

*'Fings ain't what they used to be': The
strange and lingering death of variety theatre*

Now Harry was a champion in their eyes
With his old green tie on
When he sung about hot meat pies
And any, any, any old iron
He was king of 'em all at the music hall
Or down at the Old Britannia
Singin' put a little treacle on me puddin' Mary Anne
Well you can't help laughing can ya?

Chas 'n' Dave, 'Harry Was A Champion'

MUSIC HALL, OR variety theatre as it was increasingly known, appeared triumphant in the early twentieth century. It was at the heart of live popular music. There was a network of theatres that crossed the land and a substantial and varied workforce, which gave it a dominant position in the commercialised popular music industry of Edwardian England. Its recently acquired 'respectability' was confirmed by the Royal Command Performance of 1912. Overall, the Great War was a further stimulus but the 1920s saw the number of theatre closures increase dramatically. There were fears that variety would go the way of American vaudeville but, rather than die, it rallied in the 1930s only to succumb finally in the 1950s.

On closer examination, the pre-war 'golden' days were less firmly based than appeared at the time. Music hall was struggling to renew itself as many of the big names were coming to the end of their careers. The evolution of 'family-friendly' entertainment ran the risk of losing a more youthful audience,

and the emphasis on passive consumption made it susceptible to the threat of the new music, ragtime and jazz, coming from America in the 1900s. Novelty 'ragtime' songs abounded but they missed the point. The greatest attraction of the new music was the opportunity to dance to one of the ragtime bands, rather than to listen to witty words.¹ Technological changes, albeit in their infancy, were at best a mixed blessing. Short films might be included as a novelty turn in a traditional variety programme but, as the growth in the number of cinemas portended, film might become a powerful rival. Similarly, radio and records carried the potential to transform both the production and consumption of popular music.

Music hall during the Great War

Popular song reflected and, in part, shaped a wider coming to terms with the realities of modern warfare.² When war broke out in 1914 many music-hall artists, as well as impresarios, rallied to the cause, seeing it as a brief but heroic interval, to be supported and celebrated in the way that Victorian conflicts had been. Performers added a patriotic verse to songs in their repertoire and the number of specially written pro-war songs increased. 'We Didn't Want a European War' echoed the sentiment of MacDermott's 'Jingo Song,'³ while 'Tommy is as Good a Man as Any Knight of Old' set the present conflict in a longer heroic perspective. Patronising encouragement to allies ('Good Luck, Little French Soldier Man!') coexisted with warnings to our foes ('Hands Off, Germany'). Notions of imperial unity seen in the songs of the late-nineteenth century music hall re-appeared in Florrie Forde's 'They Sang "God Save the King,"' which brought together not only an Englishman, a Scotsman and an Irishman but also a Welshman.⁴ Imperial unity was extended to include 'Our Brave Colonials' and even 'John Bull's Little Khaki Coon.' 'Blokes' who had previously been seen as 'comic caper jokes,' in the eyes of Marie Lloyd, were transformed by army uniform: 'I Do Like Yer, Cocky, Now You've Got Your Khaki On.' Among the established stars, Vesta Tilley and Harry Lauder were at the forefront but other, performers, such as Gertie Gitane appeared in public to entertain the troops, some even venturing to France.⁵ Yet alongside recruitment songs, such as 'I'll Make a Man of

You,' there were also songs of yearning and return. 'Keep the Home Fires Burning' appeared in 1914, 'Tell My Daddy to Come Home Again' in 1915 and 'Blighty, the Soldier's Home, Sweet Home' in 1916. Such songs became more prevalent as the initial enthusiasm for war began to wane and gung-ho recruitment songs, such as 'Your King and Your Country Want You,' no longer seemed appropriate as the conflict continued and separation and losses increased.⁶ Anti-war songs were rare, but, as the war progressed, there was a distinct scepticism, most notably in 'Oh What a Lovely War,' of 1918.⁷

Most wartime popular songs, however, were not about war and its impact, but rather reflected the more mundane concerns that had been the staple of Victorian and Edwardian music-hall. Music hall, in war as in peace, was about entertainment and escape from the concerns of everyday life, including those 'temporary' adjustments necessitated by the conflict. There was a continuation of pre-war trends. Harry Champion continued to sing the praises of various dishes, such as 'Boiled Beef and Carrots' and 'Hot Tripe and Onions,' familiar, especially to his working-class London audience.⁸ Such was the popularity of his 'Grow Some Taters' (1915) that it was taken up by the government as part of its campaign to encourage home-grown vegetables. Though more problematic, alcohol, especially in the form of good English ale, was similarly celebrated.⁹ Champion also reprised the old motto song, 'Work, Boys, Work (and Be Contented), in 1915, but there fewer of this type of song. Ernie Mayne sang of his contribution to the war effort in 'My Meatless Day,' explaining 'I don't sell flags on the street, I go without my bits of meat.' The tone is light-hearted as is Walt Cunliffe's 'In These Hard Times.' 'Things are bad, awful bad ... Food is dear, rent is dear ... In these hard times you mustn't pick and choose' nevertheless there are consolations as 'every single chappie can make a girlie happy.' The upbeat tune and 'look on the bright side' message was of a piece with others of his 'bright and breezy' songs, such as 'We'll Have a Holiday in the Summertime' and 'Now That the Lights Are Low,' which extolled the new-found opportunities for spooning.

