The British film of the 30's was especially prolific in star-vehicle comedies, and offered as many different comics, of varying abilities, as Hollywood did Western stars in that same period. Having no real national comedy tradition from the silent period, these talkies drew heavily on styles from the Music Halls and radio, and also on the silent and early talkie traditions from Hollywood. Jack Hulbert, one of the best British comedians (not represented tonight only because his "Bulldog Jack" was shown in toto in a recent series here, and none of his other better films are currently available) recreated the Harold Lloyd formula of comedy plus thrill; George Formby, the babe in the woods, combined ultra innocence with "blue" songs, and was a reincarnation of Harry Langdon; The Crazy Gang, a collection of three comedy duos, was somewhat of an amalgamation of the Marx Brothers and Olsen and Johnson, while the Tom Wallas-Ralph Lynmm-Robertson Have trio specialised in bedroom farce. Many of the transitory and purely regional comedians — Leslie Fuller, Ernie Lottinga, Gene Gerrard — date badly today, their personalities forced, their material thin. Others — like Bobby Howes (father of Sally Ann Howes) — survive rather well as personalities, but seem to be represented only by their weaker pictures.

The compilation, prior to the screening of the feature "Oh Mr. Porter" will include a lengthy climactic excerpt from George Formby's first starring vehicle "No Limit", and representative excerpts from the work of Tom Wallas-Ralph Lynmm-Robertson Have, Lupino Lane, Stanley Lupino (father of Ida Lupino), Jack Buchanan and Flanagan and Allen. Many of these players were the film producers, and theatrical impresarios too, who transferred their London stage successes to the screen. Since several of them were also song and dance men, I have in some cases selected musical rather than comedy sequences in that the essence of their personalities often comes over more rapidly via song and a little patter than through a prolonged comedy bit.

"OH MR. PORTER!" (Gainsborough, 1937) Directed by Marcel Varnel
Original story by Frank Launder; Screenplay by Val Guest, J.O.C. Orton and Marriott Edgar; Camera: Arthur Crabtree; Art Director, Vetchinsky; Music: Louis Levy; 8 reels
With Will Hay, Graham Moffat, Moore Marriott, Dennis Wyndham, Agnes Leuchlan, Percy Walsh, Dave O'Toole, Beatrice Varley.

Will Hay was by far the most popular British screen comedian in the late 30's. Jack Hulbert, the second to "Big Three" made his best films prior to Hay's peak, and George Formby was at his best when the Hay decline set in. (In later years, Hay's health suffered, and attempts to change the format of his films when he switched to Ealing Studios resulted in no format at all, and a weakening of his basic screen character). At his peak, Hay was a phenomenal boxoffice draw. He made only one film a year, and it was a big one, with real production values, a good blending of action and comedy, and top writers and directors. The new Will Hay film was very much an event to look forward to. And, unlike the Marx Brothers and Laurel & Hardy, there were no real anti-Hay factions, no sharp division between those who worshiped him and those who hated him. He never developed into a cult, and his comedy was never analyzed or even regarded as being important enough to warrant analysis, so he never fell into the pitfalls that Chaplin and Jerry Lewis did of trying to live up to what the critics saw in his work. Everybody seemed to like him — or if they didn't, they kept quiet about it.

Thus it is surprising that Gainsborough, which had an effective releasing set-up with 20th Century Fox in this country, and did export some of Jack Hulbert's comedies, never saw fit to send over the best (1936-38) Will Hay vehicles. "Oh Mr. Porter" was never released here, and should be quite a revelation to those of you who know Hay (if at all) through his earliest movies or his last ones, both areas having been represented to some extent on American tv in its earlier days.

