

An Approach to Traditions of British Stand-Up  
Comedy

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This thesis is the first to examine stand-up comedy within an academic framework. It begins with a review of various theories of humour and examines the three major strands of thought: the idea that humour is a way of expressing hostility; the idea that humorous laughter is caused by incongruity; and the idea that humour is connected with a release of tension. Parts of each of these are taken on, in order to establish a method of examining stand-up comedy. A particular emphasis is placed on the incongruity theory, and it is argued that this implies an intrinsic link between the joke and its cultural context: humorous incongruity involves deviation from the normal and the expected, and ideas of what constitutes abnormality or unexpectedness will differ from culture to culture.

The three major traditions of British stand-up comedy, (the Music Hall/Variety tradition, the Working Men's Club tradition, and the Alternative Comedy tradition) are examined. In each case, the stylistic tendencies of the tradition, and the attitudes towards class, gender, and race implied by the comedy are examined. The major characteristics of each of these traditions are linked with particular aspects of their organization, and it is argued that in each case, professionalization has tended to discourage stylistic innovation and political radicalism. The work of three comedians, Frankie Howerd, Les Dawson, and Ben Elton, is then examined in detail, with a view to establishing how important the influence of tradition is on the work of individual comedians.

The thesis concludes by restressing the importance of the cultural context of humour, and by discussing the reasons why professionalization should discourage radicalism and innovation. It is argued that the full artistic and political potential of the form of stand-up comedy has rarely been attained.

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## Introduction

Stand-up comedy is difficult to define, because it has undergone significant changes as it has evolved. There are various definitive features of the form which can be identified: it is a spoken form; it is a solo form, involving only one performer; it involves direct communication with the audience; and perhaps most importantly, it is defined by the effect it has on its audience, by the fact that it provokes laughter. However, to say that stand-up comedy simply involves a single performer speaking directly to an audience in order to make it laugh is inadequate, for several reasons. Firstly, it is not an exclusively spoken form, having evolved out of comic song, and many stand-up comedians still include songs in their acts. In addition to this, stand-up comedy sometimes relies on gesture and visual jokes involving stage props. Secondly, it is not necessarily a solo form, as many double acts could be said to qualify as stand-up comedians. Thirdly, it does not necessarily involve direct communication with the audience, because in stand-up double acts, the performers often talk to each other as well as to the audience. Finally, it does not always involve laughter. If a comedian 'dies' on stage, in other words if he or she fails to make the audience laugh, this does not mean that the act fails to qualify as stand-up comedy. Even modifying this first definitive feature by saying that the form involves the *intention* to provoke laughter from the audience is not entirely sufficient, because there have been some comedians who have deliberately rejected this intention and refused to be funny. However, it can be said that stand-up comedy *usually* involves a single performer making an audience laugh by talking to it directly.

In order to clarify this rather vague definition, it may be useful to contrast stand-up comedy with similar forms, in order to decide what it is not. Firstly, it is not storytelling. Whilst storytelling is a spoken form of entertainment, it does not necessarily involve the intention to provoke laughter in its audience, and it may produce a range of emotional responses. In addition to this, storytelling can exist in a number of contexts, but stand-up comedy only exists within the context of formalized entertainment. Stories

can be told in everyday conversation, or to a child at bed time, but the same cannot be said of stand-up, which requires a formalized audience, and a clear division between the performer and the audience. Secondly, comic soliloquies in stage plays are not stand-up comedy, because they are contained within a larger narrative structure, and a stand-up act is complete in itself, even if it is contained within the larger structure of a package of acts. To complete the definition, a stand-up comedy act usually involves a solo performer speaking directly to an audience, with the intention of provoking laughter, within the context of formalized entertainment, but it is an entity in itself, and is not contained within a larger narrative structure.

In addition to the difficulties in defining the form, stand-up comedy also poses problems because it is a subject which has largely been ignored by academics. The general subjects of laughter and comedy have received attention from academics in many different disciplines, and there have been academic studies of the traditions of entertainment in which stand-up comedy has existed, notably Music Hall, but the actual subject of stand-up comedy has received little or no attention. There have been various non-academic studies of comedians, and of traditions of entertainment in which stand-up comedy has existed, but these have often lacked a hard analytical approach. The lack of attention paid to the subject has necessitated a reliance on unconventional techniques and sources in this thesis. These techniques and sources have included fieldwork, attendance at stand-up comedy shows, and interviewing comedians and others involved with stand-up comedy; the examination of articles in newspapers and magazines; the examination of biographical and autobiographical material relating to comedians; and the analysis of audio and video recordings of comedians.

The purpose of this research is not to provide a thorough examination of the vast uncharted area of stand-up comedy, but to examine specific aspects of it. It specifically examines British stand-up comedy, within the context of the three major traditions of

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entertainment in which it has existed, namely Music Hall and Variety, Working Men's Clubs, and Alternative Comedy. It focusses on stylistic aspects of stand-up, and on its social and political meanings. It also examines how the traditions of entertainment within which stand-up comedy has existed may have affected the development of the form, encouraging certain stylistic features, and certain kinds of social and political meanings. This research does not attempt to examine the dynamics of the form from the point of view of the performer; and it largely avoids evaluating the work of individual comedians. A comedian's work is analysed when it is relevant to a particular stylistic or political trend; the individual skill of the performer is not a major concern of the research. In order to establish an analytical approach to the material, various theories of humour will be examined.

PART I; THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO HUMOUR

Chapter One: Existing Theories of Humour

Chapter Two: Establishing a New Theoretical Perspective

## Chapter One: Existing Theories of Humour

### I. Problems posed by existing theories of humour

- A. General problems
- B. Problems posed by scientific approaches

### II. The classic theories of humour

- A. Superiority Theory
- B. Incongruity Theory
- C. Relief Theory

### III. Instinct versus culture

## I. Problems posed by existing theories of humour

### A. General problems

For more than two thousand years, writers from various disciplines have attempted to analyse humour, dissecting jokes in order to discover the essence of what makes them funny. Many of these analyses have been part of studies of the larger subject of laughter, which have also considered non-humorous laughter, for example that caused by tickling, mental disorders, or nitrous oxide. As these forms of laughter are outside of the scope of a study of stand-up comedy, only theories directly related to humorous laughter will be considered here. Theories of humour have emerged from many different fields, including philosophy, psychology, sociology, physiology, anthropology, and linguistics. Many of the classic theories of humour have serious drawbacks, particularly for an analysis of a specific cultural phenomenon like British stand-up comedy. One of the main problems posed by philosophical theories of humour is that many of the philosophers who have proposed them, from Plato onwards, have come from privileged positions in society, and so have tended only to examine jokes from highbrow and literary sources, rather than popular humour. Whilst presenting humour as a universal phenomenon, and presenting their analysis as neutral and unbiased, philosophers have tended to exhibit the prejudices of their privilege. A snobbish attitude has meant that they have tended to ignore popular humour, which Cicero deemed, 'hardly sufferable at a gentleman's dinner party.'

### B. Problems posed by scientific approaches

Some psychologists and sociologists have attempted to take a more scientific approach, by subjecting humour to empirical testing. However, the results produced by such testing are questionable, for several reasons. Firstly, some of the experiments use techniques which are profoundly unscientific. For example, as part of an experiment on the relationship between aggression and humour, conducted by David Landy and David Mettee, a male undergraduate had

to mercilessly insult the subjects.<sup>2</sup> Insult is an elusive phenomenon which cannot be subjected to scientific control; the insulting behaviour of the undergraduate could not have been standardized, and as a result, it is not scientifically valid. Similarly, an experiment on social factors in humour conducted by Richard David Young and Margaret Fry placed a 'young, very attractive female confederate' in the room with the male subjects, to see if this affected their response to jokes with a sexual content.<sup>3</sup> The judgement that the female confederate was 'very attractive' is not scientific, because physical attractiveness is a socially-defined phenomenon, which is not scientifically measurable.

Secondly, the approach to the comedy material used in experiments is often very crude. The sources from which it is taken often seem to have been chosen in a very arbitrary way; cartoons from magazines, and jokes from published anthologies are used much more frequently than tapes of stand-up comedians. Individual jokes are rarely considered: jokes or cartoons are placed in categories by panels of psychologists, and this is deemed a scientifically objective method of establishing the nature of the jokes, ignoring the possibility that the judgement of the panel of psychologists may be culturally specific. The categories into which the jokes or cartoons are placed are also very crude. For example, an experiment by Michael Godkewitsch used 'sex jokes' (*sic*) as the humour material, because: 'there are only a few basic joke themes, as every entertainer will maintain, and the only theme that seems relatively pure, in the sense that jokes containing this theme tend to be massed in one factor in factor analyses...is sex.'<sup>4</sup> This is a very crude approach, because whilst it may be easy to identify jokes which have a sexual content, there are many different meanings which sex jokes can carry. They can involve hostile elements, degrading women, or less frequently, degrading men. They often enforce a culture's conception of normal sexuality, by ridiculing deviation from this; jokes which ridicule homosexuals are an example of this. They may also involve racist beliefs, portraying members of racial minorities as sexual deviants. All of these widely different meanings will affect how the

joke is received and appreciated, so to lump them together in one category is far from satisfactory.

Thirdly, humour is examined as if it were some kind of eternal, universal, unchanging substance, rather than being part of an ever-changing cultural discourse. One modern psychologist, trying to prove or disprove Freud's theories of humour by subjecting them to empirical testing, quotes one of the conditions which is required for the testing to be seen as scientifically valid: '*Observations...* must be under *controlled* conditions (that is eliminate the role of extraneous variables).'<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the idea that humour can be tested in such a way involves some highly questionable assumptions, principally that the process of experimentation is somehow neutral, and will not involve extraneous variables in itself. The fact that somebody hears a joke or watches a slide of a cartoon in a science laboratory will inevitably affect his or her response to it, but this fact is barely taken into consideration by most experimenters. Some experiments involve subjecting the subjects to extraordinary processes. For example, Stanley Schachter and Ladd Wheeler conducted an experiment in which subjects were injected with a stimulant (epinephrine), a placebo (saline solution), or a depressant (chlorpromazine), and then, after the fifteen minutes which it took for the drugs to take effect, they were shown a fifteen minutes segment of a comedy film.<sup>6</sup> An experiment by Ronald Langevin and H.I. Day subjected the subjects to an even more bizarre process:

Beckman electrodes with electrode paste were placed on the palm and back of the left hand for G.S.R. [Galvanic Skin Response] measures, and others were placed just below the elbow on the inside of each arm for H.R. [Heart Rate] measures. An ear-clip electrode was also used to ground the S [subject] to the shielded room in which the experiment took place.<sup>7</sup>

In either case, the fact that the subjects' appreciation of the humour material will be affected by the very process of being injected and having to wait around for fifteen minutes, or being wired up with electrodes is barely considered by the experimenters.

The laboratory setting, and the process of experimentation are in themselves extraneous variables, inevitably affecting the outcome of the experiment, and thus calling the results into question. In addition to the crude treatment of the humour material, scientific testing is not particularly relevant to a study of the cultural phenomenon of stand-up comedy, in which the 'extraneous variables', for example, the social class which the audience belongs to, the way it is seated, or the historical context to which a particular joke belongs are all an important part of the study. Similarly, the extraneous variables involved in scientific testing call into question its relevance to the study of a specific phenomenon such as stand-up comedy: the number of people who inject themselves with epinephrine, or wire themselves to electrodes before going out to watch a comedian must be negligible.

Another problem which arises from existing theories of humour from any discipline is that of terminology. Various theorists have used different terms to differentiate between types of humour. A well-known example of this is Freud's use of the terms 'Jokes' ('*Witz*'), 'the Comic' ('*das Komische*'), and 'Humour' ('*der Humor*') to refer to different types of humour. In most cases, such terminology is specifically related to the particular theory being proposed and does not have much wider significance. Therefore, it seems sensible to ignore such differentiation, and to use different terms like 'humour' or 'comedy' simply for the sake of variety. Another problem concerning terminology is that the term 'comedy' is often used in a literary context to refer to a particular category of stage play. Here, this definition is rejected, and 'comedy' is used to refer to the broad phenomenon, rather than the particular theatrical category.

Having established some of the problems posed by existing analyses of humour, the actual theories which they have produced may be examined. There are three basic theories which have emerged from the huge body of writing on humour.

## II. The classic theories of humour

### A. Superiority Theory

The Superiority Theory is the oldest explanation of the cause of humorous laughter, originating in the writings of Plato (428-348 BC) and Aristotle (384-322 BC). There are two basic variations of the theory. The first proposes that we laugh at jokes because they make us feel superior to the joke's victim. Plato argued that the cause of laughter is the lack of self-knowledge in others, Aristotle defined comedy as 'an imitation of men worse than average', and Cicero (106-43 BC) proposed that the causes of laughter are 'physical blemishes', and 'blemishes noticeable in the conduct of people'.<sup>8</sup> In all of these cases, the deficiencies of others are seen as the cause of laughter. Hobbes (1588-1679) elaborated on the theory by adding the refinement that we laugh at the deficiencies of others, specifically because it makes us feel superior: 'The passion of laughter proceedeth from a *sudden conception* of some *ability* in himself that laugheth. Also men laugheth at the *infirmities* of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated.'<sup>9</sup>

The second variation of the Superiority Theory proposes that laughter is a simple expression of hostility towards others. For example, Quintilian (35-after 96 AD) stated that 'laughter is never far from derision', and William Hazlitt (1778-1830) argued that 'we only laugh at those misfortunes in which we are spectators, not sharers.'<sup>10</sup> These versions of the Superiority Theory all rely on the assumption that everybody feels a degree of antipathy towards others, and wants to feel superior to them. Later versions of the theory explicitly state this, arguing that we possess natural, biological aggression towards others: Freud (1856-1939) spoke of jokes allowing us to express our innate 'hostile urges against our fellow men'<sup>11</sup> which society forces us to repress; and Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989) argued that humour is caused by instinctive aggressive urges, which makes it resemble the triumph ceremony in geese.<sup>12</sup> Arthur Koestler (1905-1983) has taken the concept of innate

aggressive drives further, arguing that jokes which direct aggression at minority groups are the result of an innate dislike of 'physical or mental malformations' which is repressed by Western society, so that 'we are no longer aware of the fact that it requires a certain imagination and a good deal of empathy to recognize in a dwarf, or a 'thick-lipped Blackamoor' a human being which, though different in appearance, exists and feels as oneself does.'<sup>13</sup>

A basic flaw of the Superiority Theory is that it fails to explain all humorous laughter. Whilst there is little doubt that there are many jokes which do involve an element of aggression, there are also many jokes which do not have victims, which do not ridicule anybody, and therefore do not rely on aggression towards others, or on promoting feelings of superiority in those who enjoy them. Another problem with the versions of the Superiority Theory which have been examined so far is that they state or imply that aggression in jokes is the result of innate and universal instincts, and therefore they do not examine hostile humour in its social context. This can be a serious omission. In many cases, there are clear social and even political reasons for telling hostile jokes. For example, Antonin J. Obrdlik has described how the people of Czechoslovakia deliberately used anti-nazi humour as a political tool, to bolster their own morale, and to undermine the morale of the nazis. Some anti-nazi jokes were even distributed on leaflets, and there were clear signs that the nazis considered the jokes a threat.<sup>14</sup> In such a case, the social and political reasons for the hostile jokes seem a much more relevant concern than hypothetical aggressive instincts which may or may not exist. However, there are various sociological studies which have examined aggressive humour in its social context. Some have examined aggressive humour as a tool in social conflict. An experiment by H.A. Wolff, C.E. Smith and H.A. Murray found that Jewish subjects disliked anti-Scottish jokes; they hypothesised that this was because the subjects identified with the Scots, who suffer from the same racial stereotype of stinginess. This experiment

inspired modifications on Hobbes' idea that we laugh when a joke makes us feel superior to somebody else. For example, whereas Hobbes had argued that jokes are funny when they make the individual feel superior to another person, Laurence La Fave proposed that 'a "joke" is humorous to the extent that it enhances an object of affection and/or disparages an object of repulsion; unhumorous to ~~the extent that~~ it does the opposite.'<sup>15</sup> In other words the joke need not necessarily esteem the *individual* to be considered funny: it will also be found funny if it esteems a group to which the individual belongs, or a group with which the individual identifies (a 'Reference Group'); similarly, it will not be found funny if it disparages a group to which the individual belongs, or a group taken as a reference group by the individual. There has also been work on aggressive humour's role in social conflicts which has examined specific instances of such humour. For example, John Burma examined jokes told by black people which ridicule white people, and found that they were often very different from white jokes which ridicule black people. Whereas jokes told by white people about blacks tend to reduce them to a set of stereotyped characteristics, jokes told by black people about whites tend to address themselves to the realities of the oppression which black people suffer. Burma mentions jokes about black maids being sexually harrassed, about black people being cheated out of their vote, jokes which overturn racial stereotypes, or which satirize white racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan.'<sup>16</sup> Michael Phillips has examined racial humour in more general terms, and has argued that the context in which a joke is told is vital in allowing us to determine whether or not a joke is racist. For example, a joke which describes an illiterate black person may be appreciated as an illustration of the mental inferiority of black people by a white racist audience, or be read as a satirical comment on the poor educational facilities available to black people by a conference of black sociologists. The joke is racist in the first context, but is not in the second. Phillips also argues that jokes which rely on racial stereotypes are not racist simply because they portray members of a certain racial grouping in a certain way:

The main point of portraying Jews with enormous noses and Blacks with huge lips is not to perpetrate the belief that Jews and Blacks look *that way*. Rather, it is to promote an *attitude* about looking that way, and to take the position that Jews and Blacks look that way *as a way of* insulting Jews and Blacks.<sup>17</sup>

Other sociological studies of aggressive humour have concentrated on its use as a form of social control. For example, Orrin E. Klapp argued that the figure of the fool is used in this way. Those who deviate from certain norms can be written off as *Fools*, thus losing status, and the chance of leadership.<sup>18</sup> Richard M. Stephenson examined jokes relating to social class in 1950s America, and noted that whilst members of different classes were ridiculed, the jokes were not an expression of class conflict, but instead acted as a form of social control: the American 'aristocracy' (those with acquired wealth and status), the new rich, and manual labourers (usually represented by immigrants), were all ridiculed specifically because they were seen to deviate from the values of the capitalist system.<sup>19</sup> Christie Davies has argued that Irish and Scottish jokes are about social control rather than conflict. His argument is based on the premise that they reflect the general concerns of capitalism. Modern capitalist societies make two central demands on the individual: the need to succeed at work, and thus to earn money; and the use of this money to pursue leisure activities. Jokes which portray racial groups like the Irish as stupid ridicule the inability to fulfil the first of these demands; and jokes which portray racial groups like the Scots as mean ridicule the inability to fulfil the second.<sup>20</sup> Davies has used this argument (and several others<sup>21</sup>) to prove that Irish jokes are not aggressive, do not express hostility towards the Irish, and are totally unrelated to the current political situation in Ireland. Other studies of Irish jokes have taken the opposite view, linking Irish jokes with the long history of anti-Irish racism, and citing specific examples of jokes which refer to the political situation in Northern Ireland.<sup>22</sup>

The ethics of aggressive humour have also received a good deal of attention. Those who believed that aggression is an intrinsic part

of humour often saw it as a negative force: Hobbes stated that laughter 'is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves,' and Aristotle even argued that certain jokes should be prohibited by law.<sup>23</sup> A thorough examination of the ethics of laughter has been provided by Ronald de Sousa, who has termed aggressive humour 'phthonic'. His argument is that whilst we suspend our disbelief to appreciate the incongruity in a joke, we cannot suspend our value system in order to appreciate the belief behind a joke: 'After long enough among the natives, the anthropologist might feel a sufficient sense of community to laugh at their jokes, even though in sober conscience she does not share their attitudes: she does not believe that chickens are dirty and pigeons are pure.'<sup>24</sup> Thus, if people laugh at a joke which suggests that women secretly want to be raped, they do so because they share that belief, or at least that they feel a sufficient sense of community to endorse that belief by joining in the laughter. If we believe that their attitude is morally wrong, then we believe that the laughter is unethical.

