

A Cockney Remembered

by Larry Barnes

It was only about a fortnight after seeing Vesta Victoria that I was treated to what Dad called "a real dose of Cockney" A little man (even at the age of nine or ten, the thing I remember most vividly about these legends was their small stature - none of them seemed to touch even my Dad's modest five foot seven. But they towered! My God how they towered!) who seemed to be made of india-rubber, so like a rubber ball, was he. Dressed in a seedy black morning coat, pepper-and-salt trousers (when did you last hear THAT description?) a bright red waistcoat, green cravat, a quarter of a yard of brass chain across his middle for a watch-guard and on his close-cropped sandy-grey head a broken opera-hat crookedly open and set askew. I don't think he stood still for ten seconds in an act of ten to fifteen minutes. He didn't sing a song.... he attacked it, danced with it, wrestled it, bounced up and down with it and carried you along on a wave of sheer exuberance. He defied you not to enjoy yourself, not to be swept along by his sheer enthusiasm, so, of course, you did and you were. His vocal range consisted of three notes - four, if he really stretched. In fact, he appeared to sing the same song every time, just varying the words and the tempo, but bouncing, beaming perspiring and obviously so thoroughly enjoying himself that his audience became part of his euphoria.

His name was Harry Champion.

He bounced on stage to "Any Old Iron", and sang the entire song in the time that it takes a modern artiste to sing one verse and chorus - and this without losing a word or distorting a syllable. His diction (I didn't know what it was called in those days, but by God! I do now!) was incredible. Not a word was lost, but his mimed exhortations to us in the choruses went almost unheeded...simply because none of us could have kept up with him. I couldn't give his programme in any kind of order, simply because he threw so much at us I can only remember the evening in a rather scrambled order. I know he sang "The End of Me Old Cigar," and I know that I determined that I, too, was going to learn that song and sing it. Well, I did, and I do. Although it's quite a distance from a party piece at the piano on feast days to a paying audience. The song that I'd never heard of that most impressed me went.

"I never gets the knock when the boys shout 'Cock
"Cockety-cock-cock-cock Cock Robin!"

In me old red vest I mean t' cut a shine,

Walkin' dahn the street they call me 'Danger on the
Line!"

I don't know how old he was at this time, but I do know that this was the first time I've ever seen the audience as exhausted at the end of an act as you'd normally expect to find the artists!