



A KIWI WITH THE LYONS

EACH Wednesday evening for 26 weeks of the year, an expectant audience assembles in a BBC studio in Lower Regent Street, London, to hear radio's most popular family comedy team record their show. While the seats in the studio—originally a cinema—are being filled, the father, mother and the two children mingle with the audience, chatting, joking, and greeting friends. At a set time the outer doors are closed and inside the crowded studio the head of the family steps on to the low stage, introduces himself and his family, and explains the show for the benefit of any strangers or visitors. With his friendly manner and quick wit, he soon has the audience laughing and in a happy mood. Then comes a warning signal from the control box, the cast gather round the two microphones, the BBC Variety Orchestra prepare to play the signature tune, an announcer steps forward, and when a red light flicks on he begins the programme with this announcement: "Ladies and Gentlemen, Life with the Lyons."

This comedy series, which runs neck and neck with *Take It From Here* on the BBC Popularity Poll, is at present in its fifth year of broadcasting. Over 125 gay, near-to-life domestic cameos have been written and performed, each of which portrays happenings that might well occur in the home of any normal family. The success of *Life with the Lyons* can be attributed in the main—I think—to two things: its script writers, about whom I shall write presently, and the friendly personalities and great talent of its four principals, Bébé, Ben, Barbara and Richard Lyons. They are

an extremely nice family, not at all swollen-headed by their success, each possessing in full the true artist's humbleness towards his work and towards his fellow men. I say this with assurance, for I see them at their home nearly every day, where, since the autumn of last year, I have been working in the capacity of a trainee script-writer.

Many pre-war film-goers will remember seeing Ben Lyon on the screen, as a handsome leading man, his best-known film being *Hell's Angels*. Now, no longer a romantic lead, but still handsome, his only post-war film appearances have been with his family in *Life with the Lyons*, and in their most recent picture, *The Lyons in Paris*. Besides the rehearsals and recording of the weekly show, he deals with the many decisions which must be made on family matters: publicity, public appearances, arrangements for additional radio or television appearances, either for all the Lyon family or singly, and answers to the voluminous flow of fan letters.

Barbara has appeared in several television programmes, and with Richard has been a radio disc-jockey in a series which proved very popular, especially



... by A. M. ROSS

with the teen-agers. The Lyon children have jointly contributed a number of weekly articles to a widely circulated magazine, and Barbara has been successful with several solo efforts. She is gay, attractive, and very much more quick-witted and intelligent than the character which she portrays as the "bobby-soxer" of the radio show.

Richard, with a friend, has opened a photographic studio which he attends whenever his many other commitments will allow. He is a "natural" comedian, but there seems little doubt that whichever field of entertainment he decides to specialise in, his ability and impeccable sense of timing will take him right to the top. In 1953 he was voted the most popular teen-ager of the year.

And last, but certainly not least, we come to Bébé Daniels. She has been in show business as long as she can remember. As a child she appeared in a number of silent films, gaining valuable experience in the art of acting in front of a camera. When talkies came, her early training, plus the blessings of a beautiful voice and intelligence soon took her to greater stardom in such well-remembered films as *Rio Rita* and *Reaching for the Moon*. Her leading men numbered such top-ranking actors of the day as Rudolph Valentino, John Barrymore, Douglas Fairbanks, and comedian Harold Lloyd. Naturally, as an attractive and talented woman, she had many beaux, including a tall, handsome, dark-haired film star, who slowly but surely began to take first place in her affections. An excellent athlete, an expert baseball player, and an aeroplane pilot, he also had a fund of good humour and was the idol of countless thousands of fans. During their courtship, which lasted over a year, Bébé and Ben found they were ideally suited for each other. And so it has proved, for in the changeableness and uncertainty of show business in which so many marriages break up, theirs has stood secure in twenty-four years of married life.

With the business side left in the capable hands of her husband, Bébé Daniels is free to concentrate on scripts. It is she who evolves the plot, or story, and types a rough "format" or synopsis. She gives this to her two colleagues, Bob Block and Ronnie Hanbury, who enlarge on the theme as they write the show in alternate scenes. The script is then returned to Bébé, who revises it, replacing some lines with better ones and rejecting others, ensuring that the continuity is good and that the flow of the story is not unduly interrupted by material irrelevant to the plot, no matter how funny this material may be. Miss Daniels is a perfectionist in all that she does, but especially with her scripts. If any scene does not come up to the high standard she sets, it must be completely re-written, even if she herself has to work into the early hours to have the completed script ready for the rehearsal.

Bébé and Ben first came to Britain in 1933 under contract to make a couple of films each, and returned two years later to star at the Palladium and to tour Britain. Back in London after a triumphant South African visit in 1937, they began a series of radio shows with Tommy Handley. During the years 1940 to 1942, Bébé and Ben, with Vic Oliver, broadcast the show *Hi Gang*, which was the number one BBC comedy programme in popularity figures during the whole of the time it was on the air. Towards the end of 1942, Ben Lyons volunteered for active service. He had held rank in the U.S. Army Air Reserve, and was commissioned as a Major in the 8th Army Air Force, in which he

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