

Extract From Chapter Six: Kiss The Boys Goodbye



‘Who would be a band leader in wartime?’

As if it weren’t bad enough that he sees his band slowly breaking up as more and more men are called into the Fighting Forces, he is now faced with an even more worrying headache – air raids. Lew Stone broadcast one of his ‘We Leave It To You’ sessions on Tuesday from 5 to 5.45 p.m., and when he was talking to me about it beforehand, he told me of his concern lest the band might not sound at its best because of air raid interruptions to his rehearsals.

Well, he was a prophet all right! Just at the time when he and the boys should have been having their last run-through, the warning wailed over London and a precious eighty minutes was wasted playing cards in the shelter. Then the Heinkels very considerably turned tail and flew just in time to let Lew and his boys come up above ground again and go immediately on the stand for their airing. This was particularly unfortunate for Lew because he had augmented his seven-piece Dorchester Band with some outsiders (including George Chisholm, Eric Breeze, Tommy McQuater and Andy McDevitt from the Squadronaires), and that extra bit of rehearsal

would have made all the difference. Lew sets himself a super standard, and the few rough spots in the programme would assuredly have been ironed out if he had had that bit more time.'

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'We Leave It To You' was a radio series gave Lew a chance to revive some of the good old songs, contrasting favourite numbers from his Monseigneur repertoire with more recent numbers of a similar mood or tempo. He also drew attention to the new formats that were becoming the fashion for song-writers: intros, verses, modulations and final syncopated choruses were no longer the norm.

The presence of musicians on that broadcast who were moonlighting from the newly-formed Squadronaires is also evidence that Ambrose's plea for players to be loyal to their leaders was falling on deaf ears. The Squadronaires band was the brain-child of Wing-Commander R.P. O'Donnell, the RAF's Director of Music. He had the idea of recruiting some of the musicians who were liable for the call-up into five-piece dance bands that could be dispersed among the RAF stations nationwide. Their rank would be aircraftsman second class, the lowest of the low. Their pay would be 3/6d a day, with bed and board. This didn't prevent a gratifying response from the musicians, who flooded into the RAF Depot at Uxbridge to join the 'oom-ching' gravy train.



Lew's nephew, Leslie, still working day and night as his uncle's chief copyist, took his place in the queue. He was working at the Coliseum at the time, copying out the band parts for the new songs that Vera Lynn would sing:

'I asked if I could stay and finish the week at the Coliseum, where there was a pile of work to be finished. They said, "No – you're all needed for immediate service." Then, while we were doing our basic training, the Air Ministry found out that some of the boys were running up to town for gigs in the evening – and they soon put a stop to that! All musicians who had A1 fitness, and hadn't got band work, were told they needed to find another trade. I said I'd like to join the photographic unit. When I got to Uxbridge, I found that all my musician friends had had the same idea!'

There came a time when the Stones' involvement with the People's Convention led the couple to question whether Lew's continuing Dorchester residency was the best contribution he could make to the war effort. Joyce found herself increasingly uncomfortable in that palace of privilege, entertaining the rich and famous, while East End Londoners were struggling to survive: 'Titled people would often invite Lew and me to join them for dinner in the Grill Room. But I knew that they didn't really want our company. They just liked the idea of being seen hob-nobbing with the celebrity band leader.'

Meanwhile ENSA had suggested that Lew should take his band on a nationwide tour, to raise civilian morale, and to entertain the armed forces. So, in June 1942, Lew handed in his notice to the Dorchester management. He organised a mammoth musical event on June 20th to mark the occasion, and enlisted the support of fellow band-leaders, to raise funds for War Charities.

Tickets were 7/6d, and dancers were treated to a procession of the very best London musical talent, playing, one after the other, from 4.30 till 11.30 p.m.: Billy Cotton and his Band, Carl Barriteau and his West Indian Dance Orchestra, the RAF Squadronaires, the 1st Canadian Army Band, the Irish Guards Orchestra and Lew Stone's Dorchester Band. Sir Albert Clavering O.B.E. wrote to Lew after the event:

'My dear Lew Stone,
I want to convey to you, on behalf of the War Charities' Committee, my warmest thanks and appreciation for all the help you gave us in connection with this function. I realise fully what a tremendous 'draw' were all the orchestras, and how much they meant to the success of the whole thing. Their popularity was tremendous, as anyone could see.'

Two weeks later, the Stones packed their bags, loaded the boxes of orchestrations and the Novachord into the Lagonda, and headed north, into a very different world. They were booked for a three week engagement at the notorious Green's Playhouse in Glasgow. Lew was delighted to be able to augment the band back to the scale of his Monseigneur ensemble: 'this is the combination with which I can best express myself, and with which I feel I would like to entertain a broader public.' The widening call-up, and especially the RAF plunderings of the dance bands, meant that this would be an entirely new ensemble, compared with the line-up that had recorded 'When I see an Elephant Fly' for Decca in January of that year.

