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SINGING SAILOR

From West End Night Clubs To The Mercantile Marine, Via The BBC

A STEWARD on an overseas cargo vessel loading at Wellington, walked into Station 2YA the other day and said he had sung for the BBC, and would like an engagement while his ship was in port. In this informal way, New Zealand was introduced to Gene Lewis, popular singer at exclusive West End night clubs in the pre-blitz days, but now, like thousands of other Englishmen, doing his bit in the Mercantile Marine "for the duration." Station 2YA engaged him, and so did other stations, and before his ship left New Zealand again, he had more fan mail than he could answer.

Gene doesn't look like either a steward or a night club entertainer—that is, if either class has a distinctive type. He looks just what he is, a nice English boy who learnt singing as a lad, but was determined to become a wireless operator. At first he thought that singing was "sissy," and that a wireless operator was a man of the world.

In due course, he served on a ship as wireless operator for 18 months, but his singing was so popular with his shipmates and at seamen's institutes in the ports he visited that he decided to go ashore and learn a bit more about it. "That," says Gene, "was my downfall—I've been singing ever since."

His Father Was Famous

Of course he was lucky in having a good grounding. His father, Morgan Lewis, was famous throughout Wales as a conductor and teacher of voice culture. He taught Heddle Nash, who toured New Zealand recently, and Ben Williams, star of the Drury Lane presentation of "New Moon," and later a singer at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York. A year or two ago, the BBC put on a series of programmes entitled "Great British Musicians," and No. 1 of the series was Morgan Lewis.

Gene says of himself that he was "just another boy soprano" in those days. When he came home from the sea his father was dead and he took lessons from his uncle, and it wasn't long before he got an engagement from Radio Luxembourg which brought in real money.

Lucky Accident

Then there came along the first of those accidents which have directed the course of Gene Lewis's life. A friend of his named John McHugh was discovered by Carrol Levis, a Canadian concert promoter. Levis arranged a series of competitions for aspiring artists, open to all and sundry, the winner being given a contract at a fixed salary for a period of years. This scheme brought wealth and fame to John McHugh; so Gene decided to enter the competitions and see what happened. What happened in his case was an offer from Art Gregory, a dance band leader who was then playing at Murray's Club in the West End. That in turn led to an engagement with Arthur Rosebery, formerly the pianist for Ambrose, who featured Gene Lewis at the Paradise Club, another West End club open from midnight until 4 a.m.



Spencer Digby photograph
GENE LEWIS
Thought that singing was "sissy"

(It received a direct hit from a bomb the other day).

One night Arthur Rosebery took Gene Lewis with him to entertain at a house party in Maidstone, where Gene was heard by John McCormack, the Irish singer, and through the singers' agency then operated by John McCormack and Frank Cooper, he was given a try-out at a Sunday afternoon concert at the Albert Hall. Soon, all those wearying late hours at night clubs were a thing of the past, and Gene was fully occupied until the outbreak of the war with concert platform engagements and BBC work, starting off humbly in the Children's Hour, but graduating into the well-known BBC Variety programmes, where he became very popular.

Back to the Sea

With the outbreak of the war, however, fate took another turn. Gene was called up, and did his best to get into the Navy. When it was discovered, however, that he was a former member of the Mercantile Marine, he was directed to get another ship. So he served first on a ship on the South African run. At Durban he sang for the South African Broadcasting Commission, and among the letters he received was one from a young woman named Peggy Timmons, who suggested that they try out a few duets. They had no time to learn new songs together, so they sang the lyrics made popular by Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald. Immediately they became popular, singing every day the ship was in port.

He has been kept pretty busy in New Zealand, too. After the 2YA engagement his ship went to Dunedin, and the four days they were loading there were as busy as any. On the first day he sang in a 4ZB sustaining programme, the next day he was sponsored by a retail company and sang in the morning and evening, and by the following day was on the bill at the Empire Theatre. The next day he was engaged to sing at a dance in the Town Hall and was again broadcast from 4ZB and at dawn the following day the ship pulled out. He received so much fan mail that he is still answering it.