

A short biography of the extraordinary musical life of Thomas Giles, 1930's Legendary S.A. Cornet Soloist

Ray Hawkshaw

Anyone familiar with pre-second world war Salvation Army bands, either by age or having a nostalgic enthusiasm for the old Regal/ Zonophone 78rpm recordings of such, will immediately identify the name of Thomas (Tom) Giles with virtuosic cornet playing.

While most early and legendary stalwarts of the Salvation Army brass band world have long since gone to their reward, Tom Giles has resurfaced after nearly sixty years of obscurity apropos of Army banding. Nonetheless, after several whirlwind years of matchless supremacy as a gifted cornetist, fortuitously halted by World War 2, Thomas's flair with matters musical has since explored equally intriguing and eventful avenues of elitism. With a little help from its friends, LINK was able to track down the 87-year-old former superstar, now living in Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex, and record his story.

REVIVAL

Two years after he was born in Farcet near Peterborough in 1911, Thomas's family moved to Rushden, Northants. He started playing at the age of five, taught by his father. Harry Giles had been bandmaster for 20 years at Farcet and the family arrived at their new corps to find it in a very poor state. Nevertheless, supported by his wife, four boys and four girls, all of whom had musical talent, he revived the spirit of the corps. "My father was very spiritual and he could make Army music speak of God", says Thomas.

TENDER AGE

At a still tender age Thomas's potential was quickly apparent and he travelled around with his father, an SA Divisional Bandmaster, playing solos. At 11 years of age Thomas auditioned for the 2LO BBC radio station. "I was received by Donald McCulloch ('Uncle Mac') and had to stand on a box to play D'Ye ken John Peel for which I was paid £5", Thomas recalls.

CRYSTAL SET

Later, at 14, young Tom had a further successful audition at Savoy Hill's 2LO station followed by a broadcast the same day. Again under the supervision of Uncle Mac, he stood on a stool to reach the hanging microphone and rendered an air varie on Annie Laurie. For this he received £2 plus travelling expenses and his proud parents listened eagerly to the broadcast by means of the 'cat's whisker' device on their early 'crystal set' receiver. Young Giles's talent developed in leaps and bounds during his teenage years, being regularly sought after as a soloist at divisional musical festivals and the like. He often accompanied bandmaster George Marshall on weekend 'specialling', which was a spirit-lifting experience to the young bands-man. Tom also has treasured memories of special Councils with Staff Captain Wilfred Kitching and remembers being with him at the piano when the noted musician played for him the

introduction to what became the General-to-be's prize-winning band selection, My Jesus.

OUCH!

Even so, any sign of Tommy Giles's head becoming as broad as his repertoire was promptly dismissed by his adored and revered father. Tom hasn't forgotten the severe rebuke he received when, at a musical event he attended with his dad, he suggested that he could have done better than another soloist's performance. "Let others be the judge as to whether you play the better part, my lad, not you!", was the still smarting put-down from Giles senior.

At 17½ Thomas became cornet soloist of the International Staff Band under LtCol. George Fuller where, on his arrival at Army HQ, Thomas's most unforgettable memory is of General Edward Higgins placing his hands on the lad's head in a warm greeting. Almost immediately he was asked to play some new cornet solos awaiting approval by the International Music Board before publication, including Erik Leidzen's Tucker and A Happy Day. In the meantime Thomas was also welcomed as a soldier and as 'top man' in the Upper Norwood Crystal Palace Band.

Of his debut as the ISB's cornet soloist, Salvation Army writer Brindley Boon records that Thomas "instantly made his mark as a gifted cornettist, becoming the idol of every young potential soloist on that instrument". Another writer reporting on Thomas's first London weekend at Regent Hall was even more effusive, stating: "This spectacular first appearance received tumultuous applause; the large discerning crowd immediately taking the unknown recruit to its heart".

FINEST BAND

Tom Giles still maintains today that the ISB was then the finest band in the world, firstly for its dignified presentation of evangelism and secondly for its astute presentation of Army music.