There were fewer of the old-style ('My Old Man') social commentary songs, but it was difficult to sing in the same way about the roles of women, given their increasingly visible

presence in the work force. There was a shift in the depiction of women from a passive, traditional role ('The Women Who Wait') to a more positive, modern one ('What Should We Do Without Them (War Girls)?'). 'Daughters of Britain, Work with a Will' captured the change. Gone were 'the good old days with the good old ways' in which women 'drifted quietly on' and in its place a new world in which women 'work with a will ... [and] learn everything they can,' including not to be 'afraid of the task we thought could only be done by men.'¹⁰ The song was a favourite but the land army, the girl guides and the women's institute, with its wider popularity is open to question.¹¹ Many wartime songs that referred to women's work often trivialised or marginalised it. 'The Dance of the Fire Brigade Girls,' from the highly successful 1915 revue, *Bric à Brac*, illustrates the point well. The opening scene is set in Mummerset, where 'the houses are as picturesque as the sixteen P.G.s [Palace Girls] who appear there as firemen and other things.' Reviews do not mention 'The Dance of the Fire Brigade Girls' but focus on the 'exquisite' "Toilet of Venus" scene, the splendour of the dresses and the stand-out songs, Teddie Gerrard's 'Glad To See You Back' and Gertie Millar's 'Chalk Farm to Camberwell' and 'Toy Town.'¹² Another successful revue of that year, *Shell Out*, featured 'If The Girlies Could Be Soldiers' sung by Unity More, accompanied by a line of young women 'in the daintiest of dancing frocks and the smartest of uniforms.' She was praised for two conventional songs ('I Want Loving' and 'Little Miss Lancashire'), though most plaudits went to the comedic figure of Fred Emney.¹³ Many songs were conservative, or at least ambiguous, in regard to the new role of women. This is clearly seen in Vesta Tilley's 'Where Are the Girls of the Old Brigade.' The things that 'girls are doing now,' such as driving a motor or a plough or working in munitions is 'simply wonderful, simply wonderful,' but there is a touch of the ridiculous – she 'will chase a bullock when she's told to milk a cow' – and the reassurance that the old order has not been destroyed. The third verse notes that 'Lots of girls have done the trick, for better or for worse/confetti, and a husband and something small to nurse' while the chorus repeats that 'it's the same piece of petticoat all the while.' The matter is compounded by the fact that the song is delivered in drag. Members of the audience could laugh at or agree with the figure she presented on stage. Even a song such as

'Women of the Homeland (God Bless You Every One!)' which explicitly praised women for their war work and linked them to the men at the front through their shared 'love of home and country,' still emphasised traditional feminine qualities. Women were 'so brave but so resigned.' They sacrificed their 'dearest treasure ... sweetheart, brother, son' while praying for their safe return home.

The need for escapism, exacerbated by wartime events, explains the popularity of nonsense songs. 'Sister Susie's Sewing Shirts for Soldiers' while 'Patty Proudly Packs for Privates Prepaid Paper Parcels.'¹⁴ Verbal virtuosity was equally at the root of the success of Billy Murray's 'Which Switch Is The Switch, Miss, For Ipswich.'¹⁵ Escapist in a different way were a number of romantic songs of varying degrees of sentimentality. Gertie Gitane made 'a direct appeal to the hearts of the public with 'There's silver in your hair, dear (But gold in your heart)' while the 'plaintive tones of her voice' was central to the success of 'When I Leave the World Behind.'¹⁶ José Collins' 'virile sincerity' as she sang "Love Will Find a Way" made the song a hit.¹⁷ The latter points to a shift in content discernible in these years. Old themes persisted. Mothers were still idolised by their sons ('Mother and Me'), husbands hen-pecked ('Since My Wife Joined the WAAC') and fathers incompetent ('Father's Got the Sack from the Waterworks'); but new ones emerged. The story of 'If You Were the Only Girl in the World' is well-known.¹⁸ Robey originally planned to sing it for laughs in a traditional manner. Allegedly, at the last moment, he decided to sing it 'straight,' thereby giving him and Violet Lorraine a huge hit, which they repeated in 1918 with 'First Love – Last Love – Best Love.'¹⁹

