

*‘Champagne Charlie is my name’:
The swell, the Irish and the cockney*

From the music-halls come the melodies that fill the public mind; from the music-hall come the catch-words that fill the public mouth. But for the fecundity of the music-hall, how barren would be the land, how void the chit-chat of the drawing rooms, the parlours, the sculleries.

George Gamble, *The Halls*, 1899

MUSIC HALL WAS a product of a modernising country, evermore urbanised, evermore commercially-oriented. It also provided an opportunity to comment on, and even shape, the broader context in which it developed through the songs, which were to be heard in the music halls and singing saloons, and which spilled out onto the streets and lanes of the country. Songwriters and publishers churned out thousands of songs, a few of which, such as ‘My Old Man (Said Follow the Van)’ or ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’ have survived ‘the test of time’ and are reprinted and replayed whenever music hall is recreated. The majority have sunk into (often well-deserved) obscurity but still survive and are readily available via the internet. Many are banal in musical terms, but in historical terms, there is merit in mediocrity.

With the ever-pressing need for novelty, the demand from performers and their agents was considerable. It was met by a multitude of songwriters, many struggling to make their way and offering a song or two to established singers, for coppers. A few became more established in the trade. Prolific songwriters,

such as Joseph Tabrar, Felix McGlennon and G W Hunt claimed to have written songs by the hundreds, even thousands.¹ In addition, McGlennon had 'a circle of contributors' from whom he bought songs 'by the dozen', before revising and recycling some and rejecting others. All three men, and doubtless many other lesser known songwriters, were unashamedly concerned with making money. McGlennon saw 'the ultimate object of a song' to be getting 'published ... [and then] on to the street organ.' He went to the music hall 'to instruct myself as to the class of things that is pleasing the public ... And they like simple pathos and homely humour – something to do with the wife and mother-in-law, and so on.' The key figures 'were not the kid-gloved critics in the stalls, the eminent literary man, who do the trick for you, but the people in the pit and the gallery, who are not afraid to shout their approval or disapproval.' A successful song combined 'simple language' and particularly 'catchiness ... [for which] I will sacrifice everything – rhyme, reason, sentiment.' And, if in the eyes of critics, his output was rubbish, it was 'exactly the sort of rubbish I am encouraged by the public to write.' He took pride in his skills. There was 'great art in making rubbish acceptable.' Hunt was equally hard-nosed in his approach, as was Tabrar, who reduced popular song writing to the following formula: 'Think of a catchy refrain. Think of the d---d silliest words that will rhyme anyhow. Think of a melody and there you are.' Catchy tunes and easily learned choruses were ubiquitous; popular rhythms, especially waltzes and polkas, but also marches, were utilized; the melodic range was modest, a recognition of the limited talents of performers as well as audiences; and the music was kept relatively simple with predictable harmonies and limited use of modulation.²

Two observations need to be made about the limitations of printed source material, particularly song lyrics. A perusal of the pages of *Era* or the *Music Hall and Theatre Review* soon reveals often well-received songs that were not published, presumably because they were deemed to be unsuitable for the overwhelmingly middle-class sheet-music buying public, willing to spend 2s or 3s for a song to play at home. Further, printed sheet music did not necessarily capture the song as sung on stage. Additional material, such as 'encore' verses and

choruses, or deliberate variations for specific audiences, were not always recorded; and the lyrics alone, often themselves ambiguous, cannot capture meaning that was imparted by tone of voice, facial expressions and other gestures, as well as patter, during actual performances. As one of Bessie Bellwood's obituarists summed it up: 'Her songs served only as skeletons, round which, and in the middle of which and, indeed, at both ends of which, she could interpolate her 'patter' and in this 'patter' was the secret of success'.³

Performance was critical. A well-chosen phrase delivered with a particular inflexion of the voice, or with a knowing shrug of the shoulders or a cheeky wink of an eye, not to mention ad-libs and interactions with the audience, all influenced the meaning – both intended and received – of a song or a monologue. 'Knowingness,' being in with the 'in crowd' was always important but increasingly so as attempts were made to make music hall more respectable.⁴ As one frustrated observer noted in the 1880s. 'There was an unwritten language of vulgarity and obscenity known to music-hall audiences, in which vile things can be said that appear perfectly inoffensive in King's English.'⁵ However, given the different elements within any audience, their different experiences and attitudes, there was no guarantee that people would get the same, let alone the 'right' message intended by lyricist or performer.⁶

Early music hall: from 'Sam Hall' to 'Champagne Charlie'

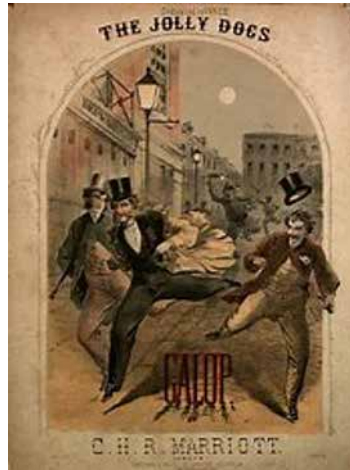
Unsurprisingly, there was a degree of continuity in terms of early music-hall entertainment and older forms. Many of the early performers, notably Sam Cowell and W G Ross, and their songs, such as 'The Ratcatcher's Daughter' and 'Sam Hall', came from the song-and-supper rooms.⁷ Their repertoire drew heavily on the popular music of the early nineteenth century, including long-standing favourites such as 'A Frog He would A-woeing go' and bawdier songs drawn from less-than-reputable collections, such as the *Coal Hole Companion*, *The New Cockalorum Songster* and *Nancy Dawson's Cabinet of Choice Songs*.⁸ *The Sam Cowell Comic Song Book*, which appeared in 1858, contained contemporary material – 'London's Misnomers' and '1858, A New Political Comedy

