

Here's News From Ross

There is a TED HEATH MUSIC APPRECIATION SOCIETY

**Address: 7 Kingsdale Court
Stow Park Crescent
Newport, South Wales NP20 4HS**

The editor of their newsletter wrote me saying "I would be in your debt if you could pen some words for me."

We did a tour of the US with the Heath Band - all of April 1956. That was the one with Nat "King" Cole, June Christy, a dancer named Patty Thomas and a comic, Gary Morton.

The Heath Band and we became such good friends. A month together on a band bus will do that. Here is some of the stuff I "penned."

*We Freshmen had worked with June Christy various times over quite a few years. We felt like she and we were old friends. June knew how to ride in a band bus. She did every mile with us.

For this tour Patty Thomas was the dancer on the show. She rode the bus some, and Gary Morton was the comic. He was in there with us most of the time.

The "Heath Band" had ridden in "coaches" before, but not over such great distances. The tour began in Ft. Worth, Texas. I don't have the itinerary before me, but I remember we went South all day the first day and North all day the second - East all day the third day and West all day the fourth. We spent the first week doing long trips and never got out of Texas.

Ted and Moira chose seats about the middle of the bus and on the right side - two seats in front of me and Bob Flanigan. Behind us toward the rear of the bus were Bobby Pratt and Duncan Campbell. These two Scotsmen carried a little blue bag - the type we used to carry aboard an airplane. Inside that little bag was a bottle of whiskey. They would take a discreet drink now and then.

At the start of a tour, each person is learning how to act in this environment. You don't want to be too "pushy" or too distant. Everyone was trying to be open to the others and be friendly, but we were cautious.

I guess the Scotsmen were hiding the bottles from Ted, which made the next few minutes so "electric." "It was mid-afternoon. The sun was shining. The bus was rolling. In a strong voice Ted said "Giff Me That BOTTLE!" Nobody breathed. The bottle was passed from hand to hand until it reached Ted. He remained seated, but he ceremoniously opened the bottle, tipped it up so everyone could see him do it and took a big drink from it. The breath we had been holding came out as a cheer and a sigh all at once!

Of course there were other bottles in other little bags. They came out and the togetherness became so thick in that bus that
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it lasted the whole tour.

*One of the first Texas evenings, the driver parked the bus by the concert hall and we all walked three or four blocks to a restaurant. Before we got there I heard some of the band calling "Johnny, Johnny!" The bass player, Johnny Hawksworth, had disappeared. Oh dear! Where could he have gone? He was right here! Johnny had his camera with him and he had hopped into a trash barrel. He was taking pictures through the crack under the almost-closed lid - pictures of people looking for him. That's when we realized we should not be surprised by anything Johnny did.

As the tour dragged on, Johnny decided to skip one extra-long ride in the bus by going by plane. But he needed money to do that, so he sold his bass viol, bought the ticket, flew, bought another bass in the next town and met us at the next concert hall.

*I was most intrigued by Ronnie Verrill. That fine little man played the most precise drums I have ever heard, and I'm such a fan of his, but his drums were never anchored down and tightened in place. They were always sliding around and almost falling over. It worried me. The drum set I played with the Freshmen was so bolted together I could carry it and run, but I think Ronnie needed falling-apart drums as an extra challenge. I'd help him set up sometimes and I would offer to fix this or that, but he would say "No, it's all right."

The band played the music so right every night. You didn't need to see them to be impressed, but they did one song where they all played drums on a dark stage with a "black" light that made the sax section's gloves glow green and their sticks glow pink. The trombones had gloves of another color and the trumpets did too. Wow! What applause they got with that.

*When we worked Don's and my hometown, Columbus, Indiana, my wife, Sue, and I had the band and June come to our house after the show. There were a lot of people there but there was room for everybody.

That's why we were surprised to find some of the band in our laundry room. It was our furnace that held their attention. The furnace was near the center of the house and the heat was sent to all the rooms through ducts. Our kitchen stove was quite different from English stoves they said.

We got to show the band so many things like Niagara Falls, horses in Kentucky, oil wells in Pennsylvania, etc. It was their first time in the US, so we played "tour guide" often.

*We Freshmen were captivated by Moira Heath. She was always a classy sweet lady who was never a bit of trouble. She always looked like a magazine cover girl, even at the end of a day on the bus. Her patience and her quiet calm helped us all make it through those endless bus rides.

*The tour ended at Carnegie Hall in New York City. As I remember we had a day off before that, so the band got a special

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