



A Season of Happiness

nothing too serious

Popcorn



P02-2

I know Popcorn is supposed to be light-hearted, but I make no apologies for this part of the programme. There are always times of sadness and despondency in everyone's life from which even musicians aren't immune. Despite this, they do seem to roll with the punches better than most and eventually come out smiling.

MUSOS MUSES - ACT II



Overture

The Tunes of Wartime

The R.A.O.C. Blue Rockets was born at the beginning of World War II and was destined to become one of the top show bands in Britain for the duration and after. Many of the boys who had joined up had no intention of forming an orchestra, or being permanently stationed in a supply depot in their home county. They were looking for the excitement and glory of an overseas deployment, but the Army in its wisdom kept them close and safe.

Aside from public performances and numerous studio sessions, The Blue Rockets recorded a selection of shows for broadcasting to the serving troops. These concerts were under the auspices of the Entertainments National Service Association, or ENSA; also known by some participating funsters as: Every Night Something Atrocious. This radio-relayed contribution was the closest they came to the war raging beyond the white cliffs of Dover. It wasn't until peace was declared that the boys in the band had their initial wish granted and were sent over to Germany.

Scene 1: Welcome to Germany

The Devastation

It was stunning. They had seen the damage to London caused by the Blitz, and there were many other cities that had not escaped the bombs; but they were totally unprepared for the devastation inflicted on their former enemy's homeland. Dresden was a salvage yard. The cathedral had gone and vast areas that had once been streets of houses and shops, cinemas and cafes, had been laid waste. There was no electricity, and who would need it anyway? No-one lived there any more – there was nowhere *to* live. Those sad individuals who remained wandered through the rubble in a daze, most looking for food, some in search of lost family and friends and, perhaps, a logical reason for it all.

The band boys didn't know of one. This wasn't why they'd joined up. Although they were only witnessing the aftermath, they could imagine the fear and pain that these unfortunates had been subjected to and were only glad that they hadn't been the ones to serve it up. That would have been terrible, not exciting. As for glory, there seemed nothing whatever to be proud of. The best they could do to ease their consciences was hand out bars of chocolate to a few starving children. Even this humble act was not without regret – there were too many orphans and not enough chocolate. Maybe their best bet was to just play their music and hope it might bring some cheer to a pathetic and dismal venue.

Scene 2: So Very Different To Home

Among His Souvenirs

Not every German town had been damaged and there were plenty of buildings still standing, which was just as well because the visiting musicians had to stay somewhere. On one occasion, their billet was an old castle and, I daresay, on their arrival the boys would have marvelled at the imposing structure, imagining this was shaping up to be a memorable stay. It was, but not for the level of comfort that might have been expected in digs so grand. They were allocated a large room at the top and there was little in it to remind them of home. The walls being the hewn stone of centuries past might have withstood the onslaught of invading armies, but they did nothing to keep out the cold – it was freezing!

Under such conditions, sleep was difficult and fitful. Amidst the grumbling, someone had a brainwave, recalling that one of their number had managed to acquire a bottle of spirits. It was just what was needed to warm the cockles. The only problem being that the owner of the bottle was on guard duty, so they couldn't seek his permission. He was, however, the sort of chap who would never deny his comrades a wee dram in such dire circumstances. And anyway, they'd leave him some for when he got back. The bottle was uncorked and started doing the rounds. Instead of sighs of rapture, the room was filled with gasps, expletives and the sounds of spitting. The nightcap tasted foul.

They told their mate about it when he returned and couldn't understand why he became so upset. After all, there was at least half a bottle left. Not that it was drinkable because it had obviously gone off. "You don't see, do you?" he wailed. "It wasn't just any old booze – it was a bottle of genuine Napoleon Brandy!"

"Well," replied one of his mates, "If that was all the poor devil had to drink, no wonder he lost the Battle of Waterloo!"

Ticket To Ride

Not only was much of the country in ruins, but Germany's currency wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. Basic essentials were the new currency and allocations to the troops of certain necessities suddenly became the means to purchase almost anything. George and his two mates discovered this when they had to take a train ride.

Rosemary Squires was singer with The Blue Rockets at the time, and while they were performing some gigs in Hamburg, she'd decided to order a new dress. I don't know the cost, but I would imagine chocolate and perhaps nylon stockings might have featured somewhere in the price. It was obviously paid for, but by the time it was ready for collection the band had moved to another city. So, Rosemary asked George if he might be able to collect it for her. It was the ideal excuse to get out of the boring routine, especially as it was kind-of "official" business. I can't recall the distance, or the time the journey took, but I do know that George bought three return tickets for the princely sum of a single bar of soap!

A Few Muses Still To Come

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