Song,' alongside older songs such as Burn's 'John Anderson My Jo,' Moore's 'The Minstrel Boy' and Dibdin's 'Tom Bowling.'⁹

Songs, specifically written for the music hall became more common in the 1850s, especially as the celebrity singer emerged. D K Gavan, 'the Galway poet,' wrote the words of 'The Rocky Road to Dublin' for 'Handsome' Harry Clifton, an early music-hall singer, best known for 'Pretty Polly Perkins.' But it was George Leybourne, signed up for the Canterbury Music Hall by William Holland, who was the trend setter. By the mid-1860s Leybourne was one of the leading *Lions comiques*, along with the Great Vance, the Great McDermott, Arthur Lloyd and 'Jolly' John Nash, who cashed in on the craze for "swell" songs.¹⁰ Flamboyant figures with flamboyant songs, they appealed to a large audience in the lower middle and working classes, not just in the capital but also in the provinces.¹¹ Having watched Leybourne perform in Hull, an anonymous correspondent to *Era* praised his 'perfectly natural presentment of a "swell" given to conviviality' while capturing 'the difference between the "swell" and the fast, slangy "gent."¹² In fact, the construction, let alone reception, of the "swell" was more complex.

'Champagne Charlie,' the best-known "swell" song, has an obvious sing-along quality and, at first sight, praises the flamboyant generosity of the hard-drinking, devil-may-care aristocrat. This is reinforced by the image on the cover of the sheet music. In similar vein, Vance's 'Cliquot, Cliquot' centres on the tippie of choice while the lyrics of his 'Slap bang! Here we are again' make clear that he's part of 'a school of jolly dogs' sallying forth at night. 'Follow my leader' cries the chief/Tonight we'll have a lark.' The emphasis on noise and disruption, cocking a snoot at authority and respectability is underlined by the cover for the sheet music of 'Jolly Dogs Galop,' which shows the eponymous 'heroes' being vainly pursued by a policeman

These are songs of liberation, even excess, that harked back to an eighteenth-century Corinthian masculinity.¹³ Songs praising heavy drinking were not new but there was added bite to Leybourne's performances, which at times contained a fair smattering of anti-temperance songs. Likewise the image of the generous "toff" – Whoever drinks at my expense are treated



all the same/From Dukes and Lords, to cabmen down, I make them drink champagne – was well-established. The invitation to join the high life at no cost had a broad, masculine, bachelor appeal. So might the apparent celebration of sex. In an age of innuendo, the very name carried sexual connotations as did the (often unsubtle) flaunting of walking canes, not to mention the symbolism of champagne bottles, with corks popping and floods of liquid. And yet for all that the “swell” mixed with adoring women, his was a strangely asexual life. “The girls on seeing me exclaim, “Oh what a champagne swell”” according to Leybourne, while one of Vance’s heroes asserts ‘all the pretty barmaids at those gay resorts I know/ The little darlings say that I’m a prize they’d like to clutch’ but that is the end of the matter. There was sexual display, primping males showing off their fine feathers, but (at least as far as the lyrics go) little else.¹⁴

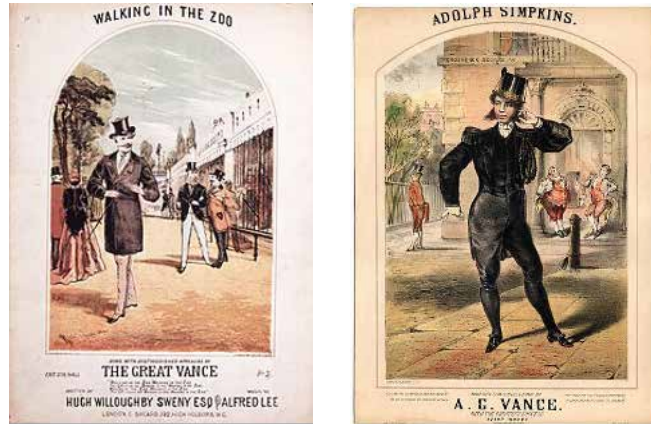
There was also an element of carnival in the depiction of the “swell” that spoke to a desire to be free from the constraints of everyday life, albeit for a day.¹⁵ The extravagant style had an appeal to aspiring young men, not for the last time, with an opportunity to buy ‘trendy’ clothes for the first time.¹⁶ When Arthur Lloyd sang about ‘Immenseikoff (The Shoreditch Toff)’ who played ‘skittles, bowls and other games,’ he was parodying the upper-class “swell” who in Vance’s ‘Slap Bang,’ ‘plays cricket, box and torture cocks,’ but Lloyd also name-checked two firms – ‘For my togs I used to deal with Poole,

but now in these hard times/ I ain't now such a lively fool I
get my things from Lynes/ And 'e gives them to me cheaper
'cos 'E says I shows 'em off/ And certainly I really think that
I'm Immenseikoff.'

