Music Hall Memories

BY FRED BASON

Now that the old-fashioned Music Hall has ceased to exist you find intellectual people taking far more interest in it than they ever did in the days when there were twenty or thirty Music Halls putting on twice-nightly shows in London alone—to say nothing of the Grands and Empires and Palaces and Alhambra's in the provinces.

I became a Music Hall fan in 1921. Before then I hadn't even the price of a seat in the gallery, which cost fourpence or sixpence. The very first variety star I met in person was Marie Lloyd, who was indeed a great star, though much of her act was above me (or rather below me, for I'd been brought up very strictly). I met her at the Camberwell Palace. I was very shy; I held out my autograph book and stuttered, 'Please... will you?'

'Come along of me,' she says. 'I'll do it in the dressing room.' She laughed—a fruity laugh, flashing her teeth. In we goes to her little, rather bare dressing room. She puts down a big handbag and takes my little autograph book and pen. 'You've no ink in it!' she says. 'What's the use of a pen with no ink in it?' and she laughs again. However, she runs downstairs, gets a bottle of ink from the stage doorkeeper, fills my cheap fountain pen, and starts writing her name. The ink won't flow and she gives the pen a shake, throwing blots on the page. 'It's shot out too soon,' she says. 'Never mind, I'll sign my name with the blots.' Which she does, writing it bold and clear, and adding September 26th, 1921. 'Now hop off,' she says, with another laugh, 'before I get undressed.' Her dresser comes in. 'Hey,' says Marie Lloyd, 'give me one of those pictures of myself.' And she picks one out of a box writes on it To a little Gent—Marie Lloyd.

I never saw her again, but I went to her funeral, with several thousand other people, and I wore a black tie for a week. I was fourteen years old.

I saw most of the big Music Hall stars between 1921 and 1931. I was specially fond of Ella Shields, the original singer of 'Burlington Bertie'—so smart and dapper; and Harry Weldon and his
wife Hylda Glyder—a very funny man and a sweet singer, wonderful troupers both; and Little Tich. I remember Little Tich with a special affection, though he was always reluctant to sign autographs because he was sensitive about having six fingers on each hand. Still, he gave me a photograph, signed 'Harry Tich'. His real name was Harry Relph, and he was a most intelligent man, who could talk fluently in five languages. Another very intelligent person, though you'd never guess it to see her on stage, was Nellie Wallace.

George Robey was another of my favourite comics, and he was the autograph hunter's delight, because he always carried about with him some pen and ink sketches of himself—drawn by himself—and he'd sign them Good Luck, Geo Robey. I asked him once whether he was wishing luck to himself or me. 'We both need it, my boy,' he said. 'It's as draughty at the top of the bill as it is at the back of the gallery. Either of us could come tumbling down—fast!'

I collected hundreds of autographs of Music Hall stars, and I'll show some of them gladly to anyone who calls to see me at 4 Broadmayne, in Portland Street, S.E.17. I remember asking Will Fyffe for his—he was the great Scottish comedian who sang 'I Belong to Glasgow'. He asked me how much his autograph was worth. I said, cheeky-like, 'Well, ten of yours is worth one of Noël Coward's.' 'And who the hell is Noël Coward?' he asked. I was amazed: he really didn't seem to know. This was just before the war, when Noël Coward was the idol of the West End. 'You might as well ask,' I said, 'who is Ethel M. Dell?' 'And who is Ethel M. Dell?' said Will Fyffe. He really didn't know. When I told him she wrote love stories he said, 'Do I look the sort 'o chap to read love stories?' I had to admit he didn't.

I asked Will Fyffe if he really belonged to Glasgow, as the words of the song went. He laughed. 'Na, laddie!' he said. 'The world's my oyster. The only thing Scottish about me is the whisky inside me.' Whether this was true or just a gag I don't know, but he was a great star and a great performer.