"I didn't mind where I sat" says Tom, "and made it plain by choosing fifth down on the cornet bench; the line-up above me being Col. Edgar Dibden, S/Capt. William Stewart, Adj. Walter Ward and B/m George Reid". Notwithstanding, Thomas had been brought in for a purpose and on his first weekend away with the ISB at Folkestone he played three solos.

"The band was 36 strong and all were officers except for three of us - with few outstanding instrumentalists - but what a wealth of evangelistic capabilities these officers had", says Tom. "From the beginning of September to the end of April, the band went every other weekend to large and small corps throughout the UK". "And make no mistake about it", he continues, "the preacher was always chosen from within the band to suit the occasion. Time after time before crowds of one to two thousand, men such as Colonel Reginald Bovon, Colonel Ernest Wellman, Brigadier Arthur Best, Colonel Edgar Dibden and Major James Upperton not only saw the results in their listeners' responses, but also rained spiritual stimulation on every man in the band".

Shortly after Tom joined the ISB cornet bench, the line-up changed to Ward, Giles, Lyndon and Reid and so remained until Tom left in 1935. His service in the band was exhilarating and happy, largely because of the outstanding comradeship and, in particular, the lack of all selfishness in Adjutant Ward. "He was my inspiration, protecting me from all asides in the early stages of my new vocation", avows Tom.

HECTIC

From then on life was hectic for young Tom for as well as working in the Army's Reliance Bank during his four years with the ISB and later with Harrod's Diplomatic Service, he travelled to Holland, Sweden, the USA and Canada (spending three months touring in the last two countries), as well as engagements throughout the UK. In the USA Erik Leidzen attended three concerts in one week to hear Thomas play Tucker and told him he 'had America at his feet'. He also made innumerable radio broadcasts and many recordings.

HUMILITY

Today there is no doubt in Thomas's mind that his four-year spell with the ISB was the most wonderful spiritual experience of his whole life. "It taught me humility in the sight of God", he says, "and memories of divine guidance and personal decisions, made after consultations with certain members, all helped my inexperienced religious aspects of life to mature and, by the help of God, to form a more conscious decision to do that which was right in his sight".

LRAM

For about two years Thomas received instruction in triple tonguing, double tonguing and tone production from bandmaster Frank Ireson of Wellingborough corps, a noted exponent. At 18½, whilst playing with the ISB, he passed his LRAM in cornet/trumpet playing; prob-ably the first in the SA to do so. B/m George Reid was his accompanist in the practical and Dr. Greenish, Principal Tutor of Harmony, examined him on theory and aural.

A BENEDICTION

The Staff Band was always present at Bandmasters' and other important Councils held at the Crystal Palace and the Albert Hall, where Thomas regularly featured the popular solos Tucker, Happy Day and Silver Threads. Thomas also recalls accompanying such as Commissioners Charles H. Jeffries and Charles T. Rich when they led these events, not only in London, but also in Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow. "What a bene-diction to me those events were" claims Tom. "There were always around 1,000 bandsmen at each venue for the weekend. I wish it could be done now!", he says nostalgically.

On these occasions Thomas would often play three solos; say, two air varies and a slow melody; and here Tom makes the point that in those days encores were strictly not allowed. However on one such occasion at Manchester with Nelson band, when the applause was almost ceaseless, Commissioner Rich relented and in an aside to the star soloist he whispered, "Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal". "And

incidentally," Thomas points out, "the Spirit of God was so present on this occasion, that the Council's Saturday evening festival closed with an intense prayer meeting".

RECORD SALES

One summer when the ISB was resting Commissioner Jolliffe requested that Thomas should make some recordings to advertise the 'Bandmaster' cornet, the Army's own make, and he even presented Tom with one. Then, much to the chagrin of the ISB, Jolliffe ordered the SP&S band to accompany the soloist. Thus under the direction of Eric Ball was the first recording of Tucker made, eventually breaking all previous record sales. Thomas recalls Charles Waters of Callenders Cable Band describing it as an 'etude'; complimentary messages from him and entreaties from other top 'outside' conductors following in its wake.