Music hall and the threat of the new

Music-hall songs were also popular at the front but there were signs of change. Philip Gibbs observed members of the London Irish Rifles, at the battle of Loos (September 1915) marching to their comb-and-paper band, playing music hall songs, such as 'Hullo, Hullo! It's a Different Girl Again,' a Walt Cunliffe song from 1906; but the most popular tune was 'Waiting for the Robert E Lee.'²⁰ Ragtime presented an opportunity to new singers and a challenge to old.²¹ Daisy Dormer sang 'Ragtime

Cowboy Joe' and the Two Rascals asked 'Are You from Dixie?' There was even a 'Ragtime Suffragette' – 'She's no household pet ... raggin' and naggin' with politics' – which combined the modernity of the latest musical craze with conservative socio-political sentiment. Alec Hurley jumped on the bandwagon with 'The Ragtime Navy' and G H Chirgwin introduced 'The Ragtime Coon.' Despite his popularity as a cockney singer, Harry Champion felt it necessary to add to his repertoire with 'My Ragtime Missus' and 'Ragtime Ragshop,' though neither were very successful. America's entry into the war further boosted what proved to be a relatively short-lived craze. New dances (and songs celebrating them) also appeared: the tango in 1914 and the foxtrot in 1916. After all, 'In Grandma's Day They Never Did the Foxtrot,' rather than 'they were modest [and] never looked naughty' whereas 'now it's strange, what a change.' Then there were the outrageous, upbeat novelty dances – 'The Grizzly Bear,' 'The Bunny Hop,' 'The Turkey-trot' and even the 'Kangaroo Dip.'²² The excitement of the music was heightened by its association with the exotic, in the form of the brothels and saloons from which it supposedly arose.

A more immediate threat to variety theatre came from the new revues and, most particularly, the cinema. Ominously, several big music halls – the Empire in Bradford, the Tivoli in Liverpool and the Grand in Sheffield – were converted into cinemas. Any hope that the 'good old days' of pre-war music-hall could be restored were soon dashed. The quasi-monopoly that music-hall had enjoyed before 1914 was broken. Demand for popular music, and the other elements of variety entertainment, increased but the variety theatre was no longer the sole supplier. The emergence of new competitors put pressure on theatre managers, for whom costs, at best, remained unchanged.²³ The problems were most acute in the so-called number two and number three theatres in the provinces. Some closed, some were converted into cinemas and some continued in hybrid form as cine-variety theatres. The fear was of a repetition of the American experience, where vaudeville had been killed off by RKO in the 1920s. The decline in Britain was checked in the late-1920s by two important, if somewhat surprising saviours, in the form of George Black, an early cinema entrepreneur, and Val Parnell, who showed

that variety theatre could be profitable, albeit in a complex relationship, more co-operative than competitive, with other providers of popular music.²⁴ Black, as head of the Moss Empire chain, created a viable business model based, on the London Palladium formula, but replicated across its provincial theatres, which allowed the flagship theatre to refresh itself from the talent coming through from its revived provincial underpinnings. His collaboration with Parnell was crucial and it was the latter who played a key role in introducing American vaudeville practices and thereby presenting a new 'high-speed variety' that offered non-stop entertainment.²⁵

Not for the first time, music hall reinvented itself. The incentive to keep abreast of changes in popular culture, including slicker presentation, was perhaps greater than before but, taking a broader perspective, there was an underlying continuity in terms of overall format. The basic formula, combining singers, dancers, comedians and novelty acts on a 'balanced' bill, remained unchanged. Individual elements changed over time, though even here there was little that was truly original. 'Peg-leg' Bates was one in a long line of dancers whose performances had been enhanced by the rhythmic and percussive possibilities of a wooden leg; and even the most outrageous novelty dance act, Wilson Keppel and Betty, was part of a long tradition of 'sand dancers,' going back to figures such as Joe Brown of the Burgess and Mitchell Minstrels, widely acclaimed in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, and Messrs. Fisher and Shine, aka 'Lambro and Pedrillo,' with their 'side-splitting ... burlesque sand-dance.'²⁶ New performers appeared alongside established figures. George Robey's career spanned pre- and post-Great War years, as did Gus Elen and Harry Champion.²⁷ Similarly, George Formby, Gracie Fields and Max Miller straddled the Second World War, though none could match G H Elliott, whose career started before the first world war and finished well after the second. The importance of personality and authenticity and the use of patter and catch phrases, associated with the likes of Formby and Fields, or Miller's vulgar flamboyance, were in the mainstream of music-hall performance, not a dramatic departure.²⁸

Music hall faced challenges from a variety of new formats and technologies that were transforming popular culture.