There was an element of self-parody, even an awareness of fraudulence, in the depictions of the "swell." Leybourne was well aware of his humble background and the pretence of his new life style with his contractual obligation 'every day, and at all reasonable times and places when required to do so, [to] appear in a carriage, drawn by four horses, driven by two postillions, and attended by his grooms,'¹⁷ His flamboyant stage dress was far from a 'perfectly natural presentment.' Lloyd's outlandish "swell" costumes were self-parodic So too Vance's exaggerated figure in 'Walking in the Zoo,' and 'Adolph Simkins,' which contrasted with the realism in his 'The Ticket of Leave Man' and as the life guard in 'Matilda Baker.'¹⁸

The most powerful parodies, exposing the fraudulence of the "swell" and the frailty of his masculinity, came from male-impersonators, notably Nellie Power, in songs such as 'Such a Mash,' 'The City Toff' and 'Tiddy Fol Lol.' In the latter the 'party I know' has 'ten thousand a year' and 'moustachios down to here.' As well as keeping 'racehorses and hounds ... he drinks champagne at the bar, smokes Intimidad cigars' [while] the duchesses all smile.' The edifice collapse in the final lines. 'But his parents gained renown as a tailor up in town, and his ancient name is Brown, tiddy, fol lol, tiddy fol, lol.'

The significance of certain songs remains elusive. Words alone are a poor indicator of overall performance. The situation is further complicated by the fact that these singers had extensive repertoires – Leybourne was said to have sung over 200 different songs in his career – and a range of characters other than the "swell." In the absence of detailed accounts of audience responses to individual songs, it is difficult to say precisely wherein lay their appeal. Leybourne in particular was well known for his ad-libbing and interaction with the audience. Responses to his concerts, particularly those given in support of a shorter working day (the nine-hour movement), strongly suggest that he spoke to a significant element of working-class society. But the *Lions comiques*, more generally, appealed to a lower-middle class audience, the young clerks



and shop assistants. However, not least for their parodying of the preening male, male-impersonators were well received by women in the audience.

The popularity of the *Lions comiques* sparked a strong reaction among 'respectable' observers, shocked by the vulgarity and inanity of this popular craze. The *Leeds Times* captured the concern. 'Songs destitute of sense, and music of harmony or sweetness, or any other musical quality ... are popular now ... And yet there are fools enough to crowd music-halls to hear the trash!'¹⁹ George Leybourne was singled out for harsh criticism. 'The song ['Who's going out for a spree tonight?'] is the very essence of stupidity and the music – is not music.' Further, 'however well "Champagne Charlie" may take, and we wonder that it does take, there is a limit to human patience to which unconscious lunacy may go.'²⁰ Such condemnation did not dim the appeal of Leybourne and even the critics had to give ground, albeit condemning with faint praise. The *Leeds Times* again: 'We cannot but subscribe to the opinion of most who hear him, that he is one of the foremost in his department of song of the present day.'²¹

Although "swell" singers were still to be found in provincial music halls in the late nineteenth century, the craze had largely ended. Charles Coburn, whose career had started in the 1870s with 'Two Lovely Black Eyes,' had a huge success in the 1890s with 'The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo,' a song that combined celebration of the high life with the 'lottery

optimism' of the 'little man' hoping to strike lucky. The Great Vance was still performing when he appeared at the Sun music hall Knightsbridge on 26 December 1888 – only to die on stage, aged 49. Six years earlier, George Leybourne had died, penniless, at the age of 42. 'Jolly' John Nash and Arthur Lloyd were still alive, but their day had passed. Nonetheless, in his hey-day, the "swell" embodied 'a potent if slippery ideology of pleasure and social identity' which chimed well with the attitudes and aspirations of elements of both lower middle and working-class society in the 1860s and 1870s.²²

Stage Irish and Cockneys

The "swell" was not the only character to grace the music hall stage. Often crudely stereotypical, "Irish" comics, dancers and singers were a staple of the music hall across the country from the earliest days. As with other aspects of music hall, they grew out of earlier musical experiences, but it is important to distinguish between two different audiences: Irish and English.

The Irish communities across the country in the early nineteenth century had their own entertainment, such as the 'Tom and Jerry' clubs in London in the 1830s, which provided an opportunity for working-class Irish men and women to 'spend an evening of drinking beer and singing songs together.'²³ They used their music, their songs, dances and instruments, to retain some link with and memory of 'home,' while protecting their identity as they settled to a new life in an often hostile environment. The great influx of Irish men and women fleeing *An Gorta Mór* (The Great Hunger) in the mid-nineteenth century, reinforced pre-existing immigrant communities, notably in London, Liverpool and Manchester, but created new ones in newer boom towns, such as Middlesbrough and Wolverhampton, where they formed a larger percentage of the population than in the great cities. There was never a homogenous Irish community but there were shared experiences, which created a sense of identity associated with Irish popular culture. Much of this took place informally in pubs and homes, at weddings and wakes. But for generations born in England of Irish parents there was a growing desire to see their experience reflected in wider popular culture.

Irish music, dance tunes perhaps more so than songs, became part of a wider popular culture. At the same, other forms of Irish music, were becoming more popular via the diffusion of the more respectable songs of Thomas Moore, Samuel Lover and later Percy French.²⁴ The expansion of music halls and singing saloons greatly increased the opportunities of Irish popular music not only for the Irish, but also for a larger host audience with different perceptions and priorities. Thus, the stage representations of the Irish served different purposes and their reception varied accordingly.

