April 10 1972

Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

1930s: Two off-beat British musical dramas

"THE END OF THE ROAD" (Fox-British, 1936) Directed by Alex Bryce
Scenario: Edward Dryhurst, G. A. Maitland; Camera: Stanley Reynolds; 7 reels
With Sir Harry Lauder, Campbell Cullen, Margaret Keach, Ruth Haven, Bruce Seton, Ethel Glendinning, Johnnie Schofield, Vera Lennox, Valentine Dunn, Tully Comber.

Unlike Warner Brothers, who made some very creditable British films in the early 30's, Fox made their British films purely and simply to comply with the British quota laws. They were cheap, serviceable, kept a few veteran directors like Albert Parker busy, but rarely made the attempt to be more than mere property fodder. After 1936 of course, there was a marked upswing in quality and budget, with films like "Wings of the Morning", "Night Train to Munich", and "The Young Mr. Pitt". "The End of the Road" is one of their last real cheapies, and as far as I know, despite the huge popularity of Harry Lauder in this country in the teens and twenties, was never released in the U.S. either theatrically or for television. Alex Bryce, who directed, was a specialist in economy B's in films in the thirties, no artist, certainly adroit at giving his films a little more semblance of quality than his budgets warranted. His last works currently, were documentary shorts in the 40's. "The End of the Road" is a pleasant little film with a nice sense of fresh air and the countryside, and a honest, old-fashioned, but quite effective sentiment. Mainly of course, it's a showcase for Harry Lauder, who, like Jolson, loved to entertain and would (and here does) belt out a song at the drop of a hat. He wears his considerable years very well, and slams over his songs with real energy. He has a nice sense of humor too, though some of his lines are lost in rapid delivery and a Scotch burr. (I especially liked his joke telling how he outwitted the wife who on her death-bed promised to climb out of the grave and haunt him; he buried her "back up"!)

"SONG OF FREEDOM" (Hammer-Exclusive Films, 1936) Directed by J. Elder Willis
Scenario: Ingram D'Abbes, Penn Sherrie; Camera, Eric Cross, Harry ~oes, Thomas Glover; Production Supervisor, H. Fraser Passmore; Asst. Director, Arthur Alcott; Music, Eric Ansell, lyrics, Herman K. H. Greig.


The second of Paul Robeson's six British films between 1935 and 1940, "Song of Freedom" was admitted below the standards of the first - Korda's "Sanders of the River" - but it was still a very creditable effort for a then very small company. Hammer. It was certainly their biggest film to date, and also the best film of its director, J. Elder Willis, formerly an art-director who graduated to directing B's for Ealing Studios. Perhaps because of his background, his sets (particularly in "The Secret of the Loch") and his montages (particularly in the opening reel here) often remained more interesting than his dramatization. "Song of Freedom" is a curious musical melodrama, set against a not too convincingly evoked background of the British depression years, with most of the action taking place in Africa. Lived in footmen in a London hotel is not a very convincing touch, but then neither is the witch-doctor dominated island off the African coast. Since it is depicted as a well-known island, the British should have dispatched to the missionary or a gunboat to remedy the situation in one way or another! However, it's an interesting film, and happily an excellent and complete print, an aspect that does much to excuse the rather ill-matched combination of location footage with studio sets, and too obvious back projection. Robeson (who did "Show Boat" in Hollywood the same year) has some excellent songs, and one of his stage hits is shown - without such identification of course - as a musicalised "Emperor Jones"! The theme song is also quite impressive, with its usual borrowings of rhythms from both "King Kong" have the (unfortunate from "Rose Marie") Enme Percy, less effective than he can be under a good director (e.g. "Dead of Night") does rather ham it up - but fortunately the part calls for it - while Robeson himself acts almost as well as he sings.

--- W. K. Everson ---

IMPORTANT NOTICE related to next week's program. The print of THE SEAS BELOW that we had been expecting has still not been finished, and we will have to fall back on an earlier work-print. Be warned that viewing it is difficult, and it will be necessary to take a generous amount of patience and entertainment. Pictorial quality is stunning, but it is out of synchronization, and the silent version is printed OVER the dialogue. We'll explain all this in the notes tapes, as this is just to serve notice that this print is recommended ONLY for the most dedicated Ford devotees - although the picture quality is better than it will be on later restored and corrected prints.