The revue, with its emphasis on coherence, in comparison to the rag-bag of acts that comprised variety, appeared in the early twentieth century but its challenge was less serious than claimed at the time. Even the highly rated *O-Kay for Sound*, starring the Crazy Gang, was glorified variety, whereas, away from the big theatres, revues were almost indistinguishable from variety. Beswick Goodgame praised Nat Gonella and His Georgians as 'the hottest modernities conceivable' but felt that their revue, *Swing It*, was 'little more than a name for linking together a team of very fine artists, each doing their own stuff in their own jolly way.'²⁹ More problematic was the radio, which could be enjoyed without the inconvenience of leaving home. Some artists were contractually banned from appearing on radio, others feared that the paucity of their material would be exposed; but some, notably Arthur Askey, Jimmy Jewel, and Vera Lynn, had their reputations enhanced by radio appearances. Indeed, from the late-1920s onwards there was a positive interaction between radio and variety. Variety acts, recorded before living audiences, appeared on programmes such as 'Music Hall,' and played an important part in broadening the popularity of radio.

The greatest threat came from the cinema. The pre-war practice of incorporating short films into a variety programme continued, but it soon became clear that the popularity of cinema was reconfiguring the world of popular leisure in England. Black was a key figure in variety's accommodation with cinema. Cinema could bring variety stars to town in an unprecedented manner, extending and enhancing their reputations, while attracting larger paying audiences to the benefit of cinema owners. *British Pathé's The Show's the Thing*, (1929), which starred Gracie Fields and *What the Public Wants!* presented by an affable Wilfred Pickles, gave cinema-goers the opportunity to see and hear well-known acts of the day, such as Troise and His Mandoliers, Syd Seymour and His Mad Hatters, Max and Harry Nesbitt and even the operatic baritone Denis Noble.³⁰ There was also a nostalgic touch as pre-war music hall stars, notably, Harry Champion and Gus Elen, were captured on film.³¹ Some productions were more elaborate. *Elstree Calling*, (1930), directed by a promising youngster, Alfred Hitchcock, was described as a 'cine-radio revue' and comprised nineteen

live variety acts, hosted by Tommy Handley. A similar formula was adopted in *Stars on Parade*. (1936) and *Calling All Stars* (1937).

Some artists, notably Gracie Fields and George Formby, had little difficulty in making the transition to new formats and new technology and built reputations as multi-media performers. Fields and Formby were highly successful stage performers and recording artists, with hit songs performed on radio and also available as sheet music. In addition, both starred in successful films, including *Sally in Our Alley* (1932). *Sing As We Go* (1934) and *Shipyard Sally* (1939) for the former; *Boots! Boots!* (1934), *Off the Dole* (1935), *Keep Your Seats, Please*, (1936) and *Let George Do It* (1940) for the latter. The films were flimsy but effective vehicles to showcase the stars. The versatility of Fields was brought home to the wider cinema audience, even in less successful films, such as *We're Going to Be Rich*. Set in the 1880s it referenced several music-hall favourites – 'Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay,' 'Two Lovely Black Eyes' and 'The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo' – but Fields delivered the sentimental ballad, 'The Sweetest Song in All the World,' which highlighted her voice and vocal range, the self-deprecating comedy song 'Walter, Walter (Lead Me to the Altar)' and the nonsense song, 'Will You Love Me When I'm Mutton,' to which she added an unexpected degree of poignancy.³² Cinema opened up opportunities for other domestic dancers and singers. Jessie Matthews combined stage and cinema from an early age, but it was in *Evergreen*, (1934) that she first sang her signature song 'Over My Shoulder,' along with 'Dancing on the Ceiling.' 'It's Love Again,' (1936) consolidated her standing at the forefront of stage and film musical.³³ Similarly, the dancing skills of Jack Hulbert and Cicely Courtneidge reached a wider audience through film, as in *Jack's the Boy*³⁴

The threat to variety posed by cinema became very apparent in the 1930s. There were European operettas (*Blue Danube*, 1931 and *Waltzes from Vienna*, 1934), and Far Eastern 'exotica' (*Chu Chin Chow*, 1934) but, above all, spectacular American musicals, (*42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of Broadway*, and so forth). Other films highlighted the dancing skills of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers (*Top Hat*, *Shall We Dance* and *Carefree* among

others). However, the most popular musical film of the 1930s was the British-made *Me and My Girl*, starring Lupino Lane in the immensely popular ‘Lambeth Walk.’