Not least among these admirers was the renowned trumpeter/cornettist Harry Mortimer with whom Thomas later had the opportunity of playing a duet, thus breaking SA regulations and being disciplined by the Army for doing so!. Then, the Army had very strict rules and regulations. "In those days I thought them very narrow," Tom says, "but now, in the 'nineties, I see much wisdom in them." "Nevertheless, in those days", he continues, "I revelled in my association with so many gifted and talented musicians, considering ourselves privileged to share in our enthusiasm to be the very best, not merely for ourselves, but for God in whom we believed".

MARKETING

During October 1933 Thomas found himself packed into a taxi with Comm. George J. Jolliffe, Cols. F. L. Hawkes and John F. Lewis and Capt. Eric Ball, all bound for Columbia Studios in Maida Vale to record Happy Day and Strong to Deliver. On the way Col. Hawkes said he would like Thomas to play the slow melody Consolation on one of the records. Thomas's answer to this was that he thought the piece more suitable for trombone and Eric Ball concurred that it was more for the tenor voice. "Well -- we shall see", interjected Comm. Jolliffe. And thus - in a London taxi - was the power of the Army's marketing force of the day brought to bear on Tom Giles and on the sales of its products.

Interestingly, recording started at Maida Vale at 2pm and by 4.30pm all that had been accomplished was a large wastage of wax, much to the annoyance of the engineers. To the relief of the soloist it was decided to call it a day. Apparently the problem lay largely with the unnamed pianist's unsatisfactory accompaniment towards the climax of Happy Day, where the right hand goes one way and the left hand the other. Work started again next day at 9am, this time with Phil. Catelinet at the keyboard. By 10am Happy Day, Strong to Deliver and Consolation were all recorded and Thomas had the rest of the day off. Listeners to these recordings today would need to allow for the style-cramping restrictions imposed upon yesterday's soloists and recording musicians generally. Richard Martin and the Enfield Band, for instance, took some nine minutes to produce Tucker for a long-play recording, whereas Thomas only had about six minutes to fill both sides of a 78rpm disc. This meant that Eric Ball's SP&S Band had to speed up the introduction and bridge passages, etc., while Thomas had to cut down on his cadenzas. Nor would Tom be

able to hold the reins on the tacet pauses before going for the high notes; time and wax being at a premium.

HEAD-HUNTING

During the winter-time when the Staff Band was very active it visited many well-known areas of the secular brass-banding world. Invited guests on such occasions included Mr. Halliwell of Besses-o-the-Barn, Charles Waters of Calendar's Cable and Arthur Pearce of Black Dyke Mills. Another admirer of Tom was the great man-o-brass himself, Harry Mortimer. Not surprisingly therefore, as a result of Thomas's artistry, invitations to become principal cornet of these and several other contesting bands followed, but Tom remained faithful. "It was the influence of comrades in the Staff Band and my belief in my calling that enabled me to resist these offers at that time", Tom maintains.

By the late 'thirties Thomas had become bandmaster at Upper Norwood. He also ran his own 'College' for about 20 students including the renowned players of yesteryear; Harry Dilley and William Overton.

DUTCH TOUR

It was inevitable that Tom Giles's fame should spread abroad and among his foreign tours was one of seven days in Holland. The ISB agreed to release him provided he was back in time to play Happy Day during their broadcast from Bath Spa Hall.

Major Claijs, MA, a very fine pianist, accompanied the tour during which our indefatigable cornettist delivered 30 solos; he also had to speak at each festival, the Major translating for him. The touring pair had also to deal with 'continental pitch', but according to Thomas, Major Claijs's abilities in transposing knew no bounds.

