

WHY ARE WE SO DUMB?

FOR a long time I have been meaning to write something about those "Community Sing" films which frequently appear in supporting programmes, and I was reminded of this undischarged obligation by coming across two particularly dismal specimens in the past week. Presumably these films are popular in the U.S.A. or nobody would bother to make them. Certainly the compères behave as if fully confident that the audience will enjoy themselves and will obey instructions; will croon out the words as they are flashed on the screen; will whistle, hum, or mutter them; will follow the bouncing ball; will divide themselves into male and female voices, taking verse and chorus alternately; and generally go through all the antics expected at a "live" community sing.

But the reception actually given these singing shorts on nearly every occasion I have encountered them seems to me to draw attention to what is possibly a fundamental difference between the British and American character; the fact that we are a much more reserved and undemonstrative people, requiring a very special sort of emotional stimulus to make us open our mouths in public. This is true even at flesh-and-blood functions when we are required to sing the National Anthem or "God Defend New Zealand": the response is usually miserably weak and disunited, and the reason is not that we have too little patriotism but that we have too much self-consciousness.

And when the invitation to sing comes from a disembodied voice or some unctuous American song-leader on the screen, the result is even more devastatingly chilly. The compère's efforts to make us give tongue, his benign reproofs that "that was not bad, but next time make it a lot louder," his condescending approval when it is presumed that we are raising the roof, are alike greeted usually with a stony and embarrassed silence. Yet the conditions for uninhibited noise-making would seem to be

almost ideal: in the darkness of the theatre you can sing as far off key as you like without encountering hostile glances; even if you have a voice resembling a buzz-saw, you can be reasonably sure you will be safe from recognition (except perhaps by your wife). Darkness and anonymity make little difference however. Sometimes a few uninhibited souls will pluck up sufficient courage to make the attempt to get a song going, and very occasionally I have known the effort to be moderately successful—but only then if the melody is very familiar and catchy, and preferably rousing, one. Usually, however, the volume of noise produced is so small (if indeed, there is any response at all) that most of these community sing featurettes can only be regarded as unmitigated flops, the ludicrous effect of which is heightened by the remarks of the screen compère as he commends the audience for its efforts!

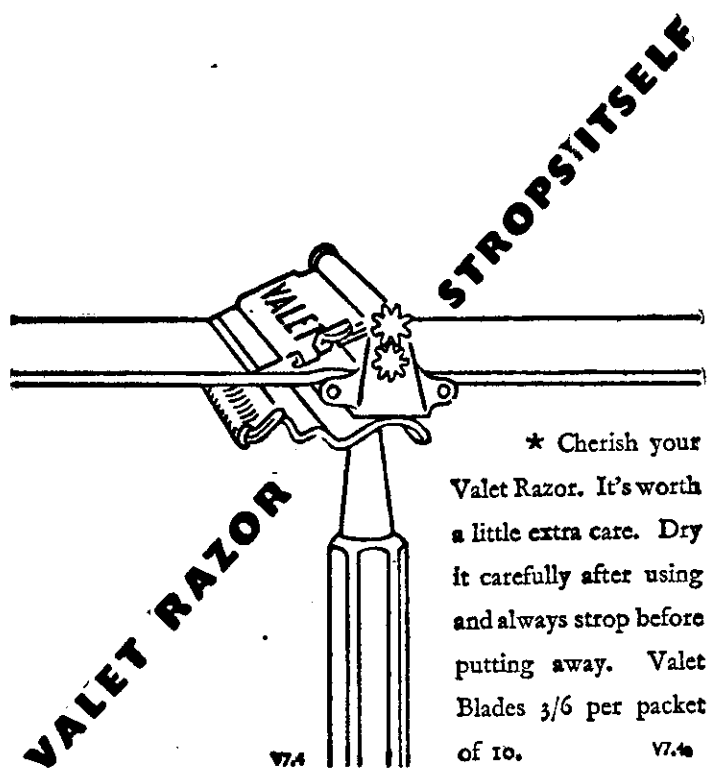
PARTLY, of course, it is the subject matter of the songs we are expected to sing which is to blame, and to this extent I would regard our reaction as a thoroughly healthy one. For, more often than not, these songs are pitiable efforts—and the lyrics are usually even more pitiable than the music. "Love," of course, is the theme of all but a very small percentage of them; but it is a mewling sort of love, a yearning, frustrated, emasculated thing. If so-called popular songs are a true index of contemporary society, then frustration is clearly the prevailing spirit of our age. Yet, although I should like to think it is self-respect that keeps the average New Zealander dumb when invited to repeat the nonsense flashed on the screen, I am afraid it is national stolidity rather than active disapproval that is the cause.

FINALLY, if there are so few short subjects available that these particular films cannot be wholly discarded, I think

(continued on next page)



An off-the-set shot of (right) JOHN STANNAGE (Station Director of 3ZB) and CAPTAIN P. G. TAYLOR, who play their real-life roles in Columbia's forthcoming Australian film "Smithy"



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