The threat of ‘Americanization’

Variety was inevitably drawn into wider debates about the ‘Americanization’ of popular culture. The debate often had a relatively narrow focus – a style of playing or dancing – but there was a wider, often unspoken, context. The relationship between Britain and America had changed significantly as a consequence of the Great War and its aftermath. A once great power was waning as another rose. Beyond such geo-political tensions were important socio-cultural differences. America seemed to be a more open and more equal society, in which there was less subservience to hierarchies and codes of behaviour. For arbiters of taste, or guardians of standards, as they saw themselves, whether in the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing or at the BBC, seemingly narrow concerns (for example whether the Charleston be banned from the dance floor or ‘crooning’ kept off air) carried considerable cultural significance that transcended the immediate musical question.

American-style entertainment was not new, but minstrelsy did not engender the same fears of cultural corruption, not least because many of the tunes had recognisable roots in Scottish and Irish music that had travelled to America since the seventeenth century, and the new songs, especially those written by Stephen Foster, were part of an equally recognisable Western European musical tradition. In contrast, the new music, both song and dance, was obviously derived more from distinctive African/African-American traditions. Some of the reaction against American cultural imports was driven by self-interest – the perceived threat to the livelihoods of English musicians – but much was driven by a belief in cultural and racial superiority, and plain snobbery.³⁵ The alleged musical shortcomings of ‘jazz’ – ‘that baser cousin of music,’ in the words of Sir Dan Godfrey³⁶ – were grounded in beliefs about proper musical forms and performance styles, but also revealed an ignorance (feigned or real) of the musicianship of ragtime composers and performers, notably Scott Joplin. In the 1920s jazz was denounced by distinguished musicians,

such as Herbert Hamilton Harty, best known as the conductor of the Hallé orchestra, who spoke of 'gangs of Jazz-barbarians' whose 'jangling discords' and 'mere ugliness of sound' were responsible for 'this filthy desecration.'³⁷ Even more outspoken in his condemnation of the cultural and racial threat posed by jazz was Henry Coward.³⁸ Jazz, 'the essence of vulgarity,' was, in his opinion, primitive music in terms of structure and mode of performance. He associated it with 'the cave man and the negro of the southern plantation' and spoke of the 'banging and clanging of pots [and] pans' accompanied with debased instruments. 'The noble trombone is made to bray like an ass, guffaw like a village idiot, and moan like someone in distress.'³⁹ Far worse, jazz 'deadened and vulgarised taste ... by popularising "toy" instruments like the ukulele and the semi-barbaric balalaika.'⁴⁰ But, as well as 'tending to sap our musical virility,' jazz threatened 'our ethical standards.' Referencing the decline of previous great empires, Coward praised first Mussolini (and Irish ecclesiastical authorities) and later Hitler for banning the tango, foxtrot and one-step and banishing 'nigger music.'⁴¹ The speeches delivered by these men received considerable press coverage but several newspaper editorials distanced themselves. The *Hull Daily News*, for one, recognised that it was not only 'lovers of vulgarity' who appreciated jazz.⁴² Indeed, there was a greater appreciation of American music, especially from the mid-1930s than commonly recognised. This points to a more important point: the fallacy of cultural contamination. The critics who talked of an alien invasion viewed audiences as passive victims, talking in terms of immunity, inoculation and even isolation, rather than viewing them as active consumers, making conscious decisions and adapting new music and dances to suit their preferences.⁴³ Some contemporaries were aware of this. The well-known drama critic and authority on contemporary theatre, St. John Ervine, identified a large number of 'American turns' in the London halls but noted that they were 'all excellent.'⁴⁴ Even the 'alien' Fats Waller, with his 'animalistic, jungle music, was seen as 'a part of English music hall.'⁴⁵ Reaction to American popular culture 'from below,' in the dance hall as well as in the music hall, was more positive than negative; and leisure entrepreneurs responded accordingly. 1930s music hall was also dragged into

more explicit arguments about national identity. At a time of growing concern with the threats to national identity, music hall found allies in strange places. *Country Life* discovered that ‘our national characteristics are nowhere so clearly evidenced as they are “on the halls”’.⁴⁶ Even the scourge of the Edwardian music halls, Cecil Sharp now praised them for their ‘exemplary Englishness.’⁴⁷

Thus, somewhat surprisingly, variety theatre, apparently in serious decline in the 1920s, had refreshed and redefined itself with new talent, both home-grown and imported, to such a degree that it enjoyed a degree of public affection as the country entered the second world war; and no better symbol of this quintessential and patriotic Englishness could be found than the old-stager, Harry Champion. Reprising his pre-Great War hit, ‘Any Old Iron,’ in good music-hall tradition, he amended the final chorus to exhort his audience to contribute their ‘old iron’ to the war cause. More generally, as Mass Observation noted, music hall had a good war.