The smaller Dutch corps hired local, larger churches to accommodate the crowds wishing to hear the famed artist from England. Because applause was not allowed in such hallowed buildings, an audience would stand en masse to demonstrate their silent appreciation and remain thus for what seemed an age. For Tom it became embarrassing, as no one seemed to know who should make the next move.

Major Claijs wanted to make the trip an annual event but, not surprisingly, the International Staff Band drew the line at that. Nevertheless, The Conservatoire of Music sent Tom a fine letter of appraisal.

ENCORES

Thomas also toured Sweden as soloist with the Elite British Territorial Band, with Col. Fuller as conductor and Brig. James Sansom as leader. In 12 of the 14 musical festivals given, Tom played solos, mostly in the leading corps buildings. Others took place in cathedrals and churches where again no clapping was allowed; instead there would be the same lengthy and uncomfortable periods with the silent capacity audience on its feet and Col. George Fuller prompting the soloist to continue bowing. Two years later Thomas made the same trip with Tottenham Citadel under B/m Arthur Dry - who actually allowed encores - but which Tom always acknowledged with a devotional style slow melody.

Thomas recalls the years 1930-38 when there were three Headquarters bands: the ISB under Col. Fuller, SP&S under Eric Ball and Men's Social HQ under Col. Goldsmith; a healthy, heart-warming degree of competition always existing between them. Every three months a united festival took place at Clapton Congress Hall, always before a capacity crowd. The excitement generated by the 120 brass players' performance would serve to enthuse the listeners next day as they evangelised in their local districts, determined to improve their own standards of technique, declaring that "only the best will do!".

"And speaking of bands evangelising", says Thomas, "When I specialised with Coventry band, as I often did, there were always up to 2,000 people waiting to hear their Sunday evening open-air meeting". Similarly, but perhaps to a lesser degree, Thomas found it was the same when he attended weekends at other corps, such as Kettering, Sheffield Citadel, Birmingham Sparkhill and Chalk Farm corps.

On this same subject, Thomas still maintains that the growth of the "magnificent SA" is still through its musicians making themselves heard down Sunday city streets; a respected, though likely to be rejected, opinion by today's bandsmen. Many such have long since abandoned their regular Sunday stands to the impinging 20th century traffic explosion, where even the modern 'spoilt for choice' Joe Public apparently has better things to do these days than stand and listen to a Salvation Army brass band; even a very good one.

PERFECT BLISS

In August, 1936, Thomas was married to Margaret Haines, daughter of Comm. and Mrs. Haines. Comm. Henry W. Mapp presided; Major Walter Ward was Best Man and Bandmaster George Reid was the organist. The happy couple enjoyed 54 years of "glorious marriage and perfect bliss" together before Margaret passed away in October, 1990. "And I am still praying", says Thomas, "for the full meaning of Comm. Rich's remark that 'Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal'." Their son, Paul Anthony, is an international lawyer in a senior government finance position in Singapore.

In 1934 Thomas left the ISB, but before branching out into his own business he took up an invitation to tour Canada and the United States, spending six weeks in each country. James MacFarlane of Earls Court Citadel sponsored the visit and Colonel Albert Dalziel accompanied as Officer-in-Charge in Canada, replaced in the U.S. by Colonel John J. Allan (later Chief of Staff).

LASTING TRIBUTE

Major (General-to-be) Clarence Wiseman was the corps officer at Montreal Citadel from where Thomas broadcast varied solos for 20 minutes each Sunday. One of these was a slow melody accompanied by bandmaster Norman Audoire and a lasting tribute to this was from a listener who told Thomas he was so moved as to seriously meditate upon his shortcomings. For years the suppliant reassured Tom of his continuance in the faith through the many Christmas cards he sent Thomas thereafter.

