British sight-gag comedy of the thirties and forties is an incredibly rich field, drawing on both the silent American comedy and the British music hall for its inspiration and material. In the past we have done quite extensive notes to cover earlier showings of films by Will Hay, George Formby and another major comedian, Jack Hulbert, so rather than attempt to compress the essence of these earlier notes into a reshake here, I'll leave much of the background comment to the introductory talk. Suffice to say here that Will Hay and George Formby were both tremendously popular comics in Britain, and Formby was for a time Britain's biggest boxoffice star, even topping Hollywood's best. Their dialects and their use of fast verbal humor did however restrict their popularity very considerably in America, and almost none of their films saw U.S. release until they were included in much later tv packages.


Formby, very loosely a British parallel to Harry Langdon, was, like his father before him, a product of the North country music halls. His Lancashire accent, which helped to disguise some of the outrageous double entendre gags in his songs also made it very difficult for him to be understood out of Britain, and few of his films were exported except to Canada, where they were very popular. Also, ARP, the forerunner of Ealing Studios, was a less polished outfit in the 30's, and production values and sound recording were often not of the best. However, "It's in the Air" was released in the U.S. shortly after the outbreak of war. Although the times were black and it was a little clash of cultures, that prompted its release, it was a surprising success (under the title "George Takes The Air"), got good reviews, and found Formby being hailed as a fine "new" comic. However, there was no follow-up, and Formby remains largely unknown here. At that time, "It's in the Air" was easily Formby's biggest and best - and while, depending on personal taste, some of his later ones were better, it still stands up as almost the definitive Formby, with a neat mixture of slapstick, thrills, songs and comedy. All that is really missing from the standard Formby formula here is his (again, Langdon-like) innocent encounter with aggressive sex in the popular nature. It was rather well-oiled, almost awkward and humdrum done by other comedians in World War Two, but they still amuse, and the stunt flying sequences - a mixture of the real thing and polished special effects - are unusually slick for a British film of that type and of that period. Quite incidentally, the opening scenes of air raid precautions include a couple of stock shots lifted from "Things to Come"; it's ironic to think that the prophecies of that film came true so quickly that within three years it could be supplying stock footage! --- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

THE GOOSE STEPS OUT (Ealing Studios, 1942) Directed by Will Hay & Basil Dearden; Produced by Michael Balcon; screenplay by Angus MacPhail and Reg Dichton from an idea by Bernard Miles and Reg Groves; camera, Ernest Palmer; music, Britton Byrd; special effects, Roy Kelino; Art Director, Tom Morahan; 8 hrs With Will Hay, Anne Firth, Charles Hawtrey, Raymond Lovell, Peter Ustinov, Barry Morse, Frank Pettingell, Peter Croft, Leslie Harcourt, Jeremy Hawk, Aubrey Mallalieu, John Williams.

Hay's best work had been done in the thirties at Gaumont-British, and he replaced Formby at Ealing when Formby moved to Columbia. Already a sick man, Hay died after only one more film. At the time Hay fanzies felt that it was one of his lesser efforts, but it was a huge morale booster, not least because it attacked Hitler and Nazism on pure slapstick terms, often of a healthily incendiary nature. It was rather well-oiled, there was of this type being made then that while it was funny, it lacked novelty; now it seems to have a freshness denied it at the time, as well as the fun of seeing such current respected names as Peter Ustinov, Barry Morse and John Williams at the beginning of their careers. (That "Carry On" perennial Charles Hawtrey is also quite delightful as one of the Hitler Youth!) Hay, overlapping into both W.O.Fields and Buster Keaton territory despite much original material of his own, must be unique in being the only comic to achieve such great popularity with a broad nature. It was rather well-oiled, a cheese gag, and totally without sentimentality or pathos in that he was never involved with either girlish friends or nagging wives. At most, he occasionally tilted with Martita Hunt as his own parallel to Margaret Dumont. Hay's old schoolmaster sketches are here also revised and updated, and though some of the double-talk routines, similar to Abbott & Costello's "Who's on first?" classic, do depart a little on a familiarity with the idiocies of the English language (one routine revolves around pronunciation, the other around manipulation of the abbreviations of names of English counties) they still amuse, and have some quite raucous innuendoes. Hay's only real drawback, based on radio and music hall backgrounds was his tendency to constant talk - even through sight-gag sequences that were playing well on their own - but this failing is far less in evidence in this film than in, say, "Old Bones of the Whitehall". Wm.K.Everson.