Music hall after the Second World War

The threats faced by variety theatre in the 1930s finally hit home in the 1950s. Many were long-standing. Even before 1914 it was losing a younger audience for whom the attractions of American ragtime and jazz were far greater. This problem intensified during the dance hall craze of the inter-war years and continued in the 1950s. More importantly, variety entertainment was relocating away from variety theatres, particularly from the mid-1950s with the advent of commercial television’s *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*. Val Parnell’s boast was bold – ‘I’m offering television viewers a seat in the circle at the Greatest Variety theatre in the world to watch the finest artists that money can buy’ – and he proved his critics wrong. Old and new music-hall performers appeared alongside headliners that included established stars (Max Bygrave) and new talent (Cliff Richard). The show attracted audiences of 20 million or more.⁴⁸ Parnell’s claim that the biggest stars in the world could be watched at home was borne out by the experience of others. ‘Who’ve you got at the local Empire?’ Roy Hudd asked. His response: ‘Me and bloody G H Elliot!’⁴⁹ To make matters worse, English audiences could also go the

cinema to see the dancing skills of Gene Kelly or watch the musical extravaganzas of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

Broader social trends also contributed to the decline of variety theatre, from the bomb damage of the second world war to post-war rehousing policy. Increasingly city, and large town centres were being devoted to commercial interests. There were obvious advantages in cashing in on prime-site theatres at a time when costs were rising and competition intensifying. As entrepreneurial talent looked to television, variety theatres, especially the number two and number three theatres, were under-resourced. Their poorly maintained buildings, increasingly old-fashioned in look and their equally dated shows failed to attract investors and customers alike. In particular, the younger audience was not attracted to variety, notwithstanding the efforts to cash in on the skiffle and rock 'n' roll bandwagons. Variety contributed to the success of Lonnie Donegan and Tommy Steele, but they did not rescue variety theatre in the mid and late 1950s. Nor did sex (nude revues) and drugs (modified licensing laws) halt the decline. Variety theatre was not alone, dance halls faced major problems in the 1950s, and an increasing number of venues were converted into bingo halls.

Some concluding observations

The demise of variety theatre, as a location for entertainment, was sudden and appeared to mark the end of an era that had its roots going back to the 1850s. However, variety as a form of entertainment survived and flourished albeit in different locations. Summer seasons in the resorts, at least until the 1970s, Christmas pantomimes and other older venues such as working men's clubs offered a living for capable but middle-ranking performers, including those who were too 'blue' for television, as well as a route to greater things for the more talented; but it was radio and increasingly television that became the new home of variety. ITV's *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* held pride of place but the BBC television presented a glamorised version of Victorian music hall in *The Good Old Days* from 1953 onwards, the minstrel-based variety of *The Black and White Minstrel Show* from 1958, and more general variety programmes, such as *The Billy Cotton Band Show*. Several 'pop'

stars, notably Tommy Steele and Cliff Richard, pursued careers as variety entertainers in ways that would have been entirely understandable to Gracie Fields or George Formby. Further, elements of music hall, or a remembered music hall, were to be found in popular music, from The Kinks', *Village Green Preservation Society* and Madness's *The Liberty of Norton Folgate* to the redefined Chas 'n' Dave, who saw themselves as part of a tradition going back, specifically, to Harry Champion.⁵⁰

Much of television music hall was unashamedly nostalgic, looking back to a romanticised mish-mash of elements that barely existed in the past. However, the music hall tradition could also look forward, again embracing, or being embraced by, the new. Nowhere was this clearer than in the career of Judge Dread, whose success, particularly in the early 1970s, combined music-hall innuendo, African-Caribbean rhythms and nursery rhymes in a format that saw him banned by the BBC.⁵¹ On the *Working Class 'Ero* album he included the George Formby number, 'Grandad's Flanalette Nightshirt.' A similar debt to music hall could also be seen in ska revival bands such as Bad Manners and Madness, to whom we will return later

Endnotes

- 1 There were 130, or more, ragtime bands touring in the immediate pre-war years. The Moss Empire had its own Ragtime Octet.
- 2 M Killgarrieff, *Sing Us One of the Old Songs*, Oxford University Press, 1998 is an invaluable guide to popular song. I am also indebted to John Mullen, *The Show Must Go On! Popular Song in Britain during the First World War*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015, though the opinions expressed here are somewhat different.
- 3 See also 'You Made Us Fight You, We Didn't Want to Do it.'
- 4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2MQWeLfCeQ> Each participant sings a 'national' song before they all sing 'God Save the King.' Amazingly, the Irishman's song is the unofficial Irish national anthem 'God Save Ireland,' the song of the Manchester Martyrs executed following the Clerkenwell bombing in 1867.
- 5 Harry Lauder's contribution was particularly poignant. He played a prominent role in various recruitment initiatives. His son was on active service as he appeared in a revue, *Three Cheers*, which included the song 'The Laddies Who Fought and Won,' the performance climaxing with Scottish guardsmen in full dress uniform on stage as Lauder exhorted young men to sign up. Lauder continued his performance even after the death of his son in