Thomas was also to attend many musical festivals at several other Canadian corps, always contributing three or four solos. While in Toronto Commissioner McIntyre arranged with James MacFarlane for Thomas to play during an orchestral concert in the cavernous Carnegie Hall and the echo of Trumpet Voluntary, Handel's Largo and Angels Guard Thee, with orchestral and electric organ accompaniments, still lingers in the soloist's memory. Before Thomas left for Buffalo, America, MacFarlane told him he had played 119 solos in all.

EXHAUSTING

Though Tom's stay in New York was tremendously exciting, it was also very exhausting. Here he met General Evangeline Booth. Festivals were arranged at the Temple on the first Monday, Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday, at each of which the General insisted that the soloist be drenched by red spotlights as he rendered the 'Send the Fire' theme in Tucker.

Comm. McIntyre was a tremendous source of inspiration to Thomas and whenever he was presiding at a festival featuring the soloist, he would invariably introduce him by stating that "Gabriel has nothing on this boy", to the delight and great amusement of the audience. The Commissioner also encouraged him to play music which wouldn't have been allowed back home, such as the Trumpet Voluntary by J. Clarke and Trumpet Concerto, composed by Erik Leidzen and Paul Whiteman, the well-known swing band leader.

LOOMING WAR

However the highlight for Tom Giles was when Tucker composer Erik Leidzen turned up to hear him play. This, claims Tom, seemed to prove to be the balm that was needed for improving a hitherto strained relationship between the Army and Leidzen at that time. The Scandinavian maestro became sufficiently relaxed by not only accompanying Tom many times during his visit, but also by composing an etude for him. It was this same slow melody that Tom, at the instigation of Comm. McIntyre, was to play before the Principal of the Chicago Conservatoire. This resulted later in an invitation for Tom to take up an appointment as Principal of Trumpet but he had to decline, for World War 2 was looming and he wanted to complete his LRAM Diploma studies. Thomas recalls never having enjoyed a full 'free' day, but says there was hardly a dull moment either and still proudly treasures written appreciations from the Canadian and American tour organisers claiming them a great inspirational and financial success.

Back in the UK Thomas resumed duties as bandmaster at Upper Norwood and though his talent was also often requested by the BBC and BBC Empire Service, recordings at the latter being often at 3am, his corps duties never suffered. The band, 50 strong, were all loyal and intelligent men who put in much service at home as well as regularly visiting other corps.

ON THE CARPET

Not surprisingly, Thomas's talent led him into many clashes with Army hierarchy, but he was not alone in this. After being threatened with dismissal for playing duets with Harry Mortimer, he sought an interview with General Evangeline Booth, along

with bandmaster Bill Major of Coventry I Band who wanted to play his own unpublished composition (a march, Three Spires); bandmaster Albert Munn of Kettering, in trouble over 'certain' regulations, and bandmaster George Reid of Wood Green in bother over bandsmen's uniforms. British Commissioner Charles T. Rich was also summoned to be present.

"Looking back, I must say that the General gave as good as she received", recalls Tom. As regards his own particular argument, she said: "If everyone would relate to their orchestras, or, like you, to your Wireless Military Band only, all well and good, but would you then play in a cheap theatre orchestra or non-temperance brass band?" "For myself", says Tom, "I have to say I most certainly would not have."

NO TROUBLE!

As for my friend Harry Mortimer and our playing together, the General went on to say: "As long as he comes into your hall with your band - no trouble!". I felt that this was only right. Of course, I had been with her in New York, where she knew very well that I had played Colonel Bogey on the march with the New York Staff Band.

One of the bandmasters was seeking mercy on two of his bandsmen suspended after being seen watching a football match from over a fence when they should have been at the Army. Many years later, especially on Sundays when Captain of his local golf club, Thomas often had cause to think over General Evangeline's philosophy regarding the cause of bandsmen's sporting activities. "Do exercise and sports that do not interfere both in time and place with your religious callings", she admonished.

Finally, speaking for the other petitioners, everyone came away persuaded not to make mountains out of molehills, but to go and get on with the job in hand with even more enthusiasm than in the past. "As for myself," says Tom, "though perhaps differing in detail, I agreed with the General in principle, and she knew she was preaching to the converted."