On the English stage, the Irish were variously stereotyped as argumentative and quarrelsome, jovial, if somewhat simple, loquacious, often incompetent but also sentimental.²⁵ One of the earliest (and most enduring) songs was Clifton's 'Rocky Road to Dublin,' a jaunty slip-jig with a catchy chorus, which combined drinking, fighting and fun as the hero 'danced some hearty jigs' albeit 'down among the pigs.' 'Finnegan's Wake,' a ballad and early music hall song of the 1850s and 1860s, celebrated the excesses of Irish celebrations. In contrast, the sentimental 'The Blind Irish Girl' played on a wider sympathy for the afflicted, whereas 'Kathleen Mavourneen,' written in 1836, before its composer Frederick Crouch emigrated to America, became popular on both sides of the Atlantic with its theme of twin separation from the singer's two loves: a woman and a country.²⁶ In the mid-nineteenth century it was primarily a concert piece but it rapidly gained a wider audience. In similar vein, Pat Rafferty sang of 'Norah: My Village Queen.' The pain of separation was a recurring theme in Irish emigration songs, though the best-known of this genre, 'I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen' was written by the German, Thomas P Westendorf. There was a striking constancy in the imagery in these songs. Hills were always green, mothers, silver-haired and colleens dark-eyed.²⁷ Social and political themes are, unsurprisingly, infrequent. McGlennon's 'Spare the Old Mud Cabin' focuses more on the plight of aged parents who escape eviction thanks to the fortuitous return from sea of their son. Yet this was the same McGlennon who was happy to set to music several of Thomas Davis poems, including 'A Nation Once Again' and West's 'Awake for an American audience. Given the strength of feeling aroused by the so-called Irish Question, it is hardly

surprising that theatre proprietors and managers as well as performers were circumspect. As John McCormack discovered after recording 'God Save Ireland' in 1906, some songs were beyond the pale.²⁸

Certain songs, such as 'The Croppy Boy,' were rarely heard in English music halls, though they featured in the annual concerts of organisations such as the Liverpool Irish Literary Society.²⁹ The significance of other songs was lost on English audiences, for whom 'Shan Van Vocht' was a racehorse, rather than the 'poor old woman.' But there were other venues in which song played an important part. Several melodramas, directly or indirectly, related to the injustices inflicted on the Irish. Auguste Creamer's Celtic comedy drama company offered plays such as *Coercion: or, Eileen Oge, Gallant Tipperary* and *Robert Emmett*. There could be little ambiguity about these plays – 'Bold Robert Emmett, the darling of Ireland' repeatedly laid down his life 'for the Emerald Isle.' Nor any doubt about audience responses. When Creamer's company appeared at the Stockport People's Opera House, for a week in May 1886, presenting *Arrah-na-Pogue*, *Kathleen Mavourneen* and *The Colleen Bawn*. it was the 'stirring and patriotic songs' that were 'received with enthusiasm by the "gods" and "pittites".'³⁰ Such was the concern that *Era* ran a warning piece, 'Dangerous Subjects', which singled out certain plays and songs. '*Arrah-an-Pogue* [was] the most charming and exciting of modern dramas [but] the story was rife with rebellion and patriotism from a particular Celtic point of view.' Worse, 'the song of the play "The Wearing of the Green" ... was the very essence of disaffection.'³¹

For the would-be music hall star, there was a difficult line to tread. Certain performers played safe. Pat Rafferty and Pat Casey combined comic sketches, dancing and a range of 'sentimental and humorous ditties' with no indication of social and political comment.³² Some chose an alternative approach. Pat Rooney, a popular figure, had a repertoire, which included 'I Will Always Speak of Old Ireland with Pride' and 'Ireland Will Once More Arise from the Dust,' the latter being 'sung with immense success at Glasgow's Britannia Music Hall.'³³ Pat Feeney was a highly popular and patriotic singer but also an ardent supporter of Home Rule. His career highlights the complex, seemingly contradictory strategies needed to combine success on stage

with personal political beliefs. Initially described as a comedian, within months he was being praised for his singing (at one point being described as 'the Tipperary Cuckoo,' notwithstanding the fact he was born in Birmingham) but also for his dancing.³⁴ He toured extensively through the country, acquiring the title 'the Shaughraun [wandering minstrel] of the Music Halls.' Early reviews spoke of the 'pleasing variety' of his Irish songs and jigs and the 'rollicking fun' of his 'caricatures of Irish life.'³⁵ What is more, a 'loyalty' song, sung with 'fire and force' was, according to one review of his act at the South London Palace, 'intended to show that no matter what might be said to the contrary, the men of old Ireland are as willing to die for the honour of the British flag as Englishmen, Scotchmen and Welshmen.'³⁶ Another London critic claimed his 'very proper idea' was 'to prove that the men who came over from Ireland have taken no small part in promoting the greatness and glory of old England.'³⁷ As one would-be wit put it, his song 'The rose, the shamrock and the thistle' demonstrated that 'Mr Feeney is not a *Feenyyn*.'³⁸ In fact, this was probably a deliberate ploy, which masked a more complex figure. As an obituarist noted, Feeney 'was the most enthusiastic Home Ruler [who] in the days when Home Rule found more brickbats than sympathy in the music-halls, Pat never missed an opportunity of advocating the claim of his race.'³⁹ He combined 'Hibernian whimsicalities' with 'clever patriotic ditties,' championing 'with "heart and voice" the true sons of Erin.'⁴⁰ Not every performance was well received. Appearing at the Canterbury, London in 1887 he was criticised for performing 'The Dove Will Fight For Freedom,' which was condemned as 'a song of rather objectionable Fenian tendencies' and 'somewhat unsuited to the audience.'⁴¹ Nonetheless, he was generally well received in London and unequivocally so in Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester (all with significant Irish communities) as well as in Dublin, not least because of his ongoing charity work, particularly at times of distress in Ireland.⁴² The popularity of his 'patriotic' songs (and that of other pro-Irish stage productions) in England was problematic to some critics, who resorted to convoluted explanations. Despite the fact that 'The Wearing of the Green' was subversive, *Era* sought to deny the reason for its appeal by claiming that audience members were 'so carried away by the excitement to applaud

the sentiments which under any other circumstance they would have most surely been the first to reprove.⁴³ On other occasions, it was claimed that the audience rose above temptation. ‘The people of London, and we believe of England generally, refused to take any party view ... and obstinately adhered to their original resolution of only being amused.’⁴⁴

