Tuesday next, June 27th THE DOOMED BATTALION (1932) with Luis Trenker and Tala Birell; one of the best of the Universal-German co-produced mountain films; and FORGOTTEN COMMANDMENTS (1932) with Gene Raymond and Sari Maritza, a wild anti-Communist piece containing a two-reel condensation of the Biblical sequence of DeMille's silent "The Ten Commandments".

June 20 1967

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

Program #1 in our Ealing Studios retrospective: Gracie Fields

Gracie Fields was one of the most beloved British stars of the 30's, and one of the very few of the many regional comedians and comedieness to achieve not only national boxoffice stature throughout England, but a great measure of international popularity as well. (George Formby apart, most of the other music hall and regional comics - Sandy Powell, Leslie Fuller, Frank Randall etc., enjoyed their greatest popularity in the middle and Northern counties of England, and their films are little remembered today). Although they were quite crude and dazed quickly, Gracie's films were released constantly and well into the 40's, and of course her recordings, her radio shows and her music hall appearances helped enormously to build her popularity in those pre-tv days.

Gracie was born in Lancashire in 1898, and began her career in the cotton mills, but fairly rapidly became involved with music hall - British vaudeville - and began to attract serious attention as early as 1915. Revues and comedy plays followed, and she was a substantial stage name throughout the 20's. Movies didn't claim her until 1931. A surprising number of her films have taken that basic Cinderella theme - factory girl-music hall-movies - and worked fairly unsuitable variations around it. She was in her early 30's when she made her first film and it was clear from the start that it would be difficult to fashion vehicles for her. She was not pretty, and did not photograph well. Her first film stressed romance, song and pathos to the exclusion of comedy, and while it was a huge success, the formula didn't seem quite right. Thereafter her films tended to alternate between standard romances, and Chaplinesque stories of unrequited love in which she stood aside while the other girl got the hero, or bizarre films like How to mar the perfect "Ealing" (In which she had a battle for fame while her unhappy lover Prince (John Loder) was forced into a marriage of state. Fortunately, Gracie's own background and the British depression of the 30's formed something of an answer. She became a kind of spokesman for the depression, settling labor strikes, reopening the mills, and singing militant and patriotic songs in films with determinedly optimistic titles like "Looking on the Bright Side" and "Lock Up and Laugh". Pathos was gradually replaced by an increase in slapstick comedy, but despite such leading men as John Loder (the most regular), Owen Narey and John Stuart, the romantic element continued to be subdued. Often there was no leading man at all - merely a female comic foil - so that comedy and song could dominate, and romance could be ignored.

Gracie's films got better as they went along, and provided useful training grounds for fledgling players (Vivien Leigh, George Sanders, Stanley Holloway), writers, directors and editors. When, in the late 30's, she switched from Ealing to Fox, the production values of her pictures soared, Italian comic & director Monty Banks (already at Fox) directed the best of them, and played cameos of sex and courtship. Between costumes, makeup and camerawork worked wonders for her, and she looked younger and more attractive than in her films of almost ten years earlier! However, despite attempts to retain the down-to-earth themes of her earlier films, the formula faltered with the added production values and the luxurious sets; the elaborate "Shipyard Sally" (in which she had some fine pantomime comedy) was far less successful with both critics and public than her cruder Ealing films.

Tonight's two films - admittedly primitive in many ways - are extremely interesting as illustrative steps in the moulding of a screen image, and as examples of the early work of a young, small, and growing company. Ealing (first called Associated Radio Pictures, and later Associated Talking Pictures, before switching to the Ealing label in the early 40's) had little money to spend in those days, and relied a great deal on extended location scenes. Because of their typical depression-era plots and their maximum of outdoor scenes, they are quite invaluable in presenting - fairly accurately - a certain strata of British life in the early 30's. Depending on the reaction to tonight's program (and I am talking in terms of audience interest and enjoyment rather than in "boxoffice" attendance) we may play - appropriately spaced - another four or five of the Fields Ealing pictures. We have them on hand, but so far the only other one positively scheduled is "Queen of Hearts" - one of her later ones, and in terms of polish and generosity with hit songs, one of her best.

