



A Season of Happiness

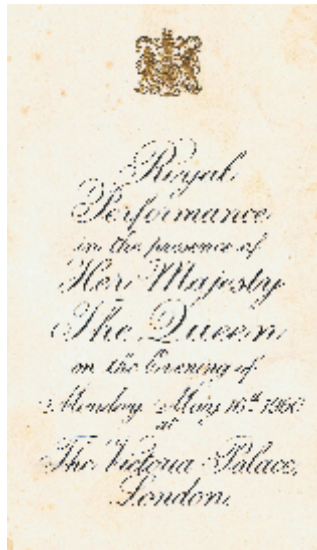
nothing too serious

Popcorn



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MUSOS MUSES – THE FINAL CURTAIN



Then there were grey skies

It sounds romantic and exciting, being a professional musician, travelling from place to place, doing what you love and being paid for it; which is fine if you manage to stay in work. In his heyday, George was able to pick and choose, playing for some of the famous big bands on stage, in the recording studio making records, film music and radio broadcasts, and generally living a high life which seemed destined to go on forever. Then came the nineteen fifties and the blue skies began clouding over.

Although the war had been over for five years, its shadow continued to dictate the British economy. People needed cheering up, perhaps more so because they knew no reason why they shouldn't, not anymore; but with many unable to find employment, barely surviving actually, they could no longer afford to splash out on dances and concerts. Big bands were giving way to smaller combos and television would soon take over as the cheap substitute for a night out. George was safe for a while because he and his mates had earned themselves something of a reputation and were in demand; then he suffered a terrible blow. A problem with his front teeth meant having most of them extracted and a false set made, disastrous for a trumpet player. Naturally, he couldn't even tolerate the pressure of the mouth-piece until the gums had healed, but he kept in the loop to ensure there was a job for him when that day came; unfortunately, it failed to dawn the way he'd hoped. The new teeth weren't quite right and vibrated as he blew. No amount of practice helped. Anyone else might have accepted that their career was over, but not George. Music was his everything and he didn't intend giving it up without a fight.

The solution was expensive. Suffering numerous appointments with a Harley Street specialist, another set of false teeth was tailored to suit his professional requirements, and George was on the road to recovery, hopefully a full one. The problem was that poor health had kept him out of the business for too

long, at least in musos' terms, and by the time he was able to play again, the decent jobs were all filled. Still, the weekly trip to London's Archer Street had always paid off in the past. Here was a place where musicians gathered to chat, play snooker, have a few drinks and trade jobs. If there were any worth having, they could be picked up in Archer Street. The boys George met there, many of whom were old pals, were sympathetic; but they now regarded him as an unfortunate casualty past his use-by date. No-one, it seemed, was willing to risk even a one-night stand on a trumpet-player likely to fluff notes, or who might not be able to last out the session.

Having run through the usual contacts to no avail, George had to start almost from scratch. One fixer who specialised in small "starter" jobs got him a few Sundays on bandstands in parks. Once he'd proved he could still play without making a mess of it, the next step up was the circus. While the star performers swung on the trapeze, or paraded and tumbled around the sawdust arena below, the band blared out their nightly repertoire at full volume. To say it was literally a hard blow was an understatement, and if George's critics had doubted his ability to make a come-back, they owed him an apology. But, by then, decent gigs were jealously guarded and the best he could get was a combination of club work and the London music hall. So, he played where he could - the Edgware Road Metro, Churchill's night club, The Cafe de Paris, and The Bag o' Nails to name just a few.

Towards the end of the fifties he struck it lucky. Initially deputising, then scoring a full-time job playing for Bud Flanagan's Crazy Gang Show, he became a regular at London's Victoria Palace Theatre for many years to come, continuing on later with the Black and White Minstrels. He was back, playing music for an appreciative audience, as well as notching up his second Royal Command Performance; and if not exactly "swinging" as he had been in the 40's, he was with his old mates again, doing what he loved best. The accent here truly was on "old" because, by then, they were all getting long in the tooth, a situation they were well aware of, having to preserve the illusion of lingering youth by applying a bit of black boot polish to their greying moustaches and washing their thinning hair in Grecian 2000. This kept them in the pit a little longer, but the winds of change eventually caught up as promoters opted for younger players who didn't need to disguise their ages and could stay the distance.

George retired earlier than many of his associates, but they all followed soon enough. A few might have been relieved to hang up their instruments, yet nearly all would have looked at them in fondness, reflecting on the undeniable reward of bringing pleasing melodies and harmony to audiences that would have been lost without them. Old soldiers, it is said, never die: they simply fade away. Old musicians never will, because their music lives on. George had been both, so he probably figured he had it covered. If not, the trumpet was there still and maybe, if he could take it with him when it was time to front up at the pearly gates, there might be a fixer on hand to get him a gig or two accompanying the angels' choir.

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