Irish performers, including people like Kate Carney and (the early) Bessie Bellwood, remained a key component of music hall entertainment throughout Victoria’s reign and beyond. The enduring popularity of the Irish, comic, singer and dancer was firmly rooted in the appeal of the wit and verbal dexterity of those who had ‘kissed the Blarney stone’ while upbeat, humorous songs, stirring choruses, joyful jigs and driving reels brought considerable enjoyment to audiences across the country. The stage stereotype was part of a more complex relationship between immigrant Irish and the host communities. For English audiences, the music hall Irish confirmed pre-existing stereotypes, emphasising heavy drinking and a fondness for fisticuffs but also a naïve joviality and humour. It contributed in part to anti-Irish prejudice, in which the Irish were less civilized, uncouth ‘others;’ but it also made for a degree of acceptance of the good-natured, good-humoured ‘Paddy.’ There was a greater degree of identification on a key element of stage Irishness – the loss of village life. The sense of a lost rural community was not confined to the Irish. As urbanization proceeded apace, there was a growing divorce from the countryside, which was increasingly romanticized in art and literature as well as in various forms of music.⁴⁵

For the smaller, but growing Irish community, the situation was different. The loquacious, jovial “Paddy” provided a convenient fiction behind which to hide, and a less threatening image to offer to a suspicious host nation. It also provided a degree of reassurance, a reminder of the resilience of those who had been uprooted and moved to a strange and often hostile world. By the end of the nineteenth century, the stereotype of the naïve country bumpkin, somewhat bemused as she or he arrives in Britain from ‘the Emerald Isle,’ was quite different from the lived experience of second and third generation of Irish, growing up in English towns and cities but for whom Home Rule was a crucial question. This was only partially

reflected on stage. This was not to be measured simply in terms of explicitly patriotic songs. Airs that were heard in respectable English drawing rooms had a different meaning to many Irish men and women. "The Minstrel Boy" had been a popular parlour song since the late eighteenth century, but as it made its way into the music halls it became more a song of Irish resistance.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, there remained a nostalgic strand in the construction of the music-hall Irish. For emigrants hoping, however wishfully, to return home, the songs kept alive a memory of the land they had left behind, but it is was a memory that, in its fixity, became increasingly divorced from the real Ireland of the late nineteenth century. It was also a memory that had less relevance to the next generations, the London Irish, the Liverpool Irish and so forth, who had that dual identity to negotiate.⁴⁷

In the summer of 1893, a strange transition took place. Kate Carney, the 'Champion Irish Songstress.' The singer of 'Donegal Ditties' and other patriotic Irish songs appeared on stage at Gatti's, where 'her Irish ditties met with a favourable reception' but later that evening she reappeared as 'Sarah ... with matrimonial intentions [who] prefers to be conveyed to church in "a donkey cart made for two".'⁴⁸ Within months the transition was complete and she was being hailed as 'an excellent exponent of feminine life.'⁴⁹ Her subsequent success as the 'Coster Comedienne' fully justified the switch and highlighted the popularity of the 'cockney,' male and female, who had been a stalwart of music hall from its earliest days. However, the representation of the 'cockney' character evolved significantly over Victoria's reign.⁵⁰ The mid-nineteenth century 'hits,' such as 'The Ratcatcher's Daughter' and 'Vilikins and His Dinah' were essentially parodies that bore little (if any) relationship to the realities of costermonger life. They contrast with the more realistic cockney figures who appeared on the stage in the 1860s, whether Clifton's 'broken hearted milkman'⁵¹ or Vance's 'Ticket of Leave Man,' let alone his 'Chickaleary Cove,' which combined 'cockney' and 'swell.' In the 'cockney' craze of the 1880s and 1890s 'the performer was no longer thought of as playing a role but as *being* the character.'⁵² Female singers, such as Jenny Hill and Bessie Bellwood, as well as the oft-quoted Marie Lloyd, and their male counterparts, Gus Elen,

Alec Hurley and even Albert Chevalier presented themselves and were seen as quintessentially cockney.⁵³ Undoubtedly, appearing to be an authentic cockney (whatever that might mean!) was an important element in their success. Many working-class men and women, across the country, could and did identify with the ‘cockney’ characters, and their predilections and problems, as portrayed on stage. A point to which we will return in the next chapter.