Hay sprang from the English music-halls, and his first films had very much that flavor. They had charm and variety (one was a most effective adaptation of Pinero's "The Magistrate") but they failed to develop a screen personality for Hay. He finally found himself,
just as Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy found themselves, through
felicitous teaming. His partners became Graham Moffat, a rotund
"Billy Hunter" of a schoolboy, and Moore Marriott. Marriott was
actually a distinguished-looking middle-aged actor (much later he was
the postman in "Green For Danger") transformed by makeup into a
toothless octogenarian. Spry, cunning and casually corrupt, he was
teamfed with Moffat (a little more honest, a little more innocent, but
heading the same way) as a team within the team. Hay was invariably
an outsider thrown in with them by circumstance; in working with them,
he had to do nothing for them, nothing with them and trying, unsuccessfully,
to convince himself that their schemes are not as foolproof and dishonest
as they seem. While Hay brought much of his music-hall background and
material to these films, he also seemed to draw quite heavily on
certain aspects of American comedy. His basic character was not unlike
that of W.C. Fields - a braggard and a blusterer, he was lazy, opposed
to work, and ever-willing to profit by a dubious scheme if he thinks
he can get away with it. Not as sadistic or as corrupt as Fields, he was
nevertheless more than willing to be ensnared into corruption by
the latter's example (Curiously, he was less sympathetic than
Fields; he never played the family man under pressure, and while
audiences looked forward to Fields' ultimate if undeserved triumphs,
with Hay they looked forward to his ultimate undeserved disasters).
For plot material, Hay fell back to a certain extent on the stories
and mechanical props of Buster Keaton. Hay's "Windbag the Sailor" was
the most open borrowing from "The Navigator". "There's that Fire!
used an ancient fire engine, "Ask a Policeman" a double-decker bus.
Here, as in "The General", it's a venerable locomotive. Named
"Redstone" it is, like "The General", given a rather endearing
personality of its own.

"Oh Mr. Porter" is one of the very best of the Hay films, and the one
most frequently shown by the British Film Institute as being truly
representative. Certainly it illustrates well the welding of British
music-hall humor with the more sophisticated styles of Keaton and
Fields. Another Hay trademark: the genial poking fun at the British
love of antiquity and dislike of change. Although the film was shot
on a dented, half-dismantled Southern Railway near Basingstoke, it
is tactfully supposed to be located in Ireland. Nevertheless, the
operation of Buggleskelly Station is by no means a total exaggeration,
as any of you who have been trapped at rural English stations will
be able to confirm! Incidentally, the Hay-Moffat-Marriott comedies
were unique in never using leading ladies or romantic sub-plots of
any kind. Indeed, heroes of any kind were conspicuous by their
absence. In "Good Morning Boys" Lill Palmer was a vamp-villainess,
and Martita Hunt was used occasionally, as a "novelty" of the Valenti-Brothers; Margaret Dumont. Moffat did
have a girl friend in "Ask a Policeman", but only as a crutch to get
the plot rolling, and incidentally to provide the only mildly "blue"
line I can remember in any Hay comedy. Dialogue as such was never
too important in their films either. Most of them featured at least
one double-talk routine (the
schoolroom "What's a watch?"
routine for example, a parallel to Abbott & Costello's "Who's on
First?") and in "Oh Mr. Porter" there's a dissertation of Summer and
Shandish elements but the payoff is verbal, not visual. This is perhaps
just as well, since the speed of dialogue delivery and the three
contrasting accents (plus the lesser quality of sound obtained in so
many British 16mm prints) often makes it difficult for non-Britons to
grasp all that is being said. Some of the best lines are thrown away
anyway - Marriott is asked if he's related to the equally ancient
postman, and replies "No, but we both go out with the same girl!" But
don't worry if lines like this slip by you, for like all good comedy,
this one doesn't rely on the spoken word. The dialogue is often funny,
although with the static back-and-forth quality of radio or the music
halls, but the emphasis on pure sight-gag humor increases as the film
progresses, coming to a spectacular climax with a haunted mill
episode and a long and zany locomotive chase. The miniatures used in
these sequences are unusually expert, and well intercut with the real
thing. Though Hay often wrote and directed his own films, it is said
though that the best and most thoroughly "British" ones were directed
by foreigners. The Frenchman Marcel Varnel also made "Chandu the
Magician" in Hollywood, directed tonight's film; "Windbag the Sailor"
was directed by the American William Beaudine. Two brief wrap-up
comments: the old Gainsborough trademark is one of the loveliest and
most graceful trademarks used by any company. And the song "Oh Mr.
Porter" (used in the titles) used to be a very popular, light-hearted
British song, now ruined through exploitation in tv commercials!}

-William K. Everson-