PERSPECTIVE

Despite the tug-o-war twixt secular and sacred pursuits, Thomas pays tribute to the Secretary for Bands, Major Charles Durman, for his nurturing and guidance of the Army's talented music leaders. In particular he commends Adjutant (later Commissioner) Edgar Grinsted, commanding officer at Regent Hall, who regularly arranged get-togethers with small and the larger bands of the London Division, keeping everybody so busy that they hardly had time to transgress. Adjutant Grinsted, himself a fine pianist, was influential in helping young Tom make the right decisions and keep a balanced perspective on his vocation. "I can't begin to describe the wonderful brotherhood existing among Salvationist bandsmen in those days", claims Tom. "We all shared in each other's successes and failures."

GOODBYE

In time, however, many of Tom Giles's associations with non-Army musicians were being crammed into the slots between the like demands of his Army banding, even to making recordings over Sunday lunch, for instance. Gradually, the encroachment on his SA duties reached the inevitable. During one Sunday lunch-time gathering at

Upper Norwood, Tom played his last solo (Long, Long Ago) with the Salvation Army. After saying his goodbyes Tom left to take up an appointment with Walton O'Donnell and the BBC Wireless Military Band at De La Warr Studios, Maida Vale.

During the Second World War Thomas saw operational service in RAF Bomber Command. Following this he curtailed his playing career to spend more time with his family and concentrated on his own successful piano manufacturing business, encouraged by a close business contact and friend, Sir Isaac Wolfson, founder of Great Universal Stores (GUS). Thomas recalls being invited by Sir Isaac to go along and listen to a brass band he'd "just bought along with the Munn & Felton factory". Sir Isaac little realised that the band's conductor, Stanley Boddington, had often practiced together with Thomas in each other's boyhood home!

CONSTANT DEMAND

Thomas sold his business in 1980 and having conducted for the London Choral Society after the war until about 1983 his over-riding interest was now in opera. He has since been in constant demand as a repetiteur, working with leading producers across Europe and preparing and conducting rehearsals for renowned maestros such as Ricardo Muti and Claudio Abbado. "Working with such artists is, for me, almost like being at university", says Tom, and he studies the operas for hours, especially those of his favourites, Wagner and Verdi. "But I tend to get on to the brass a bit if they don't play with feeling!", he admits.

Thomas refers frequently to the spiritual influence that Army musicians brought to bear on his life as a young Salvationist and still covets young people's music sections as the basic growing point of the Army. It is not surprising, therefore, that fruit of his adolescent nurturing was to be borne out years later when he was numbered among those influential in persuading past-Home Secretary Douglas Hurd that religious education in schools should be compulsory and not the prerogative of head-teachers. Indeed, Thomas recommends that today's Army officers should voluntarily seek to conduct such lessons, seizing the opportunity to invite children to join our Sunday schools and their musical sections and to visit the homes of those showing an interest.

A Freeman of the City of London and former Principal of London Rotary, Thomas now lives in Bexhill-on-Sea, but this legendery octogenarian, thrice a grandad, has had little time to stroll along the promenade. This time last year he was preparing to conduct the Bavarian Opera Company in Munich and was discussing further work with a Company in Milan. In February of this year Thomas was organising a concert in Bexhill for Cancer Research and when Sussex Radio advertised it they broadcast his recordings of Tucker and Happy Day.

Around the time of communicating with him to finalise this biography Thomas had already taken up a six-month's contract offered to him by Claudio Abbado. Unfortunately, after nicely settling in and getting to grips with the Munich based orchestra and chorus, Thomas suffered a slight seizure. Despite a quick recovery he knew he couldn't risk attempting to carry on only to let his eminent employer down at a later - and probably more critical - stage, and he therefore resigned immediately. As we go to press Thomas is busy assisting producers at the Royal Opera House, London.