## B. Incongruity Theory

The Incongruity Theory is much younger than the Superiority Theory. It was hinted at in the work of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Thomas Hobbes<sup>25</sup>, but did not appear in a recognizable form until the eighteenth century. It has been proposed in different versions by many philosophers, including David Hartley (1705-1757), Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), James Beattie (1735-1803), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), and Arthur Koestler.<sup>26</sup> In simple terms, the theory states that we laugh at a suddenly-perceived and unexpected clash of words, or mismatch of concepts, that we laugh when language or logic are used in an inhabitual manner; at its most basic level, we laugh at the incongruous. Some philosophers stated this idea quite simply. Beattie stated that 'laughter seems to arise from the view of things incongruous united in the same assemblage'; and Hartley identified the source of humour as 'accidental, indirect, and unnatural

conjunctions of circumstances, that are really foreign to each other, or oppositions that are united.'<sup>27</sup> However, it is Koestler who has provided perhaps the most thorough and satisfactory version of the theory. As part of a broader study of human creativity, Koestler examined the mental process which we go through in understanding a joke. He argued that in any joke, there is a collision of 'frames of reference', 'associative contexts', 'types of logic', 'codes of behaviour', or 'universes of discourse'. We conceptualize our perception of the world: a person in the distance looks smaller than a person standing next to us, but we still see the distant person as person-sized, because our minds process the information we receive from the retina. Similarly, in ordinary thinking, our minds think according to one matrix of thought, or set of rules: for example, a person playing chess will be thinking in the matrix of the rules of chess, and will not see the chess board as 'a uniform mosaic of black and white squares, but as a kind of magnetic field with lines of force indicating the bishops' possible moves.' In bisociation, one of these matrices of thought suddenly collides with another, and the incongruous result produces laughter.<sup>28</sup>

A distinct advantage of the Incongruity Theory over the Superiority Theory is that it acknowledges the importance of the cultural context in which humour occurs. Hutcheson acknowledged this, arguing that because different cultures understand the world through different sets of metaphors, 'what is ridiculous in one age or nation, may not be so in another.'<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Beattie argued that we only laugh at incongruities which are unfamiliar to us, and this also means that humour is connected with its cultural context; he pointed out that a periwig would not be seen as funny in the time when it was fashionable, but it would seem incongruous to an Ancient Greek or Roman who would be totally unfamiliar with it.<sup>30</sup> The clash of concepts in humour involves an outcome which is unexpected and inhabitual. This means that humour is inextricably linked with culture, as what is expected and habitual will differ in different cultural contexts.

Incongruity theorists have disagreed as to whether the unconventional thought processes which occur in humour are beneficial or harmful. John Locke (1632-1704) argued that wit is not wholly compatible with the 'severe Rules of Truth, and Good Reason', and David Hartley argued that in joking, people 'pervert all notions of things themselves, and become unable to see them as they really are.'<sup>31</sup> However, others saw humour as beneficial. Schopenhauer argued that we understand the world through rational concepts, and that in humour, there is a 'sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation.'<sup>32</sup> Rather than deviating from the Rules of Truth and Good Reason, or perverting our notions of the way things really are, humour allows us to see the flaws in the rational concepts by which we understand the world, which 'cannot get down to the infinite multifariousness and the fine shades of difference of the concrete.'<sup>33</sup> Put simply, rather than obscuring the truth, humour allows us to see it more clearly.

The emphasis on the cultural aspects of humour and Schopenhauer's idea that humour allows us to see flaws in our conceptualization of the world both anticipate a body of writing by various twentieth century sociologists, who have examined the relationship between humour and social reality. They have argued that humour represents deviations from a society's conception of reality. Ralph Piddington has argued that humour involves a jumbling up of social evaluations. However, this jumbling is conservative rather than subversive: social conditioning always involves repression, and laughter compensates for this by *temporarily* jumbling up social evaluations, *temporarily* suspending the social conditioning. This actually enforces the social conditioning:

The ludicrous is always anti-social, a sudden blow to social sentiments centred about objects and traditions of minor social importance. Were we to weep under these circumstances, we should admit that a readjustment in our attitude- that is, in our social sentiments- was necessary. On the other hand, by laughing we adopt an attitude of complete satisfaction with things as they are; by

adopting this attitude we inhibit any tendency to change in our system of social evaluations.<sup>34</sup>

In a study of humour within the specific environment of the workplace, Elizabeth Hansot made a similar argument. Using Erving Goffman's concept of the 'frame', which is similar to Koestler's idea of matrices of thought, Hansot argued that humour can relate to the frame of workplace activity in three ways: firstly, it can stay within the frame; secondly, it can provide distance from the frame; or thirdly, it can break the frame. Frame-breaking humour is potentially the most subversive, but it is actually conservative:

Once we adopt a given frame to interpret our reality and ourselves, the shoe will begin to pinch, the fit will be not quite right, and we will again look for the temporary relief of frame-break. When humour functions as a frame breaker, it gives form to our reservations, both cognitive and affective, about the serious frames in which we spend so much of our time being parents and workers, soldiers and civilians. Humour of this sort allows us to disassociate ourselves from familiar roles and see them in all the fresh incongruity with which they might strike a visitor from Mars. After a frame-break we seem to resume activity within a frame with greater ease.<sup>35</sup>

Mary Douglas also argued that humour is conservative, but for different reasons. She argued that humour is an anti-rite, and as such, it is potentially subversive: 'The message of a standard rite is that ordained patterns of social life are inescapable. The message of the joke is that they are escapable.'<sup>36</sup> However, in order to disarm this potential subversiveness, humour is subject to social regulation: 'Social requirements may judge a joke to be in bad taste, risky, too near the bone, improper, or irrelevant. Such controls are exerted on behalf of hierarchy as such, or on behalf of values which are judged too precious and too precarious to be exposed to challenge.'<sup>37</sup> Jokes cannot be truly subversive, because they depend on a consensus for recognition, and this consensus is restricted by social regulation.

Steve Linstead has offered yet another argument in favour of the idea that laughter is not subversive. In a study of the jokes made within a particular factory, he argued that humour involves reversals of the social structure, but these do not threaten the structure because they are only temporary, and are kept separate from normal discourse by being considered 'non-real', part of a 'play' situation.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Max Eastman, an American radical, argued that humour has the ability to tell unpalatable truths, and as a result is carefully separated from normal discourse:

These people are resentful of the humour that reveals, because it shakes their confidence and frightens them. They call it 'levity', and wish to have it segregated and rendered irrelevant, confined to the 'funny page', or the 'comic paper', included in parentheses, or at least stigmatized with an exclamation-point, or a pointed voice, or something else to indicate that it is not to be taken seriously or allowed to spread.<sup>39</sup>

However, there have also been arguments which suggest that the incongruity in humour is subversive. Linstead has argued that in certain circumstances, if a humorous thought could be transposed into a serious frame, or if 'real-world content' could be transposed into a humorous frame, then it could be genuinely subversive, and could inspire social change. Anton C. Zijderfeld provides a more forceful argument. He argued that joking is a de-ideologizing force which unmask social institutions. He outlined four ways in which it can deviate from social reality. Firstly, it can deviate from the norms of socio-cultural life, taking the form of satire, or of parable. Secondly, it can deviate from the meaning of language, rearranging syllables, words, and sentences, thus defamiliarizing language. Thirdly, it can deviate from conventional logic, either by transporting logical thinking into the realms of the absurd (as in elephant jokes), or by beating logic with a cunning hyper-logic (as in Jewish jokes). Fourthly, it can deviate from traditional emotions. Zijderfeld argues against the idea that our emotions are innate and instinctive, stating that 'our emotions are...pretty much institutionalized being moulded by the patterns of our culture.'<sup>40</sup> Certain forms of humour, particularly sick humour, subvert these

institutionalized emotions, for example, by making death or disability the subject of laughter, rather than of grief or sympathy. By deviating from the systems of social reality, humour exposes the ideologies sustained by the powerful in society, and by providing distance from them, it is potentially subversive. Like Douglas, Zijderfeld argued that this subversiveness has inspired leaders to regulate humour. Dictators ban satire, but other leaders work more subtly, imposing control in less obvious ways. However, his emphasis is different: whereas Douglas argued that it is impossible for humour to be genuinely subversive, because of its reliance on consensus, Zijderfeld argues that it can be genuinely subversive, and provides the example of the Dutch provos offering sugar cane to the horses of the police who were guarding their protest rally as a genuinely subversive humorous act.<sup>41</sup>

### C. Relief Theory

The Relief Theory emerged at about the same time as the Incongruity Theory. It proposes that laughter is caused by a sudden release of emotional tension. In some versions of the theory, it is proposed that within the actual process of telling a joke, tension is built up, which is then released by the punchline. For example, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) stated: 'Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.'<sup>42</sup> In other versions, it is proposed that rather than releasing tension which is built up purely within the context of the joke, laughter releases tensions of a more general kind. David Hartley noted that relief from pain or alarming emotion can provoke laughter. Freud made the distinction between 'innocent' jokes, and 'tendentious' jokes, which release tension. Tendentious jokes allow innate sexual and aggressive urges, which are normally subject to social regulation to be given a free rein. However, whilst Freud explained humour by referring to unchanging and universal innate urges common to all human beings, his explanation is flawed in that it relies heavily on the values of his particular cultural context, and thus it is by no means universal. For example, his explanation of 'smut'

and tendentious jokes with a sexual content, is only relevant to cultures in which the active role in sexual relations is exclusively taken by men, the passive role exclusively taken by women. He argued that women are naturally given to passive exhibitionism, and that men are naturally inclined to initiate the sexual act, but both are prevented from openly acting on these urges by social conditioning. A man expresses sexual excitement towards a woman by 'the intentional bringing into prominence of sexual facts and relations by speech', but sometimes, the woman to whom this smut is directed will respond with embarrassment, which is merely a repressed admission of excitement. In such cases, the man attempts to overcome 'the woman's inflexibility' by becoming hostile to the woman, calling on a third person to act as an ally, and embarrassing the woman in front of this third person. However, in 'a society of more refined education', as opposed to that of 'the common people', smut must be disguised in the form of jokes.<sup>43</sup> The idea that women only refuse to indulge in sexual activity because they repress their own sexual excitement, and that men are sexual liberators is highly culturally specific. Similarly, the snobbery implied by the contrasting of 'refined' society with 'the common people' betrays the prejudices of Freud's wealthy middle class background.

As with the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory has tended to provide a universal explanation of humour, in that it has tended to rely on the concept of innate drives and urges which are common to all humanity. Some versions of the Relief Theory go beyond the idea of instinct, and suggest that humour can be explained physiologically. Kant's version included a physiological explanation. He argued that in any joke, tension and expectation are built up, which are released by the punchline. After hearing the punchline, the listener goes back through the expectation and release of the joke several times in rapid succession, and this causes a corresponding rhythm of tension and relaxation in the elastic portion of the intestine, which spreads to the diaphragm, thus causing the altered breathing which constitutes laughter.<sup>44</sup> Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) argued that 'nervous excitation' tends

to cause muscular activity in people. It can be discharged through nerves which are not connected to bodily members, thus leading to the production of other feelings and ideas; through motor nerves, thus leading to muscular contractions; or through the viscera, thus stimulating one or more of these. Laughter is a form of the second of these, muscular release, and it can be caused by various feelings, like tension.<sup>45</sup> Arthur Koestler added a physiological dimension to the idea that laughter allows the release of natural aggressive instincts, arguing that these instincts have a chemical basis, being the legacy of a glandular system designed to cope with life in the Paleolithic times.<sup>46</sup> The body produces more adrenalin than is needed for a modern lifestyle, and laughter is a mechanism which allows the release of aggression, and therefore a reduction in adrenalin. His argument proposes that adrenalin is a necessary ingredient in laughter, that 'the grain of salt which must be present in the narrative to make us laugh turns out to be a drop of adrenalin.'<sup>47</sup>

Whilst many versions of the Relief Theory explain humour as a product of instinct, or even physiological processes, some concentrate more on the idea that humour provides intellectual relief. For example, William Hazlitt argued that to take on society's conceptualization of the world requires a certain effort, and that humour offers relief from this by momentarily suspending this conceptualization:

Now the serious is the habitual stress which the mind lays upon the expectation of a given order of events, following one another with a certain regularity and weight of interest attached to them...The ludicrous, or comic, is the unexpected loosening or relaxing this stress below its usual pitch of intensity, by such an abrupt transposition of the order of our ideas, as taking the mind unawares, throws it off guard, startles it into a lively sense of pleasure, and leaves no time for painful reflections.<sup>48</sup>

Freud made a similar point, arguing that humour allows a return to childhood freedom, in that it allows the rules of language and logic to be disregarded. He pointed out that when children first learn

their language, they play with it freely, reinventing words and breaking the rules of grammar. As the child grows older, incorrect use of language is increasingly frowned upon, and a system of logic is enforced. Humour allows a reversion to the childhood state before this enforcement has taken place, and this is the source of the pleasure. He argued that the temporary return to the childhood freedom allows the systems of language and logic to be enforced more thoroughly in non-joking situations, illustrating this point with the example of the student 'rag'. Academic institutions deprive students of freedom of thought, because of the highly logical nature of academic work. Times of illogic and nonsense, like the student 'rags' are necessary to compensate for this strict enforcement of logic. Therefore, in offering this compensation or relief, the 'rags' help to preserve academic life.<sup>49</sup> This argument is similar to that of Elizabeth Hansot which, as we have seen, proposes that jokes temporarily break the frame of thought, offering temporary relief from the effort of maintaining the frame, and thus allowing the frame to be re-imposed with greater ease.

### III. Instinct versus culture

Three basic theories have emerged which seek to explain humorous laughter. The Superiority Theory stresses the importance of aggression in humour, arguing that we laugh when we are made to feel superior to others. The Incongruity Theory proposes that we laugh when we are confronted with a suddenly-perceived mismatch of words or ideas. The Relief Theory proposes that we laugh when tension or other emotions are suddenly relieved, or when repressed instincts are suddenly given a free rein. These theories need not be taken as the ultimate explanation of humour: the Superiority Theory does not seem to explain all jokes, as there are many which have no aggressive content, but nonetheless, aggression does seem to be an important part of many jokes. Neither are the theories incompatible with one another: some theorists have supported more than one of them, and others, like Arthur Koestler, have supported all three. However, what emerges from a study of the different versions of each

theory which have been proposed is that there is a basic split between those who argue that humour is caused by innate urges, instincts, or physiological processes, and those who see it as a product of culture, which cannot be examined without taking the cultural context into consideration.