Comic songs and the pleasures of everyday life

Music-hall was about entertainment and escape, however brief, from daily routines and many of the songs were, quite simply, fun. Some were simply nonsensical, such as ‘What Happened to the Manx Cat’s Tail’ and the tongue-twisting ‘She Sells Sea Shells.’ In their different ways, stage aristocrats, cockneys and Irish were often figures of fun, and their songs unashamedly comic. So too were regional variants. In the north east, ‘The Stage-struck Keelman’ and ‘He Wad Be A Noodle’ were hugely successful comic songs for the Newcastle-based, Ned Corvan. Other songs, without denying life’s hardships, were a celebration of life’s little pleasures – from Joe Wilson’s ‘Thor’s Comfort in a Smoke’ via Gus Elen’s ‘Arf a Pint of Ale’ to Harry Champion’s ‘Boiled Beef and Carrots.’⁵⁴ Camaraderie was celebrated ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush,’ with Florrie Forde or at the music-hall with ‘our Bessie’ Bellwood. Dancing was at the heart of Kate Carney’s ‘Our Threepenny Hop’ and Alec Hurley’s ‘Lambeth Walk,’ while the nonsensical exuberance of the chorus of Lottie Collin’s ‘Ta Ra Ra Boom-De-Ay,’ combined with her high kicks and the innuendo of the verses created a nation-wide hit, despite appalling respectable critics for its banality and vulgarity. Innuendo was central to many songs. Kelly Lupino’s ‘Queenie of the Dials’ beseeched passers-by to ‘squeeze me melons’ while Sam Mayo ‘played his concertina’ in several incongruous circumstances. Gesture was also important, as (yet again) Marie Lloyd made clear – ‘Every little movement has a meaning.’ Many there were who would agree with her unsubtle declaration that ‘A Little of What You Fancy, Does You Good.’

The ‘vulgarity ... [and] stupidity’ of these songs did not endear them to advocates of ‘rational recreation,’ who felt

threatened by 'the compilation of drearily comic songsters' and by the fact that the contagion was spreading to the 'sons and daughters of the lower middle classes' who were fascinated by such 'vulgarity' as 'Pop Goes the Weasel,' 'Jump Jim Crow,' 'The Ratcatcher's Daughter,' 'The Chickalea Cove' and 'Tommy Make Room for Your Uncle.'⁵⁵ However, in their very condemnations they highlighted the success, the cross-class appeal of music hall, as well as their failure to restrict the spread of such material.⁵⁶

Comedy could serve other purposes. It might ease pain and sorrow, particularly for the listener; it might point criticism, particularly for the lyricist. Gus Elen's 'If It Wasn't for the 'Ouses In-between' was undoubtedly humorous, from Elen's stage persona and props (watering a carrot in a pot, for example) to witty lyrics – 'Wiv a ladder and some glasses/You could see to 'Ackney Marshes/If it wasn't for the 'ouses in between' or 'And by clinging to the chimbley/You could see across to Wembley/If it wasn't for the 'ouses in between.' And there is something faintly ridiculous about the singer's rustic dreams.



I wears this milkman's nightshirt/ And I sits outside
 all day
 Like the ploughboy cove what's mizzled o'er the Lea
 And when I goes indoors at night/ They dunno
 what I say
 'Cause my language gets as yokel as can be.

But there is also poignancy in the lyrics. The sense of loss and/or ever-present threat is reinforced by references to specific locations. Only the decision of the London County Council to purchase 300 acres of Hackney Marshes for recreational use had saved a much-loved escape from further housebuilding. The out-of-sight Wembley was the location of a newly opened park with sporting facilities and refreshment rooms, as well as a bandstand and a music hall. But for Elen's cockney the reality of everyday life inner city life was limited space and overcrowding. It is no coincidence that the song was dedicated to campaigning journalist G R Sims.⁵⁷ Whether audiences were fully aware of this or sympathised with the critical sentiment is a moot point.

Some concluding observations

The songs considered in this chapter point to a number of important observations. The importance of escapist enjoyment is most clearly seen in the character of 'the swell.' Audiences, largely drawn from the poorer sections of society, were invited into the company of outlandish, larger-than-life characters whose extravagant lifestyle was far removed from everyday reality. There was also something aspirational in some of the 'swell' songs – the hope of buying the lucky lottery ticket or becoming 'The Man Who Broke the Bank.' The stage Irish character also offered an element of escapism into a world of joviality and sentimentality, often linked to a lost rural idyll. Many of the comic songs associated with cockney characters celebrated the pleasures of everyday life, food, drink and company but these were ubiquitous sentiments popular across the country and found in regional variants.

And yet there was always more than simple comedy and escapism. Jenny Hill, for example, combined light-hearted characters and songs with material that looked at several social

issues of the day. Through a range of characters, clearly working-class women ('Knowing Servant Girl, and 'The Coffee Shop Girl'), some more specifically 'costers' ('The Flower Seller' and 'The Muffin and Crumpet Seller's Daughter), Hill (and other singers) were able to focus on a range of subjects – courtship and marriage, work and economic realities, even politics – relevant to their audiences.⁵⁸ This raises the broader question of whether the music hall should be seen as a 'culture of consolation,' or whether it was more complex, and more subversive. The next chapter looks at social and economic issues, the following chapter at politics.

Endnotes

- 1 'A Chat with Joseph Tabrar,' *Era*, 10 February 1894, 'A Chat with Felix McGlennon,' *Era*, 10 March 1894 and 'A Chat with G W Hunt,' *Era*, 17 March 1894.
- 2 A Bennett, 'Music in the Halls' in J S Bratton, ed., *Music Hall: Performance and Style*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1986, pp.1-22
- 3 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 25 September 1896 cited in L Wingrove, 'Reigniting the 'vital spark': Reimagining and reclaiming the repertoire, career development and image cultivation of serio-comediennes Jenny Hill and Bessie Bellwood from 1870 to 1896', unpublished Ph.D., University of Bristol, 2016
- 4 P Bailey, 'Conspiracies of Meaning: Music Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture,' *Past & Present*, 144, 1994, pp.138-70
- 5 F Freeman, *Weekly Despatch*, 4 February 1883 cited in Bailey 'Conspiracies of Meaning' p.158
- 6 By the turn of the century, Bailey argues, this knowingness had become a second language for all classes.
- 7 Ross, one of the first 'one-hit wonders,' was said to have 'a truly magnificent voice' and his 'long descriptive songs ... took well nigh half an hour to execute.' 'A Chat with Arthur Lloyd,' *Era*, 29 July 1893. See also the description in G W M Reynolds, *The Mysteries of the Courts of London*, vol.5, London, John Dicks, 1869, p.279. 'Sam Hall' was an adaptation of the eighteenth-century ballad, 'Jack Hall.'
- 8 See G Speaight, *Bawdy Songs of the Early Music Hall*, London, Pan Books, 1975. Among the more predictable titles are 'The Bower that stands in Thigh Lane' and 'Man's Yard of Stuff.' More interesting was the use of well-known traditional tunes. 'There's Somebody Coming' was set to the tune, 'Paddy Whack' and 'The Copper Stick,' described as 'a famous new smutty ditty never before printed,' set to 'The White Cockade.'