But of all my Music Hall stars the one I loved best was Aileen Stanley, the singer of 'Over on the Sunny Side' and 'Souvenirs'—a great gramophone star of the 'twenties. I met her first in 1922 when I was an unkempt urchin shivering on a cold winter's night at the stage door of the Alhambra in Leicester Square. When I asked her for her autograph she carted me off to the Kit Kat Club, a ritzy night-club in the Haymarket, made me eat a hearty supper, and asked me all about myself. She then made me promise to meet her outside Swan & Edgar's in Piccadilly Circus the next morning at ten, when she bought me an entire rig-out of suit, vest, shirt, tie, sock, overcoat and shoes.

'Now you look a perfect English gentleman,' she said. 'You can come and work for me.' There followed two of the happiest years of my life. My chief job was to buy bottles of the very finest port, and stand in the wings with about two fingers of port in a clean glass. She'd drink this just before she went on to sing three or four songs in her very individual American voice—a voice with a cherry in it. Then she'd come off stage and drink another finger of port before singing her encore. This drink was entirely medicinal, as a protection against the smoke in the theatre and the fog outside. Somehow it lubricated her vocal cords.

She was a very beautiful woman, and is still a very good friend. I heard from her in America in December 1969, when she ordered a copy of The Saturday Book and sent me some dollars to buy myself a Christmas cake. When I wrote and thanked her I said she ought to come to London and let me look after her as I'd done when I was fifteen. She sent me her love, but said she couldn't come because she couldn't leave her dog. Lucky dog!

But it wasn't only the stars that attracted me to the Music Hall. Some of my favourite acts must be totally forgotten nowadays. There was Khartoum, the Persian Pianist, with a very dark complexion, and a turban. He entered a darkened stage, made a profound bow, and played divinely, with lots of flourishes and trills and runs up and down the keys. I thought him the height of romance until one night I asked him for his autograph at the stage door and he spat out in cockney: 'Get aft of the bleedin' way.' I'm afraid the only Persian he'd ever seen was a carpet.

Then there was Tucker, the Singing Violinist, who both played and sang, and wore a flowing tie. He accepted applause by ducking his head and opening both ends of his tie—a most singular trick. I have an idea that he is now Charles Tucker, an agent.
And I liked too the Luminous Latins, who painted their clothes and guitars with luminous paint, and when the lights from the ‘gods’ were switched on to them they looked like coloured ghosts.

And here's another memory, which I've recalled before, but I'll let you have it again as it rounds off my Music Hall memories and concerns a 'turn' which used to be a great favourite of the Editor's. I was waiting at the stage door of the Holborn Empire for Max Miller, the wonderful, irrepressible, and shockingly Cheeky Chappie, when out of the door came a sad-looking, elderly man, whom I didn't recognise. Assuming he was an artiste, I held out my autograph book. 'Do you really want my autograph?' he asked. 'Yes, sir,' I said. So he signed and said, 'Would you like a signed photograph too?' 'I'd be delighted,' I replied.

Out of a shabby wallet he drew a dog-eared photograph, already signed and dated. 'Thank you very much,' I said. 'Thank you,' he said. 'Thank you for asking me. I've been carrying that photo round for quite a while, hoping someone would ask me for my autograph. I thought I was a back-number.' Then he put his hand in his pocket and gave me seven shillings. I said I really didn't want it. But he said: 'I promised myself some time ago that when next someone asked me for my autograph I'd give him or her all the money I had in my right-hand trousers pocket. Actually you're not lucky, you know. You're rather unlucky, because a few hours ago I had over ten pounds in that pocket, but I've lost nearly all of it this evening, playing poker. Take advice from an old man: never play cards for money.'

That advice came from Sam Mayo, one of the vintage stars of the British Music Hall, who wore a red wig and a shabby old dressing gown, and sat at a piano with a lugubrious expression singing sardonic songs in a curious whining voice. He had been at the top of the bill when I was a child in arms.