## Chapter Two; Establishing a New Theoretical Perspective

I. The importance of culture

II. Incongruity and culture

III. Curbing humour's subversiveness

A. Framing

B. Repetition

C. Aggressive humour and attitude towards humorous incongruity

D. Observational humour and perspective

IV. Summary

## 1. The importance of culture

Before a new theoretical perspective on humour can be established, the dispute between those who stress instinct, and those who stress cultural factors must be resolved. There are two large question marks which hang over any theory which relies on the idea that humour is the product of instinct or innate biological urges. The first is that the very concept of innate sexual and aggressive drives is open to question, as there is a school of scientific thought which argues that instinct is a negligible factor in higher mammals like human beings.<sup>1</sup> The second question mark relates more specifically to the subject of humour. Instinct-based theories tend to suggest that humour is universally uniform: we all share the same instincts, we all share the same biology, so according to these theories, we should all laugh at the same things. This idea is demonstrably false, as there are many examples of humour from other cultures which would seem strange and alien to a modern British audience: at funerals, the Luguru of Tanganyika get laughs by throwing water over female mourners, and climbing into the grave and pretending to sleep; in traditional Iranian improvisatory theatre, the clown plays for laughs by pouring yoghurt over the heads of the other characters; the San Blas Kuna of Panama recall the misfortunes of others straight, with no apparent joking structures, and this is considered immensely funny; in many tribal societies, a standard joke involves a grandson teasing his grandfather by threatening to marry his grandmother; and the Kagaru find it funny to throw excrement at certain cousins.<sup>2</sup> None of these jokes would survive the transfer to the cultural context of modern Britain. If they still seem funny, it is due to their very oddness: the idea that members of another culture find it funny to throw water over mourners at a funeral may raise a smile, but if somebody threw water over mourners in a British funeral, this would be more likely to provoke anger than laughter. We do not have to look to cultures as exotic and far-removed as Iran and Panama to find examples of jokes which could not be transferred to a different cultural context. A cartoon entitled 'Music Corner', depicting a grand piano being used as a table piled

high with guns, papers, flowers, books and clothing would be incomprehensible, let alone funny outside the context of a Kibbutz, where non-essential activities like the Arts are frowned upon.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, just as some jokes cannot cross cultural barriers imposed by geography, others cannot cross cultural barriers imposed by time. A Music Hall joke about William Gladstone would be unlikely to raise a laugh with a modern audience, now that Gladstone has been relegated in importance from a major political figure to a mere historical one. Even short periods of time are enough to rob a joke of its impact. Jokes about the explosion of the American space shuttle which occurred in 1986 are already long-redundant by 1990.

## II. Incongruity and culture

Having established the importance of culture over instinct, the three classic theories of humour may be assessed. The importance of culture inflicts further damage on the Superiority Theory: not only does it fall down because many jokes exist which do not have any aggressive content, but also because it tends to rely on the concept of innate aggressive drives, and therefore implies that humour is universal. Some versions of the Relief Theory are similarly flawed: if laughter exists to fulfil the simple biological function of reducing adrenalin levels as Arthur Koestler claimed, why is it that humour varies so much from culture to culture? Other versions of the Relief Theory can accommodate the importance of cultural factors more easily. For example, if humour exists to allow the expression of socially-repressed emotions, this explains humour differences, as different cultures will repress different emotions. However, it is the Incongruity Theory which relates humour to culture in the most satisfactory way. The Incongruity Theory states that jokes work because they involve a mismatch of words or ideas, a collision of two matrices of thought, a defiance of the expected outcome. The idea that expectation is defied in jokes and the emphasis on suddenness in some versions of the Incongruity Theory imply a certain temporal sequence: the build-up of the joke leads the listener to expect one outcome, but at the end of the joke, this

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expectation is suddenly defied. The mechanism on which such a sequence relies may be simple: for example, a word which has two meanings is used, and the build-up leads the listener to believe that one of the meanings is being used, but the punchline reveals that it was actually the other meaning which applied.

The Incongruity Theory implies an intrinsic link between humour and culture, because different cultures will have different ideas of what is incongruous. This is because for something to be incongruous, it must be unexpected and inhabitual, and this implies a deviation from systems of expectation and habit, which will differ from culture to culture. Because of this, humour is often destroyed when it is transferred to a different cultural context. For example, many British jokes begin with the phrase 'A bloke walks into a pub...', and then relate some bizarre occurrence which happens in the pub. Such jokes would have a radically different meaning in a country like Iran, in which the consumption of alcohol is prohibited by law; here, the opening line would probably be at least as incongruous as the punchline.

There are several different types of incongruity in humour. Many jokes rely on language for effect, exploiting homonyms, disregarding the rules of grammar, and reinventing words. Others rely on logic, either reinventing it by breaking the rules as in many Irish jokes or Jewish jokes; or by totally disregarding any logical structures, as in the work of comedians like Spike Milligan and Kevin McAleer. Others deviate from standard emotional responses. For example, sick jokes make death, disability, and disaster the subject for laughter rather than grief. Because the systems of language, logic, moral values and emotion differ from culture to culture, so their jokes differ. An obvious example of this is that many puns are untranslatable, because they rely on a double meaning which only exists in the original language. Similarly, a joke in which the incongruity is a deviation from a certain moral value would not work in a culture which did not have that moral value. This also explains differences in humour appreciation connected with social class,

gender, race, or regional identity, because within a culture, different social groups have different value systems, different institutionalized emotions, and different forms of the language. This means that a joke made by a member of one social group may well be lost on a member of another social group; for example, if a comedian from the North East of England used a local slang word in pun, this would be unlikely to provoke laughter from an audience in Surrey. It also accounts for individual differences in humour appreciation, as the cultural factors on which humour plays will have different relevance for different individuals; for example, a sick joke about a disaster will probably be far less funny for somebody who has lost a relative in it, than for somebody whose only contact with it has been via reports in the mass media. This emphasis on the importance of cultural factors in humour means that a joke can never be universal. However, this does not mean that jokes cannot be international, or be told in different centuries, as they may play on cultural factors which are common to many different countries and eras. For example, a joke in which the basic incongruity is that a man has sexual intercourse with a woman who is not his wife may work in any cultural context in which the concept of marital fidelity is strongly upheld; however, it will not be funny in any culture which has no concept of marriage or marital infidelity.

Many forms of humour work by creating an incongruity, by putting together two elements which are not normally connected. However, there are other forms of humour which do not make incongruous connections in this way, but instead make observations about life. This has led to an attack on the Incongruity Theory by Roger Scruton, who has argued that it does not explain the humour of caricature:

The caricature amuses, not because it does not fit Mrs Thatcher, but because it does fit her, all too well. It is true that it must also contain an exaggeration: but the exaggeration is amusing because it draws attention to some feature of *her*. If one wishes to describe the humour of caricature in terms of incongruity it must be added

that it is an incongruity which illustrates a deeper congruity between an object and itself.<sup>4</sup>

This objection seems to be valid for any form of humour based on recognition, be it caricature, observational monologue, or comic impersonation. In impersonation, the audience recognizes the mannerisms of a well-known personality and whilst these may be exaggerated by the comic, it is the congruity between the imitation and the memory of the imitated person which seems to cause the laughs. Similarly, in observational humour, the audience laughs when the observation that the comedian makes matches their memory of the object or action which is being observed. All of these forms of humour appear to rely more on congruity than on incongruity. However, it is simplistic to say that the audience laughs at observational humour simply because they recognize what is being described. If this were true, a comedian could reduce an audience to hysterics simply by describing the room in which he or she was performing. Observational comedy is different from simple observation, because it describes things in a motivated way. Rather than describing something which is incongruous because it is not normal and habitual, it describes something which is normal and habitual, which the audience recognizes, and makes it *seem* strange and incongruous. A caricature is not a simple unmotivated representational portrait. The aim of a caricature is not simply to say: Mrs Thatcher looks like this; it is to say: isn't the way that Mrs Thatcher looks *funny*? Similarly, when a comedian describes an aspect of life in an observational monologue, his or her purpose is not simply to describe it, but to *make* it seem strange and incongruous, so that it is funny for the audience; thus, it has the same impact as Bertolt Brecht's concept of the *verfremdungseffekt*.

Because it always involves incongruity, humour always involves deviation from normality. It makes unconventional connections, it defies expectation, it uses systems like language and logic in ways which are not normally permitted, it deviates from moral values, and it portrays things which are normal and habitual in ways which make

them seem strange and bizarre. As we have seen, this has led philosophers to take differing views on the value of humour. Some, like John Locke and David Hartley argued that humour is untruthful and perverse. Others, like Arthur Schopenhauer argued that it is very truthful, because it exposes flaws in our conceptualization of the world, which 'cannot get down to the infinite multifariousness and the fine shades of difference of the concrete.'<sup>5</sup> The debate over whether humour is perverse or truthful demands an examination of the concept of truth, or 'the concrete'. One view of 'truth' is that it has a concrete existence. Konrad Lorenz, who proposed a universal explanation of humour, arguing that it is the product of innate aggressive drives, stated that truth is 'universal, because it is only discovered by the human brain, and not made by it.'<sup>6</sup> Another view of truth is that it only exists in the minds of human beings, that 'when man perceives the world, he perceives without knowing it the superimposed shape of his own mind, and entities can only be meaningful (or 'true') in so far as they find a place within that shape.'<sup>7</sup> Our notion of reality, our conceptualization of the world is a product of our culture, and one of the tools which shapes our reality is language, as the American Linguist Edward Sapir has argued:

The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached...We see and hear as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

Our reality is also created by our culture's system of logic, its social values, the emotional responses demanded of us. As we have seen, humour works by deviating from the norms of these very systems, by using language and logic in new ways, by deviating from social values and normal emotional responses. In doing so, it inevitably challenges its culture's conception of reality, and allows the possibilities of other ways of seeing. Therefore, it does not pervert the truth, as Locke and Hartley argued, nor does it

reveal the truth, as Schopenhauer argued, it simply questions the validity of one way of seeing the world, and allows the possibilities of others. The humourist is like the child in 'The Emperor's New Clothes' who dares to oppose the prevailing view of reality by pointing out that the emperor has no clothes.<sup>9</sup> Humour has an intrinsic potential for being subversive, because it defies expectation, it deviates from the systems which societies use to construct reality, and it allows the possibilities of other ways of seeing. Observational humour has an even stronger potential subversiveness, as it questions accepted aspects of life, making them seem strange and incongruous.

However, as we have seen, most of the sociologists who have examined the relation of humour to social reality have argued that far from being a subversive phenomenon, humour is actually conservative. This appears to be a reasonable position: humour is an important part of our culture, and if it is so subversive, why has it not inspired a state of continual revolution, or at least of widespread revolutionary thinking? Ralph Piddington and Elizabeth Hansot argued that humour is intrinsically conservative, but Mary Douglas, Steve Linstead and Anton C. Zijderveld argued that its subversiveness is curbed, because it is subject to social control. There are several ways in which humour can be controlled, which can minimize its potential subversiveness.

### III. Curbing humour's subversiveness

#### A. Framing

Steve Linstead argued that humour's impact is reduced because it is separated from normal discourse, because it is seen as non-serious play activity. The break with normality which occurs in humour is only temporary, and so it does not change the way we think in any permanent way. Humour is often kept separate from normal discourse by being clearly framed and labelled as non-serious activity. This is particularly relevant to stand-up comedy, which is an organized form of entertainment. Audiences pay money to see stand-up comics

because they want to be entertained, and this implies that they treat the experience as a non-serious leisure activity. The particular layout of the room in which the stand-up comedy is performed may heighten this framing effect. For example, in a Variety theatre, the comedian would often be surrounded by the physical frame of a proscenium arch or curtains. However, this effect is minimized in Alternative Comedy, which is often housed in pub function rooms, which do not have this type of physical frame.

The framing of humour, and its separation from normal discourse, is often reinforced by certain stylistic features. For example, many comedians use standardized forms of humour which clearly label jokes as jokes. Some jokes use obvious framing devices, for example, by using standard phrases to introduce them. Phrases like 'I say I say I say...' act as a fanfare, heralding the imminent arrival of a jest. In other cases, the joke's arrival is heralded in a less obvious way. Certain joke formulae become so familiar through overuse that the opening line provides an unmistakable signal that a joke is approaching. For example, when we hear the phrase 'A bloke walks into a pub...' or 'There was an Englishman, an Irishman, and a Scotsman...', we realize that we are being told a joke, rather than a true incident involving a real public house, or a real Englishman, a real Irishman, and a real Scotsman.

#### B. Repetition

The potential subversiveness in humour stems from its unexpectedness, the incongruous connections which it makes, its deviation from normality. However, once a joke becomes old, once it has been heard a number of times, it is no longer unexpected, and its ability to shed new light on the familiar and the habitual is reduced. This is not only true of specific jokes which are old and well-worn, it is also true of familiar types of joke, and of standardized joke structures: once the listener recognizes a familiar joke structure, he or she will know roughly what outcome to expect, so the joke poses less of a challenge to his or her

conceptualization of the world. Arthur Koestler noted how 'cheap comedians' compensate for the lack of originality in their material by 'emphasis', which often involves resorting to stereotypes:

Emphasis on local colour and ethnic peculiarities- as in Scottish, Jewish, Cockney stories- is a further means to channel emotion into familiar tracks. The Scotsman or Cockney must of course be caricatures if the comic purpose is to be achieved- in other words, exaggeration and simplification once more appear as indispensable tools to provide emphasis.<sup>10</sup>

The use of stereotypes in humour is interesting, because jokes and stereotypes appear to work in opposite ways. A stereotype promotes certain expectations; for example, a racial stereotype leads us to expect certain things of members of the stereotyped race. As we have seen, jokes work in the opposite way, by defying expectation. The use of stereotypes in a joke will always reduce the unexpectedness of the outcome, unless the joke subverts the stereotype by deviating from the expectations connected with it.

#### C. Aggressive humour and attitude towards humorous incongruities

Whilst the idea that humour is the product of innate aggressive urges is questionable, the fact remains that there are many jokes which express hostility towards individuals or groups. This aggressiveness is often the product of socio-political conflict. As we have seen, Antonin J. Obrdlik has outlined how the Czech people expressed their resentment of the nazis occupying their country in the form of hostile jokes. Other jokes are connected with social conflicts like racism and sexism. The main point of a hostile joke is to deliver an insult, and this means that the incongruity which defines the joke becomes a secondary consideration. As we have seen, humour's potential subversiveness stems from its incongruity, and the break with conventional thinking which this constitutes; because hostile jokes deflect attention from this unconventional thinking, this implies that their potential subversiveness is reduced.

However, this point should not be overstressed, as the insult which

the joke delivers may have a subversive effect in itself, if it is directed at a powerful figure or a powerful social group: as we have seen, Obrdlik noted how jokes which insulted the nazi occupiers simultaneously bolstered anti-nazi feelings, whilst undermining nazi morale.

In many hostile jokes, the potential subversiveness of the humour is reduced not simply because the insult deflects attention from the incongruity, but also because of the particular way in which they work. Many hostile jokes show the deviation from normality in the joke, the unconventional use of language or logic, or the deviation from social values or habitual emotional responses, to be an error rather than a viable alternative. For example, a comic foreign accent may involve an inventive and surprising use of language, but the point of the humour is that the foreigner does not speak *properly*. We laugh at the deviations, because we see them as mistakes. Similarly, jokes about 'lunatics' may involve a highly unconventional use of logic, but this is seen as error resulting from insanity. Such jokes enforce the status quo because they imply that any deviation from it is simply incorrect. The incongruity in humour is seen as *error*.

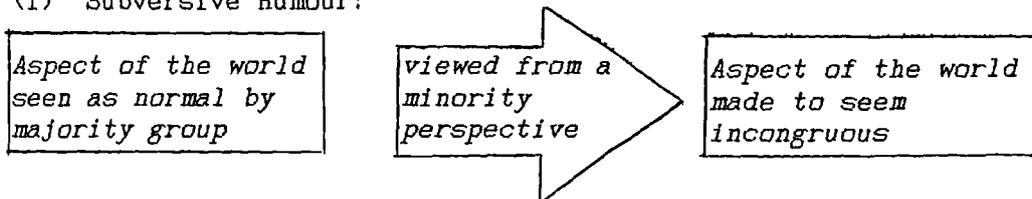
#### D. Observational humour and perspective

As we have seen, observational humour works by describing something which is normal and familiar in a way which makes it seem strange and incongruous. It does not simply describe something in an unmotivated way, it imposes a new perspective on it in order to make it seem strange. However, this process need not necessarily be subversive. If the aspect of life which is being observed is normal for the majority of people, or for a powerful social group, and it is made to seem strange by imposing a minority viewpoint, then the joke is subversive. However, not all observational humour works like this. As we have seen, Michael Philips has noted that comic racial stereotypes do not portray black people and Jewish people with thick lips or big noses simply to make physiological observations, they do

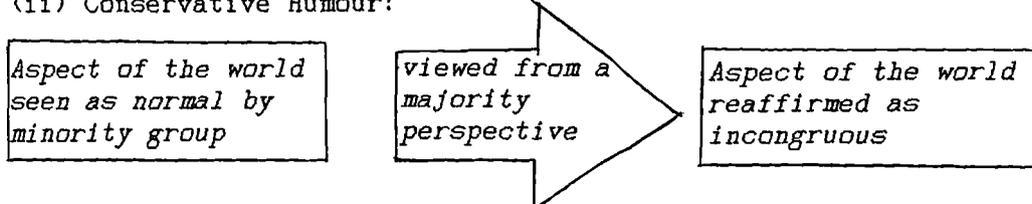
so as a way of expressing hostility. They observe the physiology of black people and Jewish people from a white racist viewpoint in order to promote the idea that non-aryan features are strange and incongruous. In this case, two minority groups (black people and Jewish people) are made to seem incongruous by being viewed from the perspective of a majority group (white people). The view of the majority group is being enforced, so the jokes are actually conservative. Therefore, in order to determine the politics of observational humour, it must be determined whether the observed object relates to a majority group or a minority group, and whether the perspective from which it is observed relates to a minority group or a majority group. Here, the terms 'majority' and 'minority' do not necessarily refer to the numerical size of the group, but rather to the social power which the group enjoys. For example, white people are a minority in South Africa, but they are a majority group, because the social power which they wield is far greater than that of the black majority, which is excluded from the democratic process. If the observed object relates to a majority group, and is viewed from a minority perspective, then the joke is subversive; if the observed object relates to a majority group, and is viewed from a majority perspective, then the joke is conservative. (See *Figure One*)

FIGURE ONE

(i) Subversive Humour:



(ii) Conservative Humour:



#### IV. Summary

The incongruity which is essential to humour challenges our conceptualization of the world, because it involves a deviation from the normal and the habitual. There are many ways in which this challenge can be minimized, by keeping it separate from normal discourse, by using old jokes or joke formats, by using humour as a form of insult, and seeing the deviation as a form of error, or by imposing a majority perspective on a subject. This theoretical perspective may now be applied to the different traditions of British stand-up comedy, in order to analyse the cultural meanings of the work of British comedians.