- action, though he fainted as the curtain closed after his first rendition of ‘The Laddies Who Fought’ after his son’s death. The better known, ‘Keep Right on to the End of the Road’ was written in memory of his son.
- 6 Mullen also draws attention to a number of ‘regional’ songs that referenced countries (especially Ireland but not Wales) to more specific counties and towns and which used the sense of attachment to home as part of the war effort. Mullen, *The Show Must Go On!* pp.92-9
 - 7 The contrast with the range of songs sung by soldiers is striking, See Mullen, *The Show Must Go On!* Chapter 6. Such was the structure and control of music hall that there was less scope for anti-war songs.
 - 8 Other songs included ‘Hot Meat Pies, Saveloys and Trotters,’ ‘Baked Sheep’s Heart Stuffed with Sage and Onions’ and, more exotically ‘Good Old Yorkshire Pudden,’ ‘ and ‘Gorgonzola Cheese.’
 - 9 Charles Godfrey had a hit with ‘Hi-tiddey-hi-ti’ at a time when ‘the drunken song was quite a popular feature’ but which was no longer the case in 1913. *Era* 1 March 1913
 - 10 The words were reprinted in *Landswoman*, 1 October 1918
 - 11 For examples see *Grantham Journal*, 8 March 1919 (Carlton Scroop Company of Girl Guides) and *Western Gazette* 13 June 1919 (Charminster Women’s Institute).
 - 12 *Illustrated London News*, 20 September 1915, *Graphic*, 25 September 1915, *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 9 October 1915 and *Tatler*, 22 December 1915
 - 13 *Sporting Times*, 28 August 1915, *Illustrated London News* 4 September 1915 and *Tatler*, 8 & 15 September 1915
 - 14 Imperial War Museum <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80021208>
 - 15 ‘Which switch’ featured in J M Barrie’s burlesque, *Rosy Rapture. The Pride of the Beauty Chorus*. The song also combined the traditional tongue-twister with a ‘witty’ comment on women’s war work.
 - 16 Reflecting on the blessing of life, even though poor,
 I’ll leave the night time to the dreamers/I’ll leave the song birds to the blind
 I’ll leave the moon above to those in love/When I leave the world behind.
 Within weeks of the outbreak of war Gitana sang her ‘great Marching Song,’ ‘Violette’ and on various occasions she raised money for wounded troops through the sale of autograph postcards. Touring extensively, she had a repertoire that included ‘a selection of catchy songs’ as well as a number of ‘pretty’ songs including ‘Once upon a time’ and ‘Morning star.’ *Era*, 14 October and 25 November 1914, 1, 15 and 22 March 1916, and 6 September 1916.
 - 17 Collins, well-known before the war, played Teresa in “The Maid of the Mountains,” winning praise for both her acting and singing. *Era* 27 December 1916.
 - 18 See, for example, Mullen, *The Show Must Go On!* p.135
 - 19 In albeit differing ways, see also Clarice Mayne, ‘It’s Lovely to be in Love’ (1915) and Aileen D’Orma, ‘Any Time’s Kissing Time’ (1916) and even the much-recorded stuttering song ‘K-K-K Katy’ (1918).