New recruits were Stanley Flaum, Rube Barnett, Sid Manikin, Art Williams (saxes); Sammy Sharpe, James McCormick, Alec McPhail, Jimmy Silvo, Bert Cooper (brass); John McCormick (piano); Wally Mitchell (guitar) Bob Duffy (bass) and Joe Watson (drums). Benny Lee had already taken Al Bowlly's place, as crooner-in-chief.

Joyce Stone was a bit shocked when she walked into the wide open spaces of Green's Playhouse ballroom. It was on the sixth floor, above a cinema on Renfield Street in Glasgow, reached by an industrial lift, which often didn't work. Unusually, there were no tables around the dance floor. If you wanted to sit, you had to go to the balcony. Bare walls, a basic bandstand, no frills or fancy lighting. This was a far cry from the mirrored splendour of the Dorch. Joyce had been warned not to walk the streets alone, where gangsters were known to lurk in every other doorway. The bouncers outside the Playhouse were also not to be trifled with.

2183 dancers greeted the band, when they played their first afternoon session on July 11th 1942. The spectators packed the corners of the balcony to get close to the band. The dancers crowded round the bandstand, clapping in time with the music, urging on the soloists, shouting out requests. Fred Green, who booked the bands for the venue, boasted that:

'Glasgow has the most swing-minded public in the British Isles, and the dancing here is in a different class than anywhere else in the country. The people are swing-minded for many reasons: partly because there is so much rhythm in Scottish national music and partly because thousands of Glaswegians have been to America.'

'Before the war, some of the biggest liners sailed from here to America, and literally thousands of young men have made the trip, dozens of times.'

Also: many famous dance band musicians have come from Glasgow – particularly brass players.’

Two Glaswegian brothers were part of that Lew Stone Band: trumpeter James McCormick and his brother, John who played piano. Their father ran a musical instrument shop in Glasgow, a family business that’s still going strong today.

John (born 1921) was a bit taken back when his Aunt Mary asked him to get Lew to give her teenage daughter Helen a singing audition. He remembers:

‘I was only a new boy in the band then , and a bit over-awed to be playing in such company. Also I was a bit shy, and I really didn’t want to have to ask Lew to meet my cousin. But Aunt Mary wasn’t shy at all! Anyway, one afternoon she barged into the ballroom while we were rehearsing, with her daughter in tow: “Hullo, John, I’ve come to talk to Lew about Ellen. (Helen was called Ellen in those days).”

I was really embarrassed, but Lew was very nice about it, and when we’d finished rehearsing, Ellen stepped up onto the stand and I accompanied her for a couple of songs.’

So began an unusual musical career, for a talented Glaswegian school-girl, who was only 14 years old at the time. Later, Lew would say: ‘I feel happier about Helen Mack than about any other vocalist that I’ve ever employed.’



She was born in Glasgow in 1928. Today she lives in San Francisco. When she was only six months old, her father went to the USA as a steward on a liner, and never returned. Convent educated, Ellen (later Helen) lived in a one-room tenement with her mother. She remembers:

‘My mother had heart trouble as a result of diphtheria and was unable to work. Some friends paid to have me go to dancing school when I was three and later the teachers gave me free lessons, because I would help them by demonstrating steps to other students. I worked up a little act with singing, dancing and some comedy and was performing that from when I was nine.

When I was eleven I heard Ella Fitzgerald's recording of ‘A Tisket a Tasket’ and became hooked on jazz singing. I auditioned for the BBC when I was twelve and did my first broadcast from Edinburgh, with Adelaide Hall and the Scottish Variety Orchestra. The following year I auditioned for Oscar Rabin and shortly after was asked to replace his singer Dianne, who was married to Oscar's son and was going to have his baby. I sang with his band at the Empire Theatre, Glasgow and did a week at the Edinburgh Empire. Then he offered me a seven-year contract, but my mother wouldn't let me take it!’

Rabin's loss was Lew Stone's gain: and Helen sang with his band on and off for the next two and a half years. On tour, mother travelled as daughter's chaperone and protector. When she couldn't be there, Joyce Stone took on that role. It was not particularly onerous, as Joyce recalls to this day:

‘She was a lovely girl. Despite coming from such a wretched background, her manners were perfect. Also, because she'd had some stage experience, she knew exactly how to present herself, how to come on stage, how to acknowledge applause. The band were very nice towards her, very protective. If we were travelling to a gig by train, and wanted to ensure the boys would behave themselves, I'd always put Helen in the same carriage – that way we knew they wouldn't get up to mischief!’