## PART II; TRADITIONS OF BRITISH STAND-UP COMEDY

Chapter Three: Stand-Up Comedy in Music Hall and Variety

Chapter Four: Stand-up Comedy in Working Men's Clubs

Chapter Five: Alternative Comedy

Chapter Six: Three Comedians

Several points must be made before we examine British stand-up comedy using the theoretical perspective established in the previous chapter. As we have seen, there is an intrinsic link between comedy and culture, because jokes involve a defiance of expectation which is related to aspects of culture. This means that jokes may be incomprehensible outside of their immediate cultural context. This is particularly true of topical jokes, as the events to which they refer may be quickly forgotten. However, other jokes can also lose their meaning with cultural change. For example, a joke which relies on a certain meaning of a word may become obsolete if the word becomes obsolete or subtly changes its meaning; similarly, a joke which relies on the idea of deviation from a certain social value may lose its point once that value changes. For this reason, all of the humour examined here will be given some sort of explanation, the basic incongruity in each joke will be outlined.

In addition to this, the comedy will be examined within its specific cultural context, within the particular branch of the entertainment industry which produced it. There are three major traditions of stand-up comedy in Britain. The form evolved out of the comic song of the Music Hall, and continued to develop through the Variety era. After the Variety circuit collapsed in the late 1950s, the Club circuit, which was made up of large variety clubs and smaller Working Men's Clubs, provided the principal platform for stand-up comedy in Britain. In 1979, Alternative Comedy was born, providing a platform for a new type of stand-up comedy. The stylistic and political tendencies of the comedy produced by each of these traditions will be examined. In addition to this, there will be an examination of organizational aspects of the Variety circuit, the Club circuit, and the Alternative Comedy circuit, which may have affected the development of the comedy which they have produced. Each of these traditions has arisen from amateur or semi-professional entertainments, and has become more formalized and professionalized. The effect of this professionalization on the development of stand-up comedy will be a particular point of focus.

One problem posed by examining general stylistic and political trends of the three major traditions of British stand-up comedy, is that the particular qualities of individual comedians tend to be lost. For this reason, the work of three particular comedians, will be given a fuller examination. These comedians are Frankie Howerd, Les Dawson, and Ben Elton, and each represents one of the major traditions of British stand-up. Their work will be specifically related to the particular traditions of entertainment which produced them, and the ways in which it is typical of these traditions will be contrasted with the more individual aspects of their comedy.

## **Chapter Three: Stand-Up Comedy in Music Hall and Variety**

### **I. A brief history of Music Hall and Variety**

### **II. The evolution of stand-up comedy in Music Hall and Variety**

### **III. The style of Music Hall and Variety comedy**

- A. Character-based comedy to joke-based comedy
- B. Stylistic innovation in Music Hall and Variety comedy
- C. Framing
- D. Familiarity
- E. Reactions against the rigid conventions
- F. Stylistic conservatism

### **IV. The politics of Music Hall and Variety comedy**

- A. Class
- B. Sexual politics
  - 1. Family
  - 2. Sexuality

### **C. Race**

### **V. The forces which shaped Music Hall and Variety comedy**

- A. Factors which encouraged stylistic conservatism
- B. Factors which encouraged political conservatism

### **VI. Summary**

## I. A brief history of Music Hall and Variety

The birthplace of stand-up comedy in Britain was the Music Hall. The form evolved from the comic songs which made up an important part of Music Hall entertainments. In order to understand this evolution, the tradition of Music Hall and Variety entertainment must first be examined.

There have been many versions of the story of how Music Hall emerged from less formalized types of entertainment. Various forms of entertainment have been named as ingredients of the pre-Music Hall melting pot, including tavern singing, free-and-easies, Pleasure Gardens, Music Houses, fairs, Singing Rooms<sup>1</sup>, Harmonic, Anacreontic, and Catch and Glee Clubs.<sup>2</sup> Most historians of Music Hall have placed the point at which this diverse collection of institutions had formally evolved into Music Hall at 1852, when Charles Morton, known as 'The Father of the Halls' opened the Canterbury Hall, which was built on the site of the Canterbury Arms, a tavern which had been used as a free-and-easy, and had been taken over by Morton in 1848. A detailed account of the transition from informal sing-songs to formalized Music Hall has been provided by John Earl, who identified seven stages in the transition: in the first, a room in a tavern is used by workmen or tradesmen to drink and sing together, under the auspices of a chairman; in the second, a landlord might have made alterations to the tavern in order to accommodate such a meeting, the chairman would play a more important role, and some of the singers may have been of a semi-professional standard; in the third, the meeting has changed from an informal meeting to a regular concert, with professional singers singing alongside accomplished amateurs; in the fourth, a purpose-built hall behind the tavern is used to house such entertainments, and singers, comics, and occasionally acrobats and speciality acts are hired to appear in the concerts; in the fifth, the age of 'grand music hall', an enormous hall built behind the tavern houses the entertainment, and some drunks and unaccompanied women (who were often assumed to be prostitutes) are

denied entry, so as to create an image of respectability; in the sixth, formal seating is introduced alongside the members of the audience who are seated around tables, and a proscenium arch is installed; in the seventh, huge Variety theatres, designed by architects like Frank Matcham, and owned by large syndicates have become the norm.<sup>3</sup>

The transition from Music Hall to Variety has led to much disagreement among historians. The question is particularly difficult, because the terms 'Music Hall' and 'Variety' were both used from the earliest days.<sup>4</sup> The two different terms have been used by historians of Music Hall because early in the twentieth century, the nature of the entertainment subtly changed; the style of classic Music Hall is different from that of later Variety. Historians have placed the point at which Music Hall became Variety at a number of different times, but as several different factors contributed to this transition, it may be a fruitless exercise to place the point at a specific time. It can be argued that the transition began in the 1890s, when large chains of Music Halls began to be established, owned by men like Sir Oswald Stoll, H.E. Moss, and Edward Thornton, who replaced old-style Music Hall buildings with theatres of Variety. This was part of a move to make Music Halls respectable, and in the 1890s, the Halls began to attract a considerable middle class audience, though Dagmar Hoher has pointed out that the middle class did not take to them as easily as it might appear.<sup>5</sup> However, the Royal Command Performances of 1912 and 1919, which featured the top Music Hall artists finally gave Music Hall/Variety an undeniable seal of respectability, which ensured that it was no longer a working class-dominated form of entertainment. In 1912, Music Halls were brought under the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain, and food and drink finally disappeared from the auditorium<sup>6</sup>, which made the entertainments more formally theatrical, and less rowdy, further aiding the move towards respectability.

Apart from the fact that Variety was more respectable than Music Hall, and its audiences less working class-based, there were several

other differences. Firstly, the songs were stylistically different, being more jazz-influenced after the Original Dixieland Jazz Band had visited Britain in 1919.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, a twice-nightly format was introduced. A Music Hall bill would have included up to thirty acts, but a shorter bill performed twice in one evening began to replace this in the north of England in the 1860s, and by 1914 a twice-nightly format was the norm.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, unlike Music Hall, Variety had to compete with other forms of entertainment, like revue, concert party, radio, cinema, and later, television. There was a complex relationship between Variety and these other forms, with various performers moving between them: Sir George Robey worked in revues as well as on Variety bills; a number of famous comedians, like G.H. Elliot, Stanley Holloway, Max Miller, Jack Warner, and Cyril Fletcher began their career in concert parties, then moved onto the Variety circuit; Robb Wilton and Tommy Handley began their careers as Variety comics, then achieved great success on the radio; a popular radio show, Band Waggon, was turned into a theatrical show, which toured the Variety circuit; and performers like Gracie Fields and George Formby (junior), who began their careers in Variety, moved into cinema, whilst occasionally still playing in Variety theatres.<sup>9</sup> This kind of cross-fertilization meant that Variety was a far less pure tradition than Music Hall.

The Second World War saw a boom in Variety, which continued into the postwar period. The end of the war also saw a new generation of comedians emerging, who had started their careers performing to the troops in the war, and went on to carve out professional careers on the Variety circuit. They became known as the 'N.A.A.F.I. comedians', and included Tony Hancock, Peter Sellers, Dick Emery, Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe, Arthur English, Frankie Howerd, and Jimmy Edwards. Harry Secombe has argued that this was the first time that a significant number of middle class university-educated people went into Variety<sup>10</sup>, and thus any remaining elements of the working class basis of the tradition were further eroded.

The 1950s saw television becoming a popular medium, a rival form of entertainment which presented pressures which Variety could not withstand. As Variety declined, and the theatres began to shut down, various attempts were made to breathe new life into the circuit. Nude shows, which had become popular in the war years, increased in popularity, but this eroded Variety's respectability.<sup>11</sup> Crooners, skiffle bands, and rock and roll stars were brought in to top Variety bills, with the aim of attracting a younger audience. Whilst this strategy was successful for a time, it had several drawbacks, notably that the young pop fans were not interested in the other acts on the bill, and that their presence in the audience scared away more traditional Variety audiences.<sup>12</sup> Given such circumstances, Variety's death was inevitable. Whilst it continued in various manifestations on the radio and on television, by 1960, the tradition of live entertainment known as Variety had almost entirely died out.

## II. The evolution of stand-up comedy in Music Hall and Variety

As we have seen, stand-up comedy can be defined as a form of entertainment which involves a solo performer talking directly to an audience with the intention of provoking laughter, within the context of formalized entertainment, but without being contained within a larger narrative structure. Without the final two elements of this definition, it could be said that stand-up comedy has existed for centuries, in the form of storytelling and comic soliloquies in stage plays. However, taking our strict definition, it can be seen that stand-up comedy actually emerged within the Music Hall tradition.

Several immediate ancestors of stand-up can be found in pre-Music Hall entertainments. For example, at one type of free-and-easy, known as 'Courts of Comus', everyone had to do something, or pay a fine of half a crown, which was beyond the reach of most of the patrons; in addition to 'poising a tobacco pipe or coal-scuttle, an imitation of a cat, dog, or fowl, posturizing or quaffing to the

dregs a deep pewter pot of "some potent compound"<sup>13</sup>, the patrons would make speeches. As the purpose of these activities was to entertain, it is reasonable to suppose that many of the speeches which the patrons made were comic. Comic speeches, directly addressed to the audience of other patrons clearly represents an embryonic form of stand-up. There were also professional storytellers like Marcus Wilkinson, who presented his patter entertainment in free-and-easies, and later in both Music Halls and Working Men's Clubs, telling stories which included a large element of comedy.<sup>14</sup> This partly comic patter-based entertainment also represents an embryonic form of stand-up.

However, fully-fledged stand-up grew out of the comic songs of the Music Hall. Exactly how this evolution occurred is almost impossible to tell, because of the nature of most of the writing that has been done on Music Hall. Most of the early writing on Music Hall was the work of middle class or upper class Bohemians like Max Beerbohm, Maurice Willson Disher, H. Chance Newton, and Dion Clayton Calthrop, and is very anecdotal and impressionistic. As a result, it is difficult to tell exactly what Music Hall performers did on stage, apart from simply singing their songs. Later writing has tended to rely on the hard evidence of songsheets and recordings in the face of a lack of first-hand experience of Music Hall entertainments, and so other elements of the performance, including any patter the performers may have used tends to be ignored.

From the earliest days of Music Hall, the performers were given generic titles which suggest that they were comedians of some sort. The earliest performers were categorized as *lions comiques*, serio-comics, or buffo vocalists<sup>15</sup>; the first two of these names suggest that comedy was at least part of the act. A playbill from Pullan's Theatre of Varieties in Bradford in 1878 lists two of the nine acts as 'comic vocalists'<sup>16</sup>, this name suggesting comic singers. By the 1890s, the term 'comedian' was being used: a programme from the Tivoli Music Hall lists thirteen acts labelled 'comedian', three labelled 'serio-comic and dancer', two labelled 'negro comedian',

and a double act labelled 'Irish comedians'; in addition to this, there was a 'baritone vocalist', a 'juggler and equilibrist', an 'American serpentine dancer', and a midget act labelled 'Lilliputian wonders'.<sup>17</sup> This means that of a bill comprising twenty eight acts, twenty one acts had names which suggested some sort of comic element. However, it is difficult to tell whether these '*lions comiques*', 'serio-comics', 'comic vocalists', or even 'comedians' and 'comediennes' were simply comic singers, or whether they also included sections of comic patter in their acts. Various modern historians have provided descriptions of Music Hall acts. John Earl notes that 'the professional singers have actor's skills and their character impersonations need to be seen as well as heard', and that 'the comedians are dressed in character.'<sup>18</sup> Roger Wilmut describes the acts of late nineteenth century acts as 'a character study in song, or a song with patter.'<sup>19</sup> According to Penelope Summerfield, 'much of it [the act] would depend on the patter thrown into songs between verses, relating to topical events with which the audience would be familiar, laced with ribaldry and invective to make them laugh'<sup>20</sup>, but also argues that this was suppressed by the Music Hall managers, anxious to maintain an image of respectability, so as to protect their licence. An examination of recordings of Music Hall artists suggests that stand-up comedy evolved from this patter which the Music Hall 'comedians' inserted between the verses of their songs. These recordings have serious drawbacks as evidence, largely because they were made in studios, so there is no audience response, and if the performers joked with the audience between songs, there is no reason to suppose that this patter would have been recorded. However, there are recordings of songs in which the artists make spoken jokes or other comments between the verses, for example, George Lashwood's 'In The Twi-Twi-Twilight'<sup>21</sup>, and George Formby (senior)'s 'One Of The Boys'<sup>22</sup>, 'Send For John Willie', and 'Playing The Game In The West'.<sup>23</sup> This inter-verse patter developed in several ways. In a Marie Lloyd song, 'Picadilly Trot'<sup>24</sup>, instead of patter being inserted between the verses, the singing of one of the verses gradually transforms into a spoken section, a conversation with an imaginary friend. In Wilkie Bard's 'She Sells Sea Shells'<sup>25</sup>,

the song is used as the basis of a two-handed sketch, about the difficulty of singing the tongue-twisting lyrics. Inter-verse patter also developed into something closer to fully-fledged stand-up comedy: several recordings feature a snatch of song at the beginning, then the music stops completely to allow the performer to deliver a short spoken comic section, and it is finished off with another snatch of song; Dan Leno's 'Mrs Kelly'<sup>26</sup>, Mark Sheridan's 'By The Sea'<sup>27</sup> and 'One Of The Bhoys'<sup>28</sup>, Tom Leamore's 'I Thought She Was So Shy'<sup>29</sup> and 'I Used To Be Poor Meself'<sup>30</sup>, and Billie Barlow's 'I'm Not Supposed To Know'<sup>31</sup> are all examples of this. In other recordings, the format is even closer to that of modern stand-up comedy: R.G. Knowles' 'Time Is Money'<sup>32</sup> begins with the spoken section, rather than placing it between the verses, thus tending to make it separate from the song; and Dan Leno's 'My Wife's Relations'<sup>33</sup> is entirely spoken, and has no musical accompaniment whatsoever.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly when this transformation from comic song to embryonic stand-up comedy occurred, and it is impossible to say whether the early *lions comiques* and serio-comics included any patter whatsoever in their acts, as the earliest Music Hall acts were all dead by the time that recordings started to be made at the beginning of the twentieth century. Maurice Willson Disher makes a reference to one of the earlier generation of Music Hall stars, G.H. Macdermott 'joking'<sup>34</sup>, but this may be a reference to jokes included in the lyrics of songs, rather than spoken comic patter. J.S. Bratton records that one early Music Hall star, Jenny Hill, used spoken comic material, described as 'improvised comic patter characteristically delivered at high speed and in defiance of any attempt at censorship'.<sup>35</sup> However, contemporary writing about Dan Leno implies that elements of patter and stand-up did not start to appear in Music Hall acts until the 1890s. Leno, who was acclaimed as one of the greatest Music Hall comics did not begin his career as a comedian until 1885, having pursued a career as a champion clog dancer in the Northern Halls before this point.<sup>36</sup> His

biographer, J. Hickory Wood noted that Leno developed his act 'in one special direction', and found the frequent use of patter (as opposed to comic songs) in his act noteworthy:

One calls his performances on the halls 'songs' for want of a pithy word that is better; but they were not really songs at all. They were diverting monologues in a style of which he was undoubtedly the originator as he was its finest exponent. With him the character was the first consideration; the amusing wealth of monologue or 'patter' was the means whereby he gave his audience an insight into that character, while the verses struck one as being in most cases, a somewhat unnecessary interlude. Indeed, he was evidently of this opinion himself, because in his later efforts, when he may be fairly said to have perfected his style, he merely used one verse to introduce himself and one chorus to take himself off the stage. The rest was simply fluent conversation.<sup>37</sup>

Whether or not Leno was the originator of the more patter-orientated style, the fact that Hickory Wood still found it noteworthy in 1905, when the biography was written, implies that the style did not become common until Leno's era.