- 9 The Sam Cowell Comic Song Book 1858 can be accessed at <https://archive.org/details/samcowellscomics00unse/page/n1> In addition, the collection includes such well-established songs and tunes as 'The Low Backed Car', 'Bonnie Dundee' and 'We won't go home till morning'.
- 10 The best introduction remains P Bailey, 'Champagne Charlie: Performance and Ideology in the Music Hall Swell Song' in J S Bratton, ed., *Music Hall: Performance and Style*, pp.49–69. In addition to those listed above, there were a whole range of singers *à la* Vance to be heard in minor provincial music halls. *Era* 11 April and 22 September 1867 for examples. These songs had their roots, in part at least, in the earlier song-and-supper rooms. One collection of Coal Hole bawdy songs was entitled *The Swell's Album*.
- 11 Bailey refers to Leybourne's popularity in Leeds and Bradford but his performances were well received in other cities (for example Hull, *Era*, 10 February 1867 and Liverpool, *Liverpool Mercury*, 17 July 1878) but also in smaller towns, such as Huddersfield (*Huddersfield Chronicle*, 7 March 1874), Middlesbrough (*Middlesbrough Evening Gazette*, 25 October 1870) and Sunderland (*Sunderland Daily Echo*, 28 September 1875 and 11 March 1879).
- 12 *Era* 10 February 1867
- 13 See particularly P Mason, *The English Gentleman*, London, Pimlico, 1993, chap. 7 'The Gentleman as Sportsman.'
- 14 Bailey asks: is this sex for those who don't want it, or sex for those who can't get it, or sex for those who couldn't handle it if they did? 'Champagne Charlie' p.62
- 15 See also Dickens' comments on Greenwich Fair in chapter 3.
- 16 Bailey refers to the link with cheap tailoring, 'Champagne Charlie' p.60
- 17 Cited in Bailey, 'Champagne Charlie' p.51
- 18 *Era* 3 June 1866
- 19 *Leeds Times*, 31 October 1868
- 20 *Leeds Times*, 8 May 1867. However, the paper conceded that 'Miss Nelly Power ... is worthy of all the applause she gets.'
- 21 *Leeds Times*, 27 November 1869
- 22 Bailey, 'Champagne Charlie,' p.67. Bailey explicitly links the emergence of the "swell" to the development of capitalist society, seeing him as 'the product of a larger system of liberal capitalism that was now offering its subordinates a greater share of its economic surplus, while offering a fuller sense of membership.'
- 23 *Westminster Review*, 1838, p.240
- 24 Among Moore's *Irish Melodies*, 'The Last Rose of Summer,' 'The Minstrel Boy' and 'Endearing Young Charms' were particularly popular. French's most popular songs included the sentimental 'Mountains of Mourne' and the comic 'Phil the Fluter's Ball' not to mention the distinctly un-Irish 'Abdulla Bulbul Ameer.' Samuel Lover, the least well-known of the trio is best known for 'The Low-backed Car,' 'The Girl I Left Behind Me' and 'Molly Bawn', from his comic opera 'Il Paddy Whack in Italia.'
- 25 A similar pattern emerges from Mervyn Busted's analysis of references to the Irish in the Axon collection mid-nineteenth century ballads, 'Songs in a strange land – ambiguities of identity amongst Irish migrants in mid-Victorian Manchester,' *Political Geography*, 17(6) 1998, pp.627–665.

