

Trying to pay a tax superintendent under the table

When the song "*In Convoy*" on the "*Essays*" - CD was to be recorded, the producer was looking for "a guy who can play the concertina" to lend the proper sailor sound to the Evert Taube-inspired song. Since Ben moves in circles largely inhabited by musical "guys", he could in fact find one quickly. But it wasn't just any old guy; this one was Arne Palm, the newly retired tax superintendent of Halland.

Arne and Ben meet now and then for good jam sessions with harp and concertina ... or with "guitar and concertina", as Fröding would have said. Arne, who's a very good friend of Ben's, was soon contacted, and as soon as he heard the request, he answered "Yes!".

He drove up in a raging snowstorm from his farm in Österlen to Varberg, where the recording was to be done. Arne did a great job, and put a golden glow into the song with his old concertina, which, though now held together with tape and band aids, had been his faithful companion since he was a kid.

When Arne had made his contribution to the sailor song, he had to hurry back to Österlen again. This was because he didn't want to get stuck in the snowdrifts that tend to build up in the southern part of Sweden when the north winds spit their small, troublesome flakes over the flat expanses.

Ben accompanied Arne out to his car to continue a short debriefing in the spirit of friendship. Suddenly Ben remembered his duty, and asked his friend how he would like to be paid for his playing.

"Ahem! Usually when someone does a quick playing job like this, we stick a thousand kronor in his fist and that's the end of it ... ", said Ben nervously.

"Out of the question," Arne interjected with a stern expression on his face, "you ought to know better than that, young man!"

He continued quickly, "And don't come dragging a bunch of money and payments, because then everything disappears in taxes. If you absolutely must repay me, my good friend, then you can stick to the spirit of the Taube-inspired song, and smuggle us a bottle of Calvados!" And the tax superintendent rolled up his car window and skidded off toward Österlen.

Voodoo eyes

No sooner said than done. On his next trip abroad, Ben bought a bottle of Calvados, and five months later he and Arne enjoyed it together in the dazzling springtime near the apple orchards in beautiful Österlen. As Arne and Ben sat and sipped their drinks, Arne talked nostalgically about his good colleagues at the Swedish version of the IRS.

Arne is very interested in art, and his whole home (and certainly his former office) is (or was) like a modest art exhibition. He related that just above his head in his office he had hung a piece of African art that depicted a large, dark, over-dimensioned human face. Arne had noticed early on that visitors' gazes were drawn first by the tax superintendent's face and then by the African face, in some kind of compliant, nervous reflection. When he noticed this, an idea came to the creative art lover. One dark night he mounted a pair of red lights in the eyes of the dark face, and pulled a well-hidden wire down to a switch near his foot under the desk. After that, when visitors talked about their tax doings, the eyeballs blinked red now and then. The tale of the blinking eyes spread around the tax offices and around Halland, and one day a visitor asked him why they blinked.

The authoritative tax superintendent put on his most peremptory look and explained matter-of-factly, "Every time the eyeballs of my voodoo face light up, no one is going to claim that you're lying ... but there's a pretty good likelihood that you are."

That's the proper attitude for a guardian of tax morale with a realistic view of his duty.

Ben Olander



*Arne in action during recordings
in Larnemos comfortable studio.*