### III. The style of Music Hall and Variety comedy

#### A. Character-based comedy to joke-based comedy

If the increasing importance of comic patter in the late Music Hall period represented the birth of stand-up comedy in Britain, it was still very different from the modern version of the form. In many respects it was very theatrical. Like the comic songs from which it evolved, early stand-up comedy relied heavily on character. The comedian would assume a role, for example a soldier, a maid, a shop assistant, or a beefeater, and much of the humour would be situational, in that it would rely on descriptions of situations which the character would recall. In some cases, the comedians' material could be more accurately described as sketches than stand-up comedy, as this routine by Dan Leno illustrates:

There's not a place on the face of the Earth like the Tower of London. If you've never been there, go again. It's a glorious place, and supplies a long felt want. Everything old. And the first ancient item you meet is the man that takes your money at the door. Then you

pass through the Refreshment Room, which is the oldest Refreshment Room in the Tower, and the only one. And there's some very ancient items in the Refreshment Room, such as the buns, and the ginger beer, and the barmaids and whatnot. Good-day ladies! Do you want to see the tower? Splendid day to see the Tower- nice and gloomy! Now- er- in the first place, this is the Refreshment Room. Er- of course, if you want something in the Refreshment Room, now is the time. You don't care for anything? No? Thank you! Only as we go along, there's no oranges or ginger beer to be had, and of course, if you feel faint, you have to come back to the Refreshment Room. You...No...you don't care? No...Don't want anything? No...I do! Still- we'll proceed. Standing with our backs to the Refreshment Room, we get a lovely view of the Tower. Follow me, ladies. Standing with your backs to the Tower, you get a lovely view of...er...the Refreshment Room. Now you see that man there? That's the sentry. He stands there night and day with his gun fixed, bayonet fixed, and his eye's always on one spot...and this is- er- the Refreshment Room.<sup>32</sup>

Here, the introduction, which is addressed directly to the audience, serves merely to establish the comic idea, that the refreshments are ancient. This idea is then played out with other characters which are imagined rather than being played by other performers, as the beefeater persistently tries to persuade the women to buy some refreshments. The comedy is situational, in that the audience has been primed with the knowledge that the refreshments are old and stale, and laughs at the valiant but unsuccessful attempts of the beefeater to get rid of them. The routine could just as easily have been performed with other actors playing the women who are being shown around, and the fact that most of the routine is addressed to the imagined other characters rather than directly to the audience means that it is arguably closer to sketch comedy than straight forward stand-up comedy. A possible reason for such material being performed solo, without other performers playing the other characters is that any act which involved more than one person speaking (as opposed to singing) counted as a one act play, and could only be performed legally in a licensed theatre. Some Music Halls did present sketches using more than one performer in spite of the law, and in 1907, the legal position was changed, so that sketches up to half an hour long could be put on in the Halls.<sup>33</sup>

Other examples of routines from this period were closer to modern stand-up comedy, involving the performer's taking on a character, and addressing the audience directly. However, the style was still much more formally theatrical than that of modern stand-up comedy, involving exaggerated costumes and make-up, and a rather stilted delivery.

By the 1930s, the style had become much less theatrical. The use of comic character became less important, and a new breed of comedian began to emerge who told a series of unconnected jokes. Comics like Tommy Handley, Tommy Trinder and Ted Ray abandoned exaggerated costumes and make-up in favour of smart suits. They replaced character pieces with a series of short unconnected jokes, which were sometimes loosely bound together by being told in the first person. The move away from comic character meant that comedians became harder to distinguish from one another: one minor Variety comic of the 1930s, George Bolton, had only one distinguishing feature, and that was that he delivered material rapidly, estimating that he used about half an hour's worth of material in a fourteen-minute act.<sup>40</sup> After the Second World War, there was a move back to character-based comedy. Comics like Jeanne de Casalis, Beryl Reid, Albert Modley, Suzette Tarri, and Frankie Howerd all relied heavily on comic character, but whereas the stand-up comedians of the late Music Hall era tended to present a series of different characters, the postwar comedians always assumed the same character.

#### B. Stylistic innovation in Music Hall and Variety comedy

Various aspects of Music Hall and Variety comedy were very imaginative and innovative. Perhaps the most obvious innovation was the very emergence of the form of stand-up comedy from the comic songs of the Music Halls, the creation of a whole new form of entertainment. Whilst this form was developing, a number of comedians experimented with the possibilities of a solo performer trying to make an audience laugh simply by speaking. For example, in the 1930s, Harry Hemsley presented domestic sketches, in which he

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would play all of the members of the family himself. He would sit on the stage and pretend to be holding a conversation with various members of his family, providing all the voices himself, and hiding his lip movements with a newspaper.<sup>41</sup>

Another imaginative aspect of Music Hall and Variety comedy was the comic use of language which was often highly inventive. In the late Music Hall era, language was a popular source of humour. Comic routines would often involve sections in which language was freely played with, with long streams of similar-sounding words being strung together into sentences. R.G. Knowles was one comedian who used this approach. Knowles was a Canadian comedian who came to England in 1891.<sup>42</sup> His stage persona was that of 'a very peculiar American', and his costume consisted of 'a battered topper, long black overcoat, high collar, white trousers with ragged ends, and boots that flapped on the stage as he walked rapidly up and down'<sup>43</sup>, and much of his humour was based on the idea of his being foreign to an English audience. This basic concept produced flights of linguistic fancy such as the following:

Nowadays, everybody wants money. Money is the root of all evil, but everybody wants the loot under different circumstances. Young girls want pin money. Young fellers want pocket money. Old maids want matrimony, musicians want harmony, huntsmen want ceremony, Englishmen want ready money, Irishmen want anybody's money, but a Scotchman wants everybody's money. Then there's the marriage certificate. That is the testimony as to the sanctimony of the ceremony. And the parsimony of the husband, which is the acrimony of the wife, breaks up the harmony of the matrimony, you suffer the alimony, and away goes your honey money.<sup>44</sup>

In this excerpt, some of the humour is based on a repeated pun which relies on the fact that 'money' and '-mony' are homonymous, allowing words like 'matrimony' and 'harmony' to be put in a list of different types of money. Much of it also rests on the stringing together of so many similar-sounding words, on the fact that a marital situation can be described using an incongruous number of words with the same '-mony' ending. Another way in which Music Hall and Variety comics used language to comic effect was to use long and

impressive-sounding words in a nonsensical way. For example, in one of Dan Leno's routines, he exclaims: 'Ah, what is man? Wherefore does he why? Whence did he whence? Wither is he withering?'<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Billy Bennett, a comedian who started his professional career after the First World War, often used language nonsensically in his songs, monologues and patter, for example listing the places he had been to on a foreign tour: 'I've been to Europe, Irope, Asia and Asparagus.'<sup>46</sup> Here, the list of places is made absurd by the inclusion of an invented word, 'Irope', and a vegetable 'Asparagus'. Another comedian who used language inventively to comic effect was Stainless Stephen, whose professional career began in 1926. He based his act on the idea of speaking the punctuation of his sentences out loud: 'We're a great race, the British. All comrades, semi colon. All shoulders to the wheel, semi-quaver. We'll carry on until Axis turns semi-turtle. And Hitler asks us for a full-stop, exclamation mark.'<sup>47</sup> The comedy here is quite complex, relying both on the repetition of the prefix 'semi-', and on double meanings of the spoken punctuation. 'Semi-quaver' is used in an incongruous context, being appropriate to the sphere of musical notation rather than of punctuation, but it also has a double meaning, indicating a patriotic quaver in the voice. Similarly, the phrase 'full stop' has a double meaning, being used as spoken punctuation, but also to mean 'stop' in a literal sense. Oliver Wakefield, a contemporary of Stainless Stephen whose act was based on his idiotic upper class stage persona also relied on an inventive use of language. His distinctive comic patter was made up of a series of unfinished phrases, totally rejecting conventional sentence patterns:

H-h-hello, everybody...I'm terribly pleased you could all...hear this...and as I look into your simple faces...I- I feel...simply...and, how many of you- can look into my...with a cast in your...and throw stones in your neighbours? Because as men and women, we must have *feelings*. Didn't Shakespeare say, very aptly, in- Om...Hamlet...Twelve...Summer-Night's...Pinch Me...do I not bleed? Stick a pin in me and- there's no knowing what'll...and that of course is a very rough idea of inflation.<sup>48</sup>

This collage of words and unfinished phrases is studded with unusual little jokes. Some of the jokes work by relying on the audience to fill in the end of an unfinished phrase; for example, when Wakefield says, 'and how many of you can look into my...', the audience assumes that the word of the end of the phrase is 'eye', thus implying that the phrase 'with a cast in your...' an insult: again, the missing word is 'eye', thus he is saying that the audience have casts in their eyes, and so he is insulting them. Other jokes work in less obvious ways. The insertion of the syllable 'om' before the word 'Hamlet' suggests that he was about to mistakenly refer to the Shakespeare play as 'Omlette'; this rather obvious joke is merely hinted at rather than being overtly stated. The phrase 'and that of course is a very rough idea of inflation' sounds as if it has been directly lifted from a radio documentary, but is made funny by being placed in an incongruous context.

In addition to the inventive use of language which many comedians used to comic effect, another inventive aspect of Music Hall and Variety comedy was the use of surreal humour. Comics like Billy Bennett frequently strayed into the realms of the surreal. He had a strange stage persona: his costume consisted of an ill-fitting dinner suit, brown boots, crudely slicked-down hair, and an improbably large moustache, creating an image of a failed attempt at respectability, and recordings of his work suggest that he addressed his audience in the stilted manner of a public speaker. His act contained lines like: 'My wife's father has a long beard, he looks as though he has eaten a horse and left the tail hanging out'; or, 'My brother had a single hair on the end of his nose. It was so long that every time he sneezed it cracked like a whip. One night he took a pinch of snuff and flogged himself to death.'<sup>49</sup> Max Wall, who worked as a Variety comedian after the Second World War having played the circuit as a dancer and acrobat since the 1920s, sometimes used jokes which relied on a similarly surreal portrayal of the human form: 'Max Wall is here. Standing behind the microphone. If I stood in front of it, I'd have to talk through a hole in the back of me neck.'<sup>50</sup>

In spite of these innovative aspects, the development of a new form of entertainment, the linguistic inventiveness, and the vein of surrealism tapped by some comics, there was also an element of stylistic conservatism.

### C. Framing

As we have seen, one of the ways in which humour's potential subversiveness can be curbed is by framing it, by keeping it safely separate from normal discourse, and by labelling it as non-serious play activity. Any form of organized comic entertainment implies a kind of framing: the audience has paid to be entertained, to have someone make them laugh, so this automatically suggests that they treat the experience as a non-serious leisure activity. It seems likely that this would be particularly true as Music Hall entertainments evolved from informal tavern sing-songs to huge theatres of Variety, because as the entertainment became more formalized, so the frame became more formal. Framing also existed within a Music Hall or Variety bill, because acts would be given formal descriptions like 'comedian', 'singer', or 'dancer', and the boundaries of these different types of act would be fairly rigid. For example, whilst working on the Variety circuit as a dancer in the 1930s, Max Wall tried to insert some spoken jokes into his act, but was told by the theatre manager that because he was a dancing act, he was not supposed to speak, and that it was the job of the comedians on the bill to tell the jokes.<sup>51</sup> This kind of rigid demarcation would mean that the role of the comedian would have been clearly defined within a Variety bill, thus framing the comedy and keeping it separate from normal discourse.

In addition to framing which was imposed by organisational aspects of Music Hall and Variety entertainment, there were also elements of the comic style which acted as framing devices. For example, the use of comic character tended to act as a framing device. There was a clear division between the comedians and the comic characters which they portrayed. This division was signalled in several ways.

Firstly, many of the late Music Hall comedians, like Dan Leno, Sir George Robey, and Tom Leamore presented a series of characters; the characters would therefore be unmistakably fictional creations, as they would only have a momentary existence on the stage. Secondly, much of the characterization would have involved obvious theatrical artifice. For example, it was common for a male comedian to play a female character: it would be obvious to any audience watching, say, Sir George Robey playing a newly-married woman that they were watching a comedian playing a woman rather than a real woman. Similarly, Billy Russell, who played a crotchety old working class northerner on the Variety circuit from the 1920s to the 1950s, used obviously theatrical make-up including a large false moustache, heavily drawn lines, and a crude false nose which clearly signalled the artificiality of his stage character. Thirdly, comic characters were given names which were different from those of the comedians who played them. For example, George Formby Senior's character was called 'John Willie', Jeanne de Casalis's upper class character was called 'Mrs Feather', and Beryl Reid's Birmingham character was called 'Marlene'. The artificiality of the character would be signalled by the fact that the comedian would appear on the bill under their own name, but would refer to him or herself using a different name whilst on the stage. The fact that the comedian would be very obviously speaking as a fictional character rather than as him/herself would tend to act as a framing device, separating the humour from normal discourse.

However, this framing became less obvious as the idea of comic character mutated into that of comic persona. Unlike comic character, comic persona involves no acknowledged division between performer and character. With comic persona, the performer ostensibly presents him/herself as him/herself. The beginnings of the change from character to persona can be seen in the work of comedians like George Formby Senior, who only ever played one character, John Willie. Because a comic persona is ostensibly a projection of the comedian, it is not possible to present a series of comic personae, so in this sense, comedians like Formby, who only

used one character, were moving towards the idea of comic persona. Similarly, there is evidence to suggest that Sir George Robey, who used a series of comic characters, had a kind of comic persona which could be seen beneath the individual characterizations. Robey became associated with one character, which has been described as 'the round-faced, impudent-eyed *decollete* curate, wearing a very flat hat and swishing a vertebrate cane'. It appears that this character acted as a form of comic persona, becoming associated with Robey himself. Maurice Willson Disher recorded that 'this character is not merely George Robey's greatest creation: as far as the general public is concerned, he *is* George Robey- far more than the person who answers to this name in private life.'<sup>52</sup> Robey continued to play a number of comic characters, but there is evidence to suggest that this persona was present in any of the characters which he played: a songsheet cover illustration showing Robey playing Oliver Cromwell<sup>53</sup>, and a photograph of him as a pantomime dame<sup>54</sup> show that he kept his characteristic make-up, with exaggerated crescent-shaped eyebrows, regardless of the character which he was playing. These aspects of the characterizations of comedians like Formby and Robey seem to have been the beginning of the move from comic character to comic persona, which meant that the division between the performer and the character which he or she played on stage became less obvious and ceased to be openly acknowledged. The implication of this change was that whilst comedians like Max Miller, Albert Modley, or Oliver Wakefield used exaggerated stage personae, they were still ostensibly projecting themselves, so their humour was not framed by the obvious artificiality of comic character.

If comic character represented one form of framing, another could be seen after the move from character comedy to straight joke telling in the 1930s. This was partly because the comedians of this era tended to tell jokes straight, without much effort at disguising the fact that they were packaged jokes. The jokes would be told one after the other, possibly with vague connections between them, but often with no attempt to link them together at all. The language and structure of packaged jokes are very distinctive and tend to act as

form of framing, because they mean that jokes are clearly recognizable as jokes, and thus they are separated from normal discourse. Several comedians reinforced this framing, in different ways. Arthur English had a catch-phrase which explicitly referred to the jokes he told, 'Sharpen up, the quick stuff's coming.'<sup>55</sup> This announced that he was about to launch into a series of quickfire jokes; by openly referring to the process of joking, he was clearly framing the jokes. Similarly, other comics used catch-phrases which were placed at the end of the joke, and so clearly signalled to the audience that a joke had been made: Dick Henderson used the phrase 'Ha! Ha!- joke over' after a particularly obvious joke<sup>56</sup>; Max Miller often finished a blue joke by suddenly shouting ''Ere!', or ''Ere listen!', as if expressing disapproval at what he had only just realised was a sexual connotation<sup>57</sup>; and Billy Bennett's catch-phrase, 'Boom-boom!', which was also used to signal the end of a joke, is now widely used for this purpose, notably by the television puppet Basil Brush.<sup>58</sup>

#### D. Familiarity

As we have seen, humour's potential subversiveness is linked with its unexpectedness, its deviation from the normal and the familiar. However, familiarity was an extremely important part of Music Hall and Variety comedy. One aspect of this was the widespread use of catch-phrases; for example, Max Miller had several of them, including 'There'll never be another'; Tommy Trinder's was 'You lucky people'; Albert Modley's was 'Ain't it grand to be daft'; Reg Dixon's was 'I'm proper poorly'; and Arthur English's included 'Open the cage', and 'Mum, they're laughing'. Catch-phrases are a peculiar aspect of stand-up comedy, because they can only work if they are familiar to the audience, and so are the opposite of jokes which work by deviating from the familiar. A catch-phrase rarely contains any joke mechanism; when it makes the audience laugh, it is only ever because of the context in which it is used. Often the catch-phrase is not used to make the audience laugh at all, but instead

serves to form a bond between the comic and his or her audience. In order to serve this purpose, the catch-phrase must have been repeated a number of times, because the audience must be familiar with it in order to distinguish it from the normal flow of patter, and thus recognize it as a catch-phrase.