- 26 John McCormack made the song even more famous when he recorded it in 1911.
- 27 P Maloney, 'Flying Down the Saltmarket': The Irish on the Glasgow Music Hall Stage,' *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 36(10) 2009, pp.11-36.
- 28 T D Sullivan wrote the words celebrating the Manchester Martyrs in 1867, using an American tune, 'Tramp, Tramp, Tramp.' It was quickly taken up as the Irish national anthem and remained popular as late as the Easter Rising of 1916. It featured prominently in various anti-English lecture tours and demonstrations. G F Train who delivered a lecture 'Irish nationality and the coming downfall of the English oligarchy used the song to 'stir up the people' and in several venues 'the audience lustily joined in the chorus.' *Leeds Mercury*, 16 June 1868 and *Cornwall Gazette*, 25 June 186. In 1889 the crowd demonstrating against the imprisonment of Irish political prisoners was opened and closed by a band playing the song (*Glasgow Herald*, 11 February 1889) and when Bonar Law arrived in Dublin in November 1912 attempts to sing 'God Save the King' were drowned out by 'God Save Ireland.' *Manchester Courier*, 29 November 1912.
- 29 *Liverpool Mercury*, 3 December 1895. Among various songs performed that evening were 'The Croppy Boy,' 'God Save Ireland,' 'The Wearing of the Green' and 'The Boys of Wexford.' Mid-century ballads also focused on contemporary issues, notably the Manchester martyrs, as well as celebrating the heroes of the past. Busted, 'Songs in a strange land' especially pp.656-9
- 30 *Era* 22 May 1886
- 31 *Era*, 2 March 1879
- 32 *Era* 28 March 1896. The reference was specifically to Rafferty but applied equally to Casey. Both men started as comics before extending their act to include singing and dancing. Both toured extensively and enjoyed careers that lasted from the 1880s to the 1900s.
- 33 Maloney, 'Flying Down the Saltmarket' p.22. Rooney was also popular in several English cities with a large Irish population.
- 34 He was noted for his jigs but on several occasions delighted audiences with his set dances.
- 35 *Era*, 11 June 1876 and 4 August 1883
- 36 *Era*, 6 January 1883.
- 37 *Era*, 14 January 1888
- 38 *The Stage*, 2 September 1881
- 39 *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette*, 18 May 1889
- 40 *Lloyd's Weekly*, 9 January 1887 and *Era*, 12 July 1884 and 4 September 1886
- 41 *Era*, 8 January 1887
- 42 For example, in 1880 and again in 1889. The latter concert was particularly poignant. Feeney's 'great energy' enabled him to raise £2,000 'on behalf of the recent distress in the West of Ireland.' It also aggravated his already declining health and shortly afterwards he died – penniless. *Lloyd's Weekly*, 8 February 1880 and *Freeman's Journal*, 14 March and 11 April 1889. Feeney died in the May of that year.
- 43 *Era*, 2 March 1879
- 44 *Era*, 2 March 1879

- 45 G E Mingay, ed., *The Rural Idyll*, London, Routledge, 1989. See chapter 4 fn.12 for further references.
- 46 Although criticised for making Irish airs palatable to the English, several (about a third) of Moore's *Irish Melodies* were political. He had known Robert Emmett and 'Oh breathe not his name' is a lament for him. Conservative British periodicals, such as *Blackwood's Magazine*, were concerned with the subversive nature of Moore's *Melodies*. The *New Monthly Magazine* saw them as 'a vehicle for dangerous politics.' Quoted in T M Love, 'Gender and the Nationalistic Ballad: Thomas Davis, Thomas Moore and their songs,' *New Hibernia Review*, 21 (1), 2017, pp.68-85 at p.75.
- 47 The relationship is complex. The evidence from London in the 1940s and 1950s clearly indicates the importance of pub music sessions to Irish emigrants, seeking to preserve their 'Irishness.' However, the so-called 'authentic' music was often viewed as quaint by relatives in Ireland. For a discussion of the complex and disputed construction of Irishness in parts of post-war Britain see M Leonard, 'Performing identities: music and dance in the Irish communities of Coventry and Liverpool,' *Social and Cultural Geography*, 6(4), 2006, pp.515-29
- 48 *Era* 1 July 1893. See also 29 March & 26 March 1890, 23 Mat & 14 November 1891, 16 April 1892 for references
- 49 *Era* 16 February 1895. See also *Era* 13 January 1894 for a list of her songs – all cockney.
- 50 D B Scott, 'The Music Hall Cockney: Flesh and Blood, or Replicant?' *Music & Letters*, 83(2), 2002, pp.237-58
- 51 'The broken-hearted milkman' kept the company of 'pretty little Polly Perkins of Paddington Green' in the song of the same name.
- 52 Scott 'Music Hall Cockney' p.247
- 53 Scott argues, 'the cockney character [was] a desired image created by the music hall and perpetuated by the music hall's feeding on itself.' There is a danger of overstating both the degree of self-reflexivity and the creation of desired image devoid of real-world content, particularly in the late-Victorian and Edwardian years His argument has greater force when applied to Dick Van Dyke's toe-curling performance in 'Mary Poppins' and even to the bizarre 'cockneys' of Walford.
- 54 Harry Champion was particularly prolific with a range of food and drink songs: 'The Old Red Lion,' 'Another little drink,' 'Have a drop of gin, Joe,' 'Hot meat pies, saveloys and trotters,' 'A good blow out for fourpence' and 'Let's have a basin of soup,' Venturing further afield he also praised 'Good old Yorkshire pudden' as well as extolling the virtues of 'Gorgonzola Cheese,' though his wedding-night ditty, 'Put a bit of treacle on my puddin', 'Mary Ann' is somewhat ambiguous. See also Charles Coburn 'Come where the booze is cheaper,' and Harry Freeman and Harry Anderson, both celebrating 'Glorious Beer.'
- 55 C Mackay, 'English Songs, Ancient and Modern,' *Nineteenth Century*, December 1884
- 56 The sale of sheet music an indicator of popularity. Arthur Lloyd's 'Not for Joseph,' huge stage hit, became the first comic song to sell 100,000 copies of sheet music. Lloyd was associated with numerous comic songs including

‘The German Band,’ ‘Chillingowullabadorie,’ ‘The Postman,’ ‘Dobbs in Paris,’ ‘Angelina Was Fond of the Soldiers,’ of which only ‘Married to a Mermaid’ remained popular into the twentieth century.

57 P Norris, *A Cockney At Work: The Story of Gus Elen & His Songs*, London, Grosvenor House, 2014, pp.210-5

58 These examples are drawn from the detailed study by L Wingrove, ‘Reigniting the ‘vital spark’. As Wingrove notes both women also portrayed upper-class women, such as ‘The Duchess of Petticoat Lane (Bessie Bellwood) and ‘Lady Gay’ and ‘Miss Dashaway’ (Jenny Hill).