lew to help him out. Lew was diffident: he'd never done a full band arrangement before. Ralton begged him to give it a try. So Lew worked through the night and completed four arrangements – 'one was pretty terrible, but the other three were quite good, and one of them even surprised me' he later recalled. The word quickly went round Denmark Street that Lew Stone was a hot arranger, and that he worked fast. Lew rented an office in Charing Cross Road, and recruited a staff of copyists, including his nephew Leslie. Leslie played the trumpet, but not to a professional standard. Copying paid really well: '15/- a page, although they always wanted the parts the following day, so you'd have to stay up all night copying.'