Catch-phrases served to establish a rapport between the performer and the audience, by making the comedian familiar to the audience. Another aspect of the familiarity which characterized Music Hall and Variety comedy was the predictability of the jokes. Several factors contributed to this predictability. One of these factors was the use of comic character and comic persona. Once a character or persona has been established, the audience knows exactly what type of jokes to expect, as they know that the jokes will relate to certain aspects of the character or persona. In some cases, the jokes relied so heavily on the persona for their meaning, that they were totally incomprehensible without a knowledge of the persona. For example, Nellie Wallace, who began her career in the 1890s could make audiences laugh by commenting, 'I was so ugly when I was a child. That's why I've grown up so pretty.'<sup>59</sup> Another of her jokes was to express surprise at a man's failing to turn up to meet her: 'Strange! He promised to be here at 9.30. It's now 12 o'clock.'<sup>60</sup> Both of these jokes are unintelligible without the knowledge that Wallace's stage persona was that of a hideously ugly old maid. In the first joke, the audience thinks that Wallace is ugly, so it is incongruous that she should describe herself as 'pretty'. Similarly, in the second joke, it is incongruous to the audience that Wallace is surprised at her potential lover's not turning up, because to them it is obvious why he has not turned up: it is because she is hideous. Similarly, one of George Formby Senior's jokes cannot be understood without knowledge of his stage character: in a recording of 'Playing The Game In The West', he makes the following comic aside between the verses: 'Do I look like George Lashwood? Huh huh! Huh huh! Aye, it's a funny thing, I were told that this morning. Very funny. He gets his clothes made at t'same place as me. Funny how they all copy my style, isn't it?'<sup>61</sup> The humour here relies not

only on the knowledge of Formby's stage character, but also on knowledge of George Lashwood's. Formby's character, 'John Willie from Lancashire' has been described as 'a timid, diffident soul who wanted to put himself right with the world' and 'the gormless, guileless Lancashire lad adrift in the wicked capital'<sup>62</sup>; few historians can resist mentioning that Formby incorporated the cough that resulted from his chest troubles (variously described as tuberculosis, and chronic bronchitis) into this comically pathetic character, commenting 'coughing better tonight' after a coughing fit. Bearing Formby's pathetic character in mind, the aside from 'Playing The Game In The West' can be understood. He compares himself with George Lashwood, a Music Hall singer associated with an immaculate dress sense which led to his nickname 'The Beau Brummel of the Halls'.<sup>63</sup> The comparison between the gormless John Willie and the sophisticated Lashwood is extremely incongruous, and this incongruity is the source of the humour. Formby's costume, a deliberately scruffy *ensemble*, consisting of 'a miniscule bowler, a jacket too tight, pants too baggy, large unlaced boots, a scarf that dangled between his legs, and gloves whose fingers were larger than his own'<sup>64</sup>, makes the statement 'Funny how they all copy my style, isn't it?' incongruous; the idea that such a conspicuously scruffy figure could be a leader of fashion is the source of the incongruity. In these jokes, the source of the incongruity is that Wallace and Formby play against type, that they defy the expectations which their stage characters promote. However, once this basic defiance of expectation was established, it was used again and again, so the audience knew exactly what kind of joke to expect of them.

Once a persona was established with an audience, ~~this allowed it~~ to anticipate the nature of the jokes in the act. This was particularly true because many of the characters and personae which comedians used conformed to established comic types. In the earliest years of Music Hall, before stand-up comedy had evolved out of comic song, there were several comic types, for example, the swell, an upper class dandy, and the coster, a working class cockney. There were

several comic types in Variety comedy. One of these was the unsophisticated simpleton from the north of England. This was the type on which George Formby Senior's John Willie was based. Others who based their personas on this comic type include Tom Foy, a contemporary of Formby Senior, and later George Formby Junior, Albert Modley, and Reg Dixon. Another comic type used by Music Hall and Variety comedians was the upper class twit figure, perhaps a descendent of the early Music Hall 'swell' figure. Oliver Wakefield, who played the Variety circuit in the 1930s is one example of this type. If the upper class twit was the descendent of the swell, then the descendent of the coster was the cockney comic. Some, like Leon Cortez, merely exaggerated their accent; others, like Arthur English portrayed the cockney 'spiv' or conman. Another established comic type was the Jewish comic; Julian Rose, who played the circuit in the 1920s, and Issy Bonn, who played it in the 1940s and 1950s are examples of this type of comedian.

Audiences would know exactly what sort of jokes to expect from comedians who conformed to these comic types. For example, once an audience had recognized that Arthur English was supposed to be a 'spiv', they would expect to hear jokes based on incongruously unscrupulous business practices. Even in the 1930s, when straight joke telling began to replace character comedy, stage personae could still lead audiences to know what kind of jokes to expect. For example, Max Miller's act was based on a series of unconnected packaged jokes, but he still had a very distinctive cheeky persona, with a stage costume consisting of a white trilby and a garish multi-coloured suit. Miller's career was built on a reputation for obscene jokes, and he boosted this reputation with his stage persona. Sometimes he boosted his reputation for obscenity indirectly, for example by suggesting that he was sexually promiscuous, for example: 'I'm ready for bed now, huh! Anybody?'<sup>65</sup> Here, the phrase 'ready for bed', which normally indicates tiredness, is unexpectedly used to indicate a desire to have sexual intercourse, and the 'Anybody?' is an open proposition to the members of the audience. In other cases, he directly played on his

reputation as a teller of obscene jokes; for example, he began a performance late in his career with the statement: 'Well, here we are with another spot of fun for old and young, without the slightest sign of vulgarity'; later in the same performance, he commented: 'I went ~~out to~~ a Music Hall the other week, I took the wife. I took the wife. And we sat in the front row, and two comedians came in on the stage, I have never heard such filth in all my life.'<sup>66</sup> Both of these jokes are based on a mismatch between his reputation for obscenity and his pretended disapproval of obscenity. The fact that both of these jokes work suggests that the audience was well aware of Miller's reputation, and so knew exactly what sort of jokes to expect from him.

If the use of comic personae allowed audiences to know what sort of jokes to expect, this effect was reinforced by the fact that every Variety act had its 'bill matter', which was a phrase which gave some indication of the nature of their act printed under their name on the poster. Some performers' bill matter gave little away about their act; for example, George Robey was billed as 'The Prime Minister of Mirth', and Nellie Wallace was billed as 'The Essence of Eccentricity'. Others gave a general indication of the nature of the act. The regional or ethnic origin of the act was often indicated.: Tom Foy was 'The Yorkshire Lad'; Dick Henderson was 'The Yorkshire Gentleman'; Albert Modley was 'Lancashire's Favourite Yorkshireman'; and Julian Rose was 'Our Hebrew Friend'. Others gave a more specific idea of the act: Max Miller's 'The Cheeky Chappie' gave an idea of the cheekiness of his stage persona, and the blueness of his material; Billy Bennett's 'Almost a Gentleman' gave an idea of his failed attempt at respectability; Billy Russell's 'On Behalf of the Working Classes' clearly indicated the basic concept of his act; and Oliver Wakefield's 'The Voice of Inexperience' indicated the ineffectual silliness of his stage persona.

The use of comic characters and personae was not the only aspect of Music Hall and Variety comedy which allowed audiences to know what sort of jokes to expect of comedians. There is evidence to suggest

that the scope of the comedy was very limited, revolving around a narrow and fixed set of subjects. Maurice Willson Disher has written of G.H. Macdermott that 'he was a comedian who joked *like any other* about mothers-in-law, lodgers, twins, the Salvation Army, curates, the sea-serpent, tight lacing and shapely ankles'<sup>67</sup> [my emphasis], thus suggesting all comedians used similar jokes. Max Beerbohm expressed this idea more overtly, referring to the 'quaint monotony' of Music Hall comedy:

Without that monotony there would not be the same air of general enjoyment, the same constant guffaws. That monotony is the secret of the success of the Music Halls. It is not enough for the public to know that everything is meant to be funny, that laughter is craved for every point in every 'turn'. A new kind of humour, however obvious and violent, might take the public unawares, and be received in silence. The public prefers always that the old well-tested and well-seasoned jokes be cracked for it. Or rather, not the same old jokes, but jokes on the same old subjects.<sup>68</sup>

Beerbohm also went on to list these 'same old subjects':

Mothers-in-law  
Hen-pecked husbands  
Twins  
Old maids  
Jews  
Frenchmen, Germans, Italians, Negroes (not Russians, or other foreigners of any denomination)  
Fatness  
Thinness  
Long hair (worn by a man)  
Baldness  
Sea-sickness  
Stuttering  
Bad cheese  
'Shooting the moon' (slang expression for leaving a lodging house without paying the bill).<sup>69</sup>

It is reasonable to suppose that this list of subjects changed as time went on, but some of the items were joked about until the late Variety period. For example, the figure of the old maid (or 'old dame') was referred to by comedians like Max Miller and Max Wall

whose careers lasted up to and even beyond the collapse of Variety in the 1950s, as well as appearing in the work of earlier comics like R.G. Knowles and Nellie Wallace.<sup>70</sup> A later addition to the set of stock subjects was the commercial traveller. In Variety jokes, the fact that the commercial traveller's job took him away from home for long periods was seen as giving him the opportunity for sexual promiscuity. As a result, the commercial traveller was always portrayed as a sexual rogue. For example, Max Miller had a reputation for obscenity, so he cast himself in the role: 'I know what you're saying to yourselves. You're saying to yourselves, "Why is he dressed like that?" I'll tell you why I'm dressed like this, I'm a commercial traveller, and I'm ready for bed.'<sup>71</sup> In a Billy Bennett joke, the commercial traveller was more of a sexual voyeur: 'In the bed opposite to my father was a commercial traveller, brought in from one of the hotels, stabbed in the eye with a hat pin. I thought it was through an accident, but it wasn't, it was through a keyhole.'<sup>72</sup>

In the 1930s, when joke-based comedy began to replace character-based comedy, not only did the same subjects crop up again and again, the very same jokes were used again and again. This was partly because packaged jokes were easier to steal than sections of character comedy<sup>73</sup>, but also because many comedians relied on the same sources for their material. There were a number of joke books which comedians used, for example Ten Thousand Jokes, Toasts and Stories, edited by Lewis and Fay Copeland, and published in 1939.<sup>74</sup> Max Wall is one comedian who has recalled using such books:

'Sometimes I used to take jokes from Orben's joke book- a lot of comedians used to take whole routines from it, whether it suited them or not- but I used to work out a structure and weave the jokes into it.'<sup>75</sup> Whether the comics bothered to adapt the jokes to their own styles or not, the fact that they relied on the same books for material suggests that Variety audiences would hear the same jokes over and over again.

Overall, it seems that familiarity was a major characteristic of Music Hall and Variety comedy. Comic personae would allow audiences to know what kind of jokes to expect, and would often conform to established comic types, the nature of the comedy would often be indicated by the bill matter, the same set of subjects would be joked about, and the same jokes would be used again and again. Humour's potential subversiveness is linked with defiance of expectation and deviation from the habitual and the familiar; Music Hall and Variety comedy constantly undermined these elements, leading audiences to know exactly what to expect, breeding familiarity, and habitually using the same jokes.

#### E. Reactions against the rigid conventions

As we have seen, the scope of Music Hall and Variety comedy was limited. The role of the comedian within a bill was strictly defined, the humour tended to be based on a small number of established comic types and a limited set of joke subjects. Comedians even relied on the same joke books to provide them with material. However, a few comedians reacted against this stylistic conservatism. For example, Sir George Robey defied the established conventions of stand-up comedy by reprimanding the audience when they laughed, saying 'desist!', or 'desist from mirth!', or 'pray temper your hilarity.'<sup>76</sup> Max Wall interacted with the audience in a similarly unconventional manner, pretending that he was desperate to make them laugh. If a joke failed, rather than ignore it, he would comment, 'Success is built on failures- that's why I'm a success!' If he made a particularly weak joke, he would ask, 'How desperate can a comedian be?' If a weak joke went down well, he would cry 'Success! Success!'<sup>77</sup> With both Robey and Wall, the incongruity is based on deviation from the role of the comedian. Robey broke the conventions of stand-up comedy by pretending to disapprove of the audience response which defines his job, laughter; and Wall made a more subtle deviation by highlighting his failures, and deprecating his successes.

Many comedians appear to have satirized the rigid conventions of Variety entertainment. For example, Sandy Powell had an act about an incompetent ventriloquist, and another about an incompetent magician; Tommy Cooper had a more famous incompetent magician act; and Horace Kenney had a sketch called 'The Music Hall Trial Turn' which featured badly-performed versions of various aspects of Music Hall entertainment.<sup>73</sup> Kenney's act involved a deliberately incompetent stand-up comedy routine:

**Kenney:** A Scotchman and an Irishman were one day havin' a walk along a street, side by side, together, it was on a Monday they were walking, no Wednesday, no Saturday...

**Manager:** It was during the week.

**Kenney:** Yes, it was. One day of the week. And as they was walking along, they suddenly came to a big shop window with glass all over it, and the Scotchman, 'e turned to 'ave a look in the window, as he...wanted to see in it. And the Irishman, 'e looked on the other side of the road. And on the other side of the road, was a very big tree, very high and tall, with leaves and branches sticking out all over it, it was growing there. And, er, when 'e saw the tree, 'e turned to the Scotchman and 'e said, ''Ere, Murphy,' 'e said, 'if that big tree was to fall into that big window and break it, as it would, if it did,' 'e said, 'what would the window say to the tree?' Yes, oh yes, this is good. Then said the Scotchman to the Irishman, 'Well, I don't know Sandy, tell me, what would it say?' Then said the Irishman, 'Why the window'd go and say: "Enormous."'

**Manager:** 'Enormous'?

**Kenney:** Yes, sir, that's what it'd...No, no, take that back, 'Tree-mendous'. Yes, 'tree-mendous'. It wouldn't say 'enormous'. Well, that's the end of that one.<sup>73</sup>

Whilst Powell, Cooper, and Kenney all appear to have been satirizing the conventions of Variety entertainment, their humour was in fact directed against the incompetence of the individual. Sandy Powell's ventriloquist was a doddering old Chelsea Pensioner, and it was his inability to ventriloquize that was being satirized, rather than the conventions of ventriloquism. Similarly, the main source of Tommy Cooper's humour was his genially insane persona who could not perform the tricks properly; it was not a satirical comment on the conventions of stage magic. Horace Kenney's act was even more obviously about the incompetence of the individual. The very fact that the sketch is about a 'trial turn', an amateur who is trying

to turn professional, suggests that it is not the conventions of Music Hall entertainment, but the inability of Kenney to adhere to them, which is being ridiculed. In the extract above, the joke is that Kenney tells a very weak joke in an unnecessarily long-winded and muddled fashion. Rather than questioning the use of stock figures like Irishmen and Scotsmen, the joke is that he gets the conventions wrong, calling the Irishman 'Sandy' and the Scotsman 'Murphy', where convention would dictate that the Irishman is 'Murphy', and the Scotsman is 'Sandy'.

However, there were comedians who did satirize the rigid conventions. For example, Beryl Reid, who worked on the Variety circuit in the 1940s and 1950s ridiculed the convention of stringing packaged jokes together into routines told in the first person:

Well now, I start off by saying my mother's not very well. (She's all right, see, but I have to say that because it's part of the joke.) This morning she swallowed an egg, whole. Now she's afraid to move in case she breaks it, and she's afraid to sit still in case she hatches it. You couldn't help laughing at that, now, could you? Now I say 'any road up', like, a sign that I'm going to say another joke. Any road up- you know I said my mother's not very well- it's making her very irritable, 'cos just before I came here she hit me on the head with an oak leaf. The one out of the centre of the dining-room table. Didn't 'alf 'urt me 'ead. (I like rub my head, see- acting, like she hit me. She never touch me- nice woman, my mother.) Now I'm going to say it again...any road up, my boyfriend took me down to Devon last year. (I never been there, see- Birmingham, I come from. I never been abroad till I came here on the coach.) He'd never been to Devon before. (It's a lot of lies- he lives there.)<sup>80</sup>

Here, Reid constantly undermines her jokes, by drawing attention to the conventions she is using: she draws attention to her own attempts at making the patter sound more natural by inserting the phrase 'any road up'; and she subverts the idea of telling packaged jokes in the first person, as if they had actually happened, by pointing out that they are 'a lot of lies'. In this way, she satirizes and defamiliarizes the conventions adhered to by many of her contemporaries.

## F. Stylistic conservatism

The style of stand-up comedy changed dramatically between its emergence in the late Music Hall era and the collapse of Variety in the 1950s. When it evolved out of comic song in the late Music Hall era, it still relied heavily on comic character; in the 1930s, comic character became less important, and the style relied more on packaged jokes; and in the postwar period, comic character became more important again. In addition to this, the comedy often used language very imaginatively and there was a notable streak of surrealistic humour. However, in spite of these dramatic changes and imaginative aspects, the majority of Music Hall and Variety comedy was stylistically conservative: the humour was clearly framed and separated from normal discourse, and a series of rigid conventions made the jokes obvious and predictable. There were reactions against these rigid conventions, but they were not particularly widespread, and did not outweigh the general stylistic conservatism.

## IV. The politics of Music Hall and Variety comedy

Recordings of the early stand-up comics of the late Music Hall suggest that overtly political comedy was not particularly common among the array of comic characterisations telling stories about coming into money, going on holiday to Brighton, or celebrating the comradely atmosphere of the barrack room.<sup>31</sup> The politics of Music Hall and Variety comedy must therefore be ascertained by examining the attitudes to class, gender, and race exhibited in the jokes.

### A. Class

The earliest stand-up comedians began to appear at around the time that Music Hall was mutating into Variety. At this stage, Music Hall was still a largely working class form of entertainment, even though attempts were being made to make it more up-market and respectable. However, recordings of Music Hall comedians suggest that Music Hall

comedy was not particularly class conscious. There were occasional jokes which had a something of a working class basis. For example, in his routine 'Time Is Money', R.G. Knowles made a reference to pawnbrokers:

Now then, if time is money, how is it that so often we have to take our time, which is our money, to a friendly uncle's, and there change the time into money, if it is already money, there is something that always bothers me. And then again, you've got to get more money, which is also time again, to get the time out, when the time is up. And if it is also time out when the time is up, you've got to tell the time by the ticket. Well, there's one time you can tell by the ticket, and that is to get it out again. And if you don't get it out *on* time, away goes time, money and the whole darned business.<sup>82</sup>

Here, the actual comedy arises from the convoluted language and logic used to describe the process of a transaction with a pawnbroker, playing with phrases like 'time is money', 'time's up', and 'time out'. The fact that the routine is about going to a pawnbroker suggests that it is aimed at a working class audience, which would have actual experience of dealing with one. A joke in Dan Leno's 'My Wife's Relations' also relied on social class, in that it was about pretension and social status: 'Well, my brother returned from his work, where he'd been, he'd been working for the umm, not masonry exactly, but, umm, um, it was the government had some stones they wanted breaking, and the brother got the contract.'<sup>83</sup> Here, the joke is that the brother is not involved in anything as socially respectable as masonry, but is in fact a criminal, breaking rocks in prison; the incongruity is the mismatch in social status between a stonemason and a prisoner. The joke satirizes working class people who claim to have a higher social position than they actually have. There is evidence to suggest that this type of joke continued in the Variety era. Max Wall made the following joke in 1951: 'I believe my father was a real go-getter. He used to go and get the coal and wood.'<sup>84</sup> The phrase 'go-getter' suggests upwardly mobile aspirations, but this expectation is overturned by the **punchline** which reveals that it refers to the physical task of going and getting. The task of fetching coal and

wood suggests a working class lifestyle, so the joke works by suggesting that the father is upwardly mobile, then revealing that he is solidly working class.