- 20 P Gibbs, *Now It Can Be Told*, London, Harper & Brothers, 1920. See D Taylor, *Memory, Narrative and the Great War: Rifleman Patrick MacGill and the Construction of Wartime Experience*, Liverpool University Press, 2013, pp.114–5.
- 21 Beyond its use of syncopation, ragtime is an ill-defined umbrella term that covered numerous players and styles. Thanks to *The Sting* (1974) ragtime has been seen as synonymous with Scott Joplin and his compositions, notable ‘The Entertainer’ and ‘Maple Leaf Rag.’ In fact, Joplin was unusual. He emphasised composed music, including worked out harmonies, and his pieces demanded considerable musical skill. More important to this study was the more homogenised and less subtle ragtime of Tin Pan Alley,
- 22 Marie Lloyd’s ‘Piccadilly Trot’ was a direct challenge but failed to achieve the success of the (later) Lambeth Walk.
- 23 Several contemporary observers blamed the ‘tax menace,’ following the introduction of the theatre tax in 1916. The fact that the tax also applied to cinemas and dance halls, both of which flourished, indicates that more profound influences were at work.
- 24 Black built up a cinema chain in the north east of England before selling up and creating a new chain. In 1928 he was the director of the General Theatre Corporation. O Double, *Britain Had Talent: A History of Variety Theatre*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2012, esp. pp. 51–5
- 25 Time management was critical as was maximum stage usage and a general ‘professionalisation’ of presentation. Double, *Britain Had Talent*, chap. 4
- 26 *Stage*, 20 October 1882 for Joe Brown’s claim to have introduced sand-dancing 25 years earlier and *Stage* 2 June 1882. There was also women sand-dancers, notably Winifred Johnson, ‘A Chat with Winifred Johnson,’ *Era*, 30 March 1895. Sand dancing was losing some of its popularity in the mid-1890s but the dramatic and varied dancing of Middle Texas gave it new life. She was particularly popular in the new resorts, such as Blackpool and Douglas, Isle of Man, but also appeared at several London halls.
- 27 Thanks in no small measure to the early 1930s ‘Veterans of Variety’ short films. See chapter 15.
- 28 Double, *Britain Had Talent*, Part two: Performance Dynamics. He stresses the ‘constant quest’ for novelty, but much presented as new was often a slick repackaging of something old.
- 29 *Era* 13 January and 24 February 1937
- 30 <https://www.britishpathe.com/workspaces/df699ffd537d4e0c74710ad015dfd64d/qg4ldiTP>
- 31 <https://www.britishpathe.com/search/query/gus+elen> 2020. The films do not do justice to Elen’s ability. He was clearly past his best when the films were made and the limitations of camera technology forced him to modify his stage act to keep within camera shot.
- 32 These songs can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsxSPJ8oUCM> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AevoH8_5bk and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZk33tWP-Tk> the latter with Ray Noble and his orchestra.
- 33 For ‘Over My Shoulder’ see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZjquAEjkrns> and ‘Dancing on the Ceiling’ see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEy8OB0-6CU>

- 34 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpGjj-9tjaw&t=36s>
- 35 See Appleby Matthews, musical director of the Regent Theatre and conductor of the Birmingham City orchestra, *Observer*, 4 May 1924
- 36 D Godfrey, 'Music: An All-Pervading Influence,' *Musical Mirror*, March 1929
- 37 *Manchester Guardian*, 6 September 1926. As President of the Incorporated Association of Organists he delivered several speeches in which he condemned "jazz." See *Hull Daily Mail*, 5 September 1928, 2 & 3 September 1929
- 38 He made a major contribution to the development of choral music, particularly with the Sheffield Music Union and the Huddersfield Choral Society
- 39 *Manchester Guardian*, 10 October 1927; *Hull Daily Mail*, 21 September & 1 October 1927, and *Tamworth Herald* 1 October 1927
- 40 *Hull Daily Mail* 10 October 1927 and 22 May 1933
- 41 *Hull Daily Mail* 5 February 1926 and 22 May 1933. Coward also had a problem with Schonberg.
- 42 *Hull Daily News* 21 September 1927
- 43 C Waters, 'Beyond 'Americanization': Rethinking Anglo-American Cultural Exchange between the Wars,' *Cultural and Social History*, 2007, 4(4), pp.451-9 makes a similar point at p.454
- 44 *Observer* 19 February 1939. Ervine was a playwright in his own right but had had mixed experiences in Ireland. He also had the misfortune to lose a leg in the fighting in Flanders. He made his reputation as a critic in post-war London.
- 45 P Bailey, 'Fats Waller Meets Harry Champion: Americanization, National Identity and Sexual Politics in Interwar British Music Hall,' *Cultural and Social History*, 2007, 4(40), pp.495-509 quoting John Crow's review of Waller's performance at the Finsbury Park Empire in the *Spectator*, 2 September 1938
- 46 *Country Life*, 11 June 1938 cited in P Bailey, 'Fats Waller Meets Harry Champion,' at p.503
- 47 Bailey, 'Fats Waller Meets Harry Champion,' p.505
- 48 The show starring Cliff Richard attracted 19.5 million viewers, Max Bygraves 21 million but Harry Secombe beat both with an audience of 22 million.
- 49 Cited in Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p.76
- 50 The highly successful 21st century folk band, Bellowhead, included Harry Champion's 'The Old Dun Cow' on one of their tours/CDs. A bolder, if not entirely convincing claim has been made by B J Faulk, who claims that 'rock musicians [particularly the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the Kinks] ... ironically appropriated the traditional forms of Victorian music hall.' *British Rock Modernism, 1967-1977: The Story of Music Hall in Rock*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, p.1. Originally published by Ashgate Press, 2010. See the review by D Laing, *Popular Music*, 33(3), 2014, p.573, who refers to 'a puzzling mixture of suggestive insights, assiduous scholarship, special pleading and theoretical turgidity.'
- 51 J Stratton, 'Judge Dread: Music Hall Traditionalist or Postcolonial Hybrid,' *Contemporary British History*, 28(1), 2014, pp.81-102