Tonight's films are alternately archaic and clumsy; but they're warm, human, and a real and rare slice of film history. Treat them with kindness and patience and you'll find them most rewarding.
"SALLY IN OUR ALLEY" (Ass. Radio Pictures, 1931) Directed by Maurice Elvey Produced by Basil Dean; screenplay by Miles Malleson & Alma Reville; additional scenes, Archie Pitt; Camera: Robert G. Martin & Alex Bryce; Asst. Director: Raymond Friedgen; Art Director, Norman Arnold; editor, Otto Ludwig.

The Cast: Gracie Fields (Sally Winch); Ian Hunter (George Miles); Florence Desmond (Florrie Small); Ivor Barnard (Tod Small); Fred Groves (Alf Cope); Gibb McLaughlin (Jim Sears); Ben Field (Sam Bilson); Renee Maacready (Lady Daphne); Barbara Gott (Mrs Pool); Florence Harwood (Mrs Kemp); Helen Ferrers (Duchess of Wexford).

"Sally in our Alley" has been a much-used movie title, both in this country and Britain. From 1913 on, several unrelated films have used the title, one of them being curiously related from a likely-sounding original story called "Holly o' Pigtail Alley". The Gracie Fields vehicle however - based on Charles McGavoy's play "The Likes of Us" - is the best known of them all, and was even quite a big success in this country. Historically it is interesting not just as the very first Gracie Fields vehicle or as one of the earliest Ealing films, but also as a representative film from Britain in the early sound period - an area rather sparsely represented by archives in this country. Maurice Elvey, an uninspired director admittedly, was one of Britain's pioneers and most prolific film-makers; he made his first film in 1913, and was still going strong in the 1950's. The late 20's and early and mid-30's generally represent his best years, and if "Sally" seems too creaky and uncertain at times to justify that statement, then just think back to some of the creaky and uncertain early American talks by Lewis Milestone, Henry King and James Cruze!

"Sally" is a curious film indeed, with its Germanic streets and lighting, and its Victorian "Broken Blossoms" mood. The songs are rather far apart, and one would think come some of the fast-paced comedy that Gracie was to get into her later films. Yet it's consistent to its own dramatic and visual mood, and occasionally pays off with some unexpectedly powerful scenes - as in the confrontation between Gracie Fields and Florence Desmond (a clever and under-appreciated British actress, mimic and comedienne). The importance of movies as a means of escape in the depression years is interestingly commented on in the person of the movie-struck Desmond (a casual forerunner of the Betty Field role in "Of Mice and Men") and there are some good supporting performances, especially by little Ivor Barnard - who must have remembered perhaps as the evil and officious little ex-army officer in Huston's "Beet the Devil".

--- INTERMISSION ---

"SING AS WE GO" (Associated Talking Pictures, 1934) Directed by Basil Dean Screenplay by J.B. Priestley; Scenario editor, Gordon Walsley; Camera, Robert Martin; Art Director, J. Elder Willis; edited by Thorold Dickinson; 8 reels.


With a plot that is almost a blueprint for her much later "Shipyard Sally" (in which wartime activity finally ended the depression), "Sing As We Go" offers J.B. Priestley a wonderful outlet for social comment and criticism. However, he doesn't strain himself either politically or cinematically, and seems content to go no further than having Gracie lead hordes of singing workers through the streets! A very disjointed, seemingly off-the-cuff film, it is very typical of the later Fields films, stressing song and slapstick, with Gracie (minus the glamour) representing the British working girl much as Joan Crawford fondly imagined she was doing over here. The loosely-connected film would have had no real value were it not for the extended Northern-counties location shooting of streets, towns, country roads, and most of all the funfair at Blackpool, England's rather more stylish Coney Island. These sequences are fun and fascinating, and give Thorold Dickinson a chance to indulge in some fancy editing. The other major asset of the film is the presence of cool and lovely Dorothy Hyson, one of the real charmers of British films of the 30's. Her appeal hasn't dated one whit, and it's surprising that she never became a major star of British films. (Her movies ranged from Karloff's "The Ghoul" to George Pormby's "Spare a Copper" in the early 40's).

Billing Studios is still a beehive of activity incidentally, but only as one of several studios now operated by EBC-Television. I was in the studio last Summer, working on the BBC's documentary on D.W. Griffith, and it is still a compact, efficient little unit, physically unchanged since those days in the early 30's when, as a tot, I would wander past the carefully guarded gates and in my naiveté wonder if Ken Maynard, Fred Kohler or Joan Blondell were filming within!

William K. Everson