Later, in the Variety era, when audiences were socially mixed, and did not necessarily have a strong working class basis, there is some evidence of an element of snobbery. For example, it is possible that part of the humour of Billy Russell's act was a ridiculing of working class values. It would be simplistic to argue that Russell's stage character of a bad-tempered working class northerner was a simple piece of snobbery, a comic commoner created for the middle class to laugh at. Part of his appeal was undoubtedly that he was supposed to offer a down to earth, no-nonsense viewpoint. One joke which relied on this came from a routine from the Second World War, and was aimed at the over-enthusiastic vigilance of the A.R.P. wardens:

And, er, and to make matters worse, that R.I.P. [A.R.P.] lot 'e come again last Saturday night, I said, 'Now don't tell me, there's no light shinin' through the windows,' 'e says, 'I know. There's a light shinin' under your door,' I says, 'Well blimey, you don't expect they're coming on their 'ands and knees, do you?!'<sup>es</sup>

Here, Russell's no-nonsense perspective makes the demands of the A.R.P. seem incongruous, by pointing out that only an invasion force advancing on all fours could see a light shining under a door. However, it seems unlikely that his act was entirely devoid of snobbery. The title of the act, 'On Behalf of the Working Classes', tends to suggest that Variety audiences did not identify themselves as working class, that Russell addressed them as an outsider, on behalf of his social group, the working classes. Some of his jokes also seem to rely on a ridiculing of the low social status of his comic character, for example: 'We got one of those R.I.P. [A.R.P.] chaps round our way, he's a damn nuisance! With 'is "Blackin' out, blackin'out", we've hardly got any clothes on the bed.'<sup>es</sup> This joke gets a very good response from the audience, a burst of laughter lasting seven seconds. The joke could rely on the simple incongruity

of using sheets and blankets to use as extra curtains, to achieve a blackout. However, the audience response seems a little over-enthusiastic for such an apparently weak joke. It is possible that the joke also relies on an element of snobbery: the idea of using bedclothes as curtains is not respectable, and the audience may be laughing at the incongruous vulgarity of it. Russell's character also uses malapropisms, for example referring to an A.R.P. warden as an 'R.I.P.' warden, and referring to the Ministry of Information as the 'Ministry of Inflammation'.<sup>27</sup> Part of the comedy of malapropisms lies in the simple incongruity of using an incorrect word in an inappropriate context. These particular malapropisms may also have been enjoyed because they may have been interpreted as mild insults to bureaucratic government bodies. However, because they involve an incorrect use of language, they also connote ignorance, and the laughter which greets the malapropisms which Russell's character uses can be interpreted as a snobbish laughter at the supposed ignorance of working class people. Leon Cortez, who played the Variety circuit from before the Second World War to the 1950s, had a series of routines based on Shakespeare plays, which also possibly contained an element of snobbery. In these routines, the plots of the plays would be summarized in a broad cockney accent, with a good deal of slang:

Now then, when Macbeth gets 'ome, 'e tells 'is missis all about this, and she bein' a bit of a cunnin' old commando, already sees 'erself with a crown for a titfer, and knowin' the King was comin' to stay for the weekend, decides to do 'im. Well, King Duncan and 'is sons Malcolm and Donalbain arrive, and bein' a bit tired the old cock goes straight for kip, and no sooner 'as 'e dropped off to sleep than Mrs Mac, just like the cat, crept up to 'is cot, copped 'is clock, coughed and crept out again. 'Ain't yer done 'im?' sez Macbeth. 'No,' she sez-' 'is clock reminded me of my father. You 'ave a bash.' 'What?' sez Macbeth- 'Don't you think I 'ad a father?' 'Now take this dagger and cut off 'is future'- which 'e does, and so becomes king.<sup>28</sup>

Most of the humour in this routine stems from the incongruity of linking the high culture of Shakespeare with the low culture of the broad cockney delivery smattered with slang words like 'titfer'

(hat), 'kip' (sleep), and 'clock' (face). This basic comic idea is double-edged: it could be laughed at because the cockney approach debunks the highbrow culture of Macbeth, bringing it down to earth; on the other hand, it could be that the idea of a working class cockney aspiring to live up to the standards of Shakespeare is seen as ludicrous and laughable. In the first of these responses, the working class is taken as a reference group, and the audience approves of the debunking of elitist culture; in the second, the audience identifies itself with the highbrow culture of Shakespeare, and laughs snobbishly at Cortez's vulgar approach to it. It is possible, and indeed likely that both of these responses could co-exist within a mixed-class Variety audience, and therefore it seems unlikely that the audience response to it was entirely free of snobbery.

If some of the jokes which Variety comics told had a snobbish appeal, in other cases, snobbery itself was ridiculed. For example, Oliver Wakefield's upper class twit persona took a patronizing and snobbish attitude towards the audience, for example, talking about looking into their 'simple faces'. In the context of Wakefield's idiotic persona, it is clear that this kind of attitude was being ridiculed.

Another aspect of Music Hall and Variety comedy which related to social class was the ridiculing of working class radicalism, and Left movements of all varieties. For example, Dan Leno's 'Midnight March' presents a parody of a radical political speaker:

It is my intention to hold a meeting here today and say a few speaks. Working men of England, you must rally round me. Working men, you don't seem to understand yourselves. You must rouse yourselves, get behind yourselves, and push yourselves forward. Don't stand about the place and stand about just for the sake of standing. No! Now is the time and the only time. When time is time you can't get away from facts. What did Mr Gladstone say the other day? I again ask you, working men of England, what did he say? You know some people see things when they look at 'em; you can't eat soap and wash with it. Well, that proves what I have just said, that

the working men of England at the present day are nothing more or less than- than- than working men. You can't get away from facts.<sup>29</sup>

Billy Bennett used a similar parody of a political speaker: 'What we would want today is social reform, tariff reform and, more than likely, chloroform. What did Gladstone say after '99? Why, a hundred of course- and he was right!'<sup>30</sup> Both of these extracts satirize political speakers of the Left: the continual references to 'working men' in the first, and the references to Gladstone in both indicate this. In both cases, the comic technique is the same: there is a mismatch between the pomposity of the language and the fact that what they are saying makes no sense. This suggests that the arguments of political speakers are nonsensical. The references to Gladstone are significant, as he was a standard figure of fun in the Music Halls, as Laurence Senelick has pointed out: 'Without fail, the Music Hall berated Gladstone's age, insisted on his mismanagement of the Liberal Party, and called for his stepping-down.'<sup>31</sup> It is interesting that Bennett, whose performing career did not begin until after the First World War, twenty years after Gladstone's death, still made a reference to him in this routine.

Communist Russia was also ridiculed by some Variety comedians. In an act dating from 1938, Billy Russell's commonsense viewpoint made a generalized attack on politicians, for disregarding working class interests: 'The last bloke to get any consideration in this world is the working man- look at 'em in parliament, what do they do for the working man? *What do they do?* Promise him everything, give him nothing, and before he gets it they take it off him.'<sup>32</sup> Whilst this may appear momentarily to be a piece of genuinely radical working class comedy, it is swiftly followed by an attack on Russia:

Not only here but all over the world- it's the same even in Russia. Russia!- and they brag of their freedom! They're interfering with the working man's innocent amusements! Taking all the kings and queens out of the packs of playing cards. Now if you want to go nap, you've got to have four town councillors and a sanitary inspector!<sup>33</sup>

This comic attack on Russia must be put in context: in 1938, little was known of the human rights abuses which had been perpetrated by Stalin's regime, the non-aggression pact with Hitler had not yet been signed, and many on the Left looked on Russia as something of a utopia, a living example of the socialist future which they hoped for. Russell's portrayal of the Russian regime as a bureaucratic system which is out of touch with the working class, serves to neuter his attack on British politicians; the argument which emerges from his comic routine seems to be that our system is bad, but the alternative, as represented by Russia, is worse.

Overall, social class does not appear to have been a major pre-occupation of Music Hall and Variety comedians, though there is some evidence to suggest that by the 1930s, some comedians used jokes which relied on a snobbish, derogatory attitude towards working class people; this kind of joke co-existed with jokes which ridiculed upper class snobbery. One class-related theme that does appear to have been quite common was the satirizing of anything representative of working class radicalism.

## B. Sexual politics

### 1. Family

Domestic matters were perhaps the most popular subject of jokes in Music Hall and Variety. Domestic jokes were nearly always concerned with family relationships, and marital relationships in particular. The incongruities on which these jokes were based were connected with deviations from an idealized image of marriage. According to this ideal, which originated in the Industrial Revolution, marriage was a compulsory institution, marital fidelity had to be upheld, and within the marriage, the husband took the role of the dominant breadwinner, and the wife took the role of the subservient housekeeper.

The deviation from this ideal which perhaps inspired the largest number of jokes was the figure of the domineering wife. Dan Leno's

'The Grass Widower', about a husband whose wife is going away, is an early example of this type of humour:

She turned round and said: 'You brute! You massive brute! I believe you wish I was dead!' (Isn't it funny how wives guess your thoughts!) I said: 'No, darling, but you must hurry up and get your train in the morning.' So I put the clock on four hours- we had to get up before we went to bed. But when I got to the station, I couldn't contain myself. I felt so overjoyed, I could have cuddled the engine. And I got hold of the guard, and I said: 'What time does it go?' He says: 'In five minutes.' I said: 'Make it off in two, and there's a pot of four-half for you!' He says: 'Shall I lock the lady in?' I said: 'Nail her in! Hammer her in!'<sup>34</sup>

There is nothing in this extract which explicitly suggests that the wife is dominant and overbearing. Her only comment is more ridiculous than fierce: she calls her husband a 'massive brute', this being a joke based on the fact that Leno was 'a small, frail person'.<sup>35</sup> The rest of the humour in the routine is based on Leno's character's incongruously overstated hatred of his wife: he wishes her dead, he cuddles the train that is taking her away from him, and he instructs the guard to nail her into her compartment. In the absence of any evidence of the wife's dominating nature, this hatred appears to be gratuitous, and rather inhuman. However, a contemporary description of the routine suggests that the audience would have accepted the idea that the reason for Leno's character's hatred was the wife's unacceptable dominance:

He conjured up realistic visions of the most awful termagant of a wife that ever lived. Of course, we never saw her; but we knew she must have been a terrible virago, because Dan bubbled over with such sheer delight when he told us she had gone away for a holiday and left him at home.<sup>36</sup>

The fact that this contemporary observer assumes that the character's hatred of his wife is a result of her being a 'termagant' and a 'virago' suggests that the dominant wife figure was a well-established convention. It does not logically follow that because a husband wants to get rid of his wife for a while, she must be violent, masculine, and dominant as the words 'termagant'

and 'virago' suggest; there may be any number of reasons for it, not least his own intolerance. Therefore, the contemporary observer's assumption that it is the wife's dominance that has caused the husband's hatred implies that jokes about dominant wives were common in Leno's era. The dominant wife continued to appear in jokes well into the Variety era. For example, Reg Dixon, a comedian whose persona was based on the unsophisticated northern simpleton type, was the victim of a particularly hard-hearted wife:

I said, 'I hope to reach three score and ten.' She said, 'If you do I shall lose money. I shall have paid out more for you than what I'm getting back on the insurance.' I said, 'That isn't very kind- I haven't been to the doctor for three days.' She says, 'Well, it's about time you went. The fowl were going on very well on those pills that you had for your constitution.'<sup>27</sup>

Jokes about domineering wives were connected with jokes about the extended family. The wife's family, and particularly her mother, were seen as her allies allowing her to gain a dominant position. The introduction to one of Billy Bennett's poems illustrates this point: 'Little dramatic poem, written by my wife, and composed by her mother, entitled: "I shall love you when your money has gone. But I shan't be with you".'<sup>28</sup> The joke here is that the phrase 'I shall love you when your money has gone' suggests a declaration of loving loyalty, but this expectation is overturned by the sentence which follows, which implies loveless and mercenary intentions. This hard-heartedness is seen to be the result of an alliance between the wife and the mother-in-law. This type of joke seems to have been very common: as we have seen, both Maurice Willson Disher and Max Beerbohm included mothers-in-law in their lists of stock subjects for Music Hall jokes, and the tradition of mother-in-law jokes still exists in Working Men's Club comedy. In some jokes about the extended family, the wife's family is even shown to have forced the husband into the marriage in the first place; for example, Billy Bennett joked: 'Of course I walked into that wedding with both my eyes shut- her brother shut one and her father shut the other.'<sup>29</sup> Other jokes connected with extended family relations were not

connected with the idea of the wife's dominance. For example, Dan Leno's 'My Wife's Relations' addresses the idea of extended family relations becoming too close:

And, er, during that time, our step father had married a third mother, and he deceased [*sic*] also our second mother. So my brother met our third mother, and fell in love with her, and married her. Well now, that's where the trouble commenced. Because, you see that made me my brother's son. And my sister-in-law was really me mother. Well, now then, follow me closely, would you? There was an aunt. By marriage. She had an adopted daughter. Left to her for rent, or something. And, er the, she, this daughter fell in love with a man that built the house for our second mother. You see where we're getting to? Well, now then, keep close to me will you? This is rather intricate. You see, the uncle owed us a f.. oh no, no I'm wrong, I...no, yes, that's right. Oh, there, there was a postman in it as well. But however, I know we got so mixed up that my brother was his own father at the finish, and I know this, that's how it wound up.<sup>100</sup>

Here, family relations are so incongruously tangled and close that they even confuse Leno's character, and his brother becomes his own father, but the routine manages to avoid the taboo subject of incest, which must have been a subconscious fear in close-knit extended families. Other jokes about the extended family dealt with the question of social status. For example, in one of Max Miller's jokes, his father-in-law has an incongruous lack of respectability:

What a family I've married into, what a family! On our wedding day, on our wedding day, somebody tied a pair of shoes to the back of the car. And when we came into the church, I couldn't find 'er father. He was at the back of the car, trying 'em on!<sup>101</sup>

In addition to jokes about the wife's dominance, often linked with the idea of the extended family, there were also jokes about wives who deviated from their role as housekeeper. For example, Dick Henderson, a comedian of the 1920s and 1930s, appears to have based most of his material on the shortcomings of his wife. In one of his routines, he described her failure to provide him with an adequate breakfast: 'She gets me up in the morning and brings me a cup of tea- and drinks it herself- and when I come down to breakfast she

boils me a couple of eggs but gives me the gravy.'<sup>102</sup> He also ridiculed her abilities as a cook: 'She's what one would call a religious cook- everything she sends up is either a sacrifice or a burnt offering.'<sup>103</sup>

There was also a series of jokes about wives who deviated from their role as sexual partner. These were usually based on the idea of the wife's being ugly; for example, Max Miller joked: 'And between you and I, my wife's the ugliest woman in the world. The ugliest woman in the world. I'd sooner take 'er with me than kiss 'er goodbye.'<sup>104</sup> In other jokes, the idea that the wife did not conform to society's conception of physical beauty was expressed less directly, in descriptions which conjured up vivid images of hideousness; for example, Dick Henderson described his wife in the following terms:

She came right up to me and looked into both of my eyes- and I looked into her one- mind you, I didn't mind her only having one eye. What I took exception to was her teeth. Not that I do in the ordinary course of events, but I did to hers because they belonged to her sister, and her sister has a bigger mouth than her.'<sup>105</sup>

Whereas Dick Henderson's joke wife was one-eyed and had ill-fitting borrowed false teeth, Billy Russell's was hugely fat:

And what a boiling piece- what a size! What a figure! She's like a venetian blind with the cord broke. It's remarkable how far the human skin will stretch without bursting. To see her with the nose-bag on, it's an education- her stomach's got no memory! She sat down today, she had a beefsteak, it it had been any bigger she could have milked it!<sup>106</sup>

Here, the wife is not only incongruously fat and greedy, she is also like an animal, eating out of a nose-bag. Jokes about the wife's ugliness are linked with her role as sexual partner: her lack of sexual attractiveness means that she is impaired in this role. In one of Max Miller's jokes, this is overtly stated, and his wife is held to be so fat that it impairs her sexual performance: 'She weighs twenty stone. Twenty stone, what I go through. On our wedding

night, on our wedding night, she woke me up, she woke me up, and she started shouting, "Here, here!" I started shouting, "Where, where??"<sup>107</sup> The humour here is surprisingly graphic: the wife's size means that Miller has to 'go through' a lot of fat to reach her vagina, and on her wedding night, he cannot even find it.

Whilst the wife's deviation from her role as subservient housekeeper and sexual partner was the subject of many of the jokes about domestic matters, other jokes took the husband as the subject. Firstly, there were jokes about subservient husbands. Tom Leamore's 'I Thought She Was So Shy' is an early example of this kind of humour. In the patter section of the song, Leamore portrays an incongruously puny husband who is 'like a ninepenny rabbit', and is too weak to assert himself with his wife: 'Well, I told him a bit about me family troubles, he said, "It's your own fault, you must put your foot down my boy!" I said, "Put it down? I've hardly the strength to lift it up!"'<sup>108</sup> Other jokes about husbands dealt with their deviation from the role of breadwinner. For example, in one of the incongruous-sounding sentences of R.G. Knowles' 'Time Is Money', it is the 'parsimony of the husband' which causes 'the acrimony of the wife', and 'breaks up the harmony of the matrimony.'<sup>109</sup> It may be that Knowles chose to blame the husband's 'parsimony' merely to contribute to the repetitive sound of the sentence, but he could have served this purpose just as well by blaming the wife's 'parsimony' for the *husband's* 'acrimony'. The routine blames the husband's 'parsimony', because his meanness is related to his failure to fulfil his role as breadwinner. Similarly, Robb Wilton's radio routines from the Second World War featured what appeared to be a classic dominating wife figure, but in fact, most of the jokes were at the expense of Wilton's bumbling persona. For example, he moaned that his wife had 'a cruel tongue': "'Well", she said, "all the young fellers'll be getting called up, and", she said, "you'll have to go back to work." Ooh, she's got a cruel tongue!"'<sup>110</sup> The joke is that what the wife says is perfectly reasonable, so it is incongruous for Wilton to accuse her of having a cruel tongue. The joke is about Wilton's unwillingness to work, and therefore his

unwillingness to fulfil his role as breadwinner, rather than about his wife's dominance. Similarly, he moaned about his wife's having 'no brains', and driving him out of the house:

'Now', she said, 'our 'Arry's sure to be getting called up, and', she said, 'when 'e's gone, there'll only be 'is army allowance, and', she said, 'what are you going to do then?' I said, 'I'll 'ave to try and manage on it!' She said, 'You'll 'ave to try and manage...??' she said, 'What about me?' I said, 'There'll be my insurance.' She said, 'I can't get that 'til you're dead.' I said, 'Well then, you'll 'ave to wait.' She said, 'Suppose I die first?' I said, 'Well then, you won't want it!' But you can't reas...she's no brains...Anyhow, I got fed up, an' I put me 'at on, and I went down to the local. Ooh, the times that woman's driven me into the local!'''

The humour here is about his inadequacies as a breadwinner rather than his wife's dominance: he is supposed to be the provider, so it is incongruous for him to say he will try to manage on his son's army allowance. The joke about his wife living on his insurance involves faulty logic: it appears to be perfectly logical for him to point out that his insurance will be no good to her if she dies first, but it is incongruous in a conversation in which he has suggested that she should live on it. It is his logic that is at fault, so it is incongruous for him to assert 'she's no brains', and to suggest that she has driven him into the local pub.

As domestic jokes tended to deal with deviations from expected roles within marriage, they could be seen as being subversive. For example, it could be very subversive for jokes to show wives as powerful dominators with their husbands meekly accepting their dominance, in a society which held that wives should be subservient and husbands should be dominant. However, these jokes were far from being subversive, because the attitude to deviations like this was that they were totally undesirable. One of the aspects of the wife's dominance in jokes was that she forced *restrictions* on the husband's leisure activities. For example, Max Miller joked: 'I've just come back from my holidays, always have a wonderful time when I go on my holidays, because I haven't got one of those wives who says, "Where

have you been, how much have you spent, who have you been with?" She doesn't say that, she comes with me.''<sup>12</sup> The joke works by building up the expectation that Miller is praising his wife for her tolerance: she does not interrogate him about what he does on his holiday. However, the punchline overturns this expectation by revealing that the reason she does not interrogate him is that she goes with him, presumably to keep an eye on him, thus restricting his activities. Many of Al Read's jokes were based on the idea of the wife restricting the husband's leisure activities, for example, reprimanding him after a night at the pub:

No, I mean to say, you've all had it, a night out with the lads. A few over the eight, as you totter down those stairs the morning after the night before, what greets you? [exaggerated mimed movements of disapproving wife] All wives do that, don't they? 'I hope you know, you came to bed stripped with your hat on?' That's the wife from the kitchen. 'When was that, love?' 'Well, if you think you're gonna keep coming this trick three or four nights a week, we're going to have a different arrangement. I 'eard you, creeping up those stairs, and you'll be breaking your neck one of these nights, hopping up and down that landing trying to get your pants off.''<sup>13</sup>

This routine is interesting in terms of the way in which the audience relates to it. It is primarily a parody of a nagging wife, but most of the laughs are produced by the descriptions of the ridiculous way in which the husband has behaved coming in drunk the night before, forgetting to take his hat off before getting into bed, and hopping about trying to get his pants off. It would be possible to argue that its audience responded to it in different ways, the men laughing at the harshness of the wife, the women at the ridiculousness of the husband's drunken attempts at going to bed. However, this argument has serious flaws. Firstly, the audience clearly recognized the convention of the nagging wife. The exaggerated mimed movements of the disapproving wife at the beginning of the routine are greeted with laughter, even though the wife has not been mentioned yet: this implies either that Read's mime has been unerringly accurate, or that the audience has recognized the convention of the nagging wife. Secondly, the routine

is addressed to the men in the audience: only the men would have had 'a night out with the lads'. This suggests that the audience are being invited to take men as a reference group, and identify with the plight of the nagged husband. Finally, the ridiculous behaviour of the drunken husband is partly linked with the idea of a dominating wife anyway: he hops about on the landing trying to take his pants off because he does not want to disturb his wife and thus incur her wrath. Ultimately, the comedy is about his wife trying to curb his leisure activities. The fact that the wife's dominance was shown to restrict the husband's leisure implies that it was seen as undesirable for wives to dominate as they did in jokes. Moreover, the idea that the wife's dominance was seen as undesirable is supported by a number of jokes which directed gratuitous misogynist aggression at the wife. For example, Max Miller used a poem in his act which portrayed his wife as a form of divine punishment:

They took the vanity from the peacock,  
The cunning from the fox,  
The brains from the jackass,  
The jawbone from an ox,  
The venom from the viper,  
The stinger from the bee,  
Put them all in my old woman,  
And bunged her onto me!<sup>14</sup>

There were also jokes which relied on taking an incongruously callous attitude towards the wife. Max Miller provides an example of this:

I said, 'Ello Charlie, what are you having?' He said, 'I'll have a whisky.' I said, 'How's the wife?' He said, 'Oh dear, oh dear.' 'E said, 'She's fallen down the stairs, and broken her leg.' I said, 'I'm sorry to hear about that.' He said, 'I'll be glad when they shout time, so I can go 'ome and pick 'er up.'<sup>15</sup>

The idea of the man in the joke going to the pub after his wife has fallen down the stairs, and waiting until the pub shuts before picking her up off the floor, is potentially more tragic or horrific than comic. Only antipathy towards the wife transports it into the

realm of the humorous. In other jokes, this kind of antipathy was taken further, and domestic violence was seen as a laughing matter; for example, Max Miller joked:

But we never row, the wife and I, never row, never 'ave a row. We get on nicely together, and d'you know why? Because I help her in everything. Everything. Yesterday, I did the washing with 'er yesterday. Today, I did the ironing with 'er today. Tomorrer, I'm gonna do the cooking with 'er tomorrer. Then on Saturday, I'm gonna wipe the floor with 'er.'<sup>116</sup>

The joke here is a simple wordplay, based on the phrase 'to wipe the floor with somebody' which means 'to beat somebody up'. This double meaning could be understood by anybody, but one would have to be unconcerned about domestic violence against women to find the joke funny.

Whilst there was a good deal of antipathy directed at dominant wives, dominated husbands appear to have been seen as ridiculously puny: as we have seen, in 'I Thought She Was So Shy', Tom Leamore describes himself as being 'like a ninepenny rabbit'. In other cases, dominated husbands seem to have been pitied. As we have seen, Reg Dixon, a comic whose persona was based on the northern simpleton type, suffered from a particularly hard-hearted wife in his routines, and he also directly appealed to the audience's sympathy: 'You wouldn't think that nobody loved me. But it's true. It's true- to look at me, you would say, "There is someone that should have lots of love, oodles of cuddle, a bottle of medicine, and some fresh air." I'm not getting anything. Penelope's left me.'<sup>117</sup>

The antipathy directed at the dominant wife, and the ridicule or pity directed at the subservient husband suggest that deviation from established roles within marriage portrayed in jokes was thought to be undesirable. However, the institution of marriage was rarely criticized. There were a few jokes which did express dissatisfaction

with marriage itself. For example, in one of George Robey's character routines, he played a newly-married woman who compares the three weeks between the banns being read and the wedding with the period before an execution, and declares: 'It's a very serious business is marriage, you know. There isn't a word for marriage...it's a sentence.'<sup>118</sup> Similarly, in one of Max Miller's jokes, arguing was seen as a definitive part of married life: 'Married people, they do, they argue, there's no doubt about it, they've got to, otherwise it wouldn't be married life.'<sup>119</sup> However, in most cases, whilst marriage was seen as a bringer of misery, it was also seen as a necessity. For example, after describing his wife's nagging after his night out at the pub, Al Read suddenly declared: 'But we'd be lost, we'd be lost without the wives.'<sup>120</sup> The solution to the problem of marital strife was to return to the traditional roles. In 'I Thought She Was So Shy', Tom Leamore's character is advised by a friend: 'Now, as soon as you go 'ome, start ordering your old woman about, and make her wait on you. She'll think the world of you.'<sup>121</sup> In fact, we are told that the wife has reacted angrily at the husband's attempts to assert himself, but this is only because he is too puny to assert himself properly.

The institution of marriage was also implicitly supported by the fact that those who refused to get married were subjected to ridicule: as we have seen, the old maid was a stock subject for Music Hall jokes. In jokes about old maids, they were never unmarried by choice, indeed they were always desperate to marry. R.G. Knowles' 'Time Is Money' states this overtly, saying 'The old maid wants matrimony.'<sup>122</sup> In Dan Leno's 'Mrs Kelly', the woman he plays is not exactly an old maid, having been married twice before, but essentially she conforms to the old maid type having pursued her potential husband for twenty five years even though he has no desire to marry her; she is positively desperate to marry, declaring: 'If he won't marry me, well I'll insist upon it, and take him to church meself if I have to chloroform him, upon my word I will, I'll have

him.<sup>123</sup> Similarly, Nellie Wallace's stage persona was a classic personification of the old maid type, and was constantly searching for eligible men. In some jokes, old maids were desperate for sex rather than marriage. For example, Max Wall joked: 'By the way, did you hear about the two old dames? Two old dames went for a tramp in the woods. But he got away.'<sup>124</sup> The joke relies on a double meaning of the phrase 'went for a tramp', which initially suggests going for a walk, but also suggests sexually molesting a tramp. The attitude taken towards old maids in jokes was usually scornful, as demonstrated by one of Max Miller's poems:

What is an old maid? That is the question:  
A bundle of sour discontent.  
If you were to offer her sweet married bliss,  
She'd want this and that, and then that and this.  
Then if you gave her just what she wanted,  
Don't think a favour you'd do her,  
Because after she got what she wanted, she wouldn't want it,  
So what's the good of givin' it... I mean, it's a waste of...<sup>125</sup>

This poem not only portrays the old maid as 'a bundle of sour discontent', but also portrays her as intrinsically awkward and impossible to satisfy. It is interesting that faced with the figure of the old maid, the woman who has rejected marriage, Miller talks of 'sweet married bliss', even though the rest of his act shows marriage as a source of unhappiness. In other cases, the old maid is treated more with sympathy than with scorn; for example, Maurice Willson Disher wrote of Nellie Wallace's ability to 'excite our sympathy' with her 'protruding teeth and a heart-rending squint.'<sup>126</sup> By portraying old maids as cantankerous or pitiable women, desperate for marriage or sex, these jokes implicitly upheld the institution of marriage, by ridiculing those who had rejected it.

Most of the domestic comedy in Music Hall and Variety was solidly conservative, because it showed deviation from established roles within marriage as something to be avoided, and seldom questioned the actual institution of marriage. Jokes which imposed anything approaching a feminist perspective on domestic matters were

exceptionally rare, if they existed at all. Indeed, movements associated with feminism were a major source of ridicule. Maurice Willson Disher noted that 'the emancipation of women [was] a stock joke of Music Hall comedians for many years.'<sup>127</sup> Billy Bennett provides an example of this kind of joke, using a play on the words 'poll' and 'pole' to change the demand of the suffragette movement into a misogynist desire to get rid of women: 'The trouble today is that women are trying to rule the country. They say their place is at the poll. I think so meself. They can go either to the South, or the North Pole; I don't care which.'<sup>128</sup>

However, there was one type of domestic joke in Music Hall and Variety comedy which could be seen as subversive. One form of deviation from conventional ideas about marriage which inspired a number of jokes was marital infidelity, and the attitude towards this was not always one of disapproval. For example, in one of Max Miller's jokes, his wife completely accepts his infidelity:

Feller next door to me, he hates the sight of me. He said to my wife, he said, 'I saw your 'usband this morning. I saw 'im on the beach, with a blonde on his arm.' She said, 'Well, what do you expect him to have on his arm at his age- a bucket and spade??'<sup>129</sup>

Moreover, in Miller's routines, the right ~~to be~~ unfaithful was not restricted to the husband: on catching his wife with a naked man, rather than expressing anger he praises her ingenuity in thinking up an excuse:

I called the wife in, I said, 'Who's this?' She said, 'Don't lose your temper Miller, don't go raving mad.' I said, 'I'm only asking a fair question, who is it?' She said, 'E's a nudist, and 'e's come to use the 'phone.' There's a clever one from the wife, eh?'<sup>130</sup>

This apparent tolerance of marital infidelity was unmistakably subversive in a society in which **faithfulness** within marriage was the ideal, particularly when compared with the conservatism of the majority of domestic comedy. However, this subversiveness may have been limited by the fact that it was Max Miller who was tolerating

the infidelity: it may have been seen as permissible for Miller's cheeky, outrageous, sexually promiscuous persona to be seen to be unfaithful to his wife and to tolerate his wife's infidelity, but not for others to do the same. In other words, it may be that Miller's sexually insatiable persona was seen as an exception to the rules which still applied to everyone else.

## 2. Sexuality

Blue and smutty jokes were a massively popular part of Music Hall and Variety comedy. The terms 'blue joke' and 'smutty comedy' are used to denote humour which makes reference to sexual or lavatorial matters; but here, the terms are used specifically to refer to jokes which employ innuendo, in other words which make *covert* references to sexual and lavatorial matters. Blue jokes and smutty comedy were so popular that they led Archibald Haddon to express a fear that they actually lead to the demise of Music Hall:

The Music Hall of today retains to a considerable extent its inherited addiction to 'smut', but the direction it is taking has a more insidious trend, and the possibilities are deadlier. The result, if no halt is called, may be the ultimate extinction of the Music Halls; for how can they continue in a land of good repute if they definitely cease to be reputable?'<sup>31</sup>

Various performers, notably Marie Lloyd and Max Miller, built their careers on a reputation for blueness. Most blue jokes referred to sexual matters. Some referred to the sexual act. For example, Max Miller often used the introduction to a song to make a covert sexual reference: 'Look, I'll tell you what I'll do tonight Sidney, I'll do two choruses of "Rambling Rose" with the boys, and then I'll do "Sally" by meself.'<sup>32</sup> Here, the phrase 'I'll do "Sally" by meself' has a hidden sexual meaning. Ostensibly, 'do "Sally"' means 'sing a song entitled "Sally"'; but 'Sally' need not necessarily be a title, it could also be taken as a woman's name, and 'do' could be

interpreted as 'copulate with'. Other blue jokes would refer to the sex organs. Max Miller provides several notorious examples of this:

I'm writing another one now, a sequel to 'Annie and Fanny', and it's called...it's called 'A Fan Dancer Minus Her Fan'. That's like 'without', see. 'A Fan Dancer Minus Her Fan'. I 'aven't finished it yet, I 'aven't finished it, I'm working on it now. I've got the beginning, I've got the beginning...and I've got a part of the end, but what I'm after is that middle bit, that's what I want. If I get that, I'll be all right, I'll be all right. I'll give you a rough idea what it's all about, I'm not gonna give you a lot, you're not gonna have a lot. 'Cos I want it when I come back, you see. [sings:] I started courting a smashing fan dancer/ To marry her, that was my plan/ Now it's all off with the smashing fan dancer/ She fell down and damaged her fan...'ere!<sup>133</sup>

Now a woman, a woman bought a dog, a lit..a little dog, a little chihuahua...you see. Yeah, a little chihuahua, and she was showing it to her girlfriend, and her girlfriend said, 'That's not right.' 'What d'you mean, it's not right?' She said, 'Those little short hairs on it...shouldn't have, shouldn't have any little short hairs on it, it should be like velvet.' She said, 'You wanna do something about that.' So she went to the chemist, see...and she said to the chemist, 'Have you got anything to get rid of little short hairs?', see. So the chemist said, 'Well,' 'e said, 'I'll make you something up, you come back in about half an hour,' see. So she went back in half an hour, and 'e said, 'Right, there it is,' 'e said, 'Now look,' 'e said, 'I'll tell you what you do. You rub it on your legs...' She said, 'It's not for me legs. It's for me little chihuahua.' He said, 'Well in that case, don't ride your bike for a fortnight.'<sup>134</sup>

In the first of these, the basic joke is that 'fan' sounds like 'fanny', a slang word for vagina.<sup>135</sup> There is also another reference to vaginas: when Miller is talking about writing the song, he talks about wanting 'the middle bit', which can be taken to mean vagina, as well as the middle bit of the song. The audience's reaction to this is interesting. In this excerpt of the routine, Miller uses the same 'fan'/'fanny' joke twice, once in the title of the song, and once in the last line of the song. He also uses it again in the part of the routine which comes after this excerpt, and he also repeats 'the middle bit'/vagina joke. However, each time he uses either joke, the audience laughs; this may suggest that the naughtiness of the material gave it the power to bear repetition. Certainly, the audience's laughter suggests that the blueness of the material made

it very funny indeed to them: the final line of the song, in which the fan dancer damages her fan, provoked an audience laugh which lasted for nineteen seconds, a very long laugh indeed. In the second excerpt, there is a similar repetition of jokes. The phrase 'little short hairs' ostensibly refers to hairs on the dog, but can also be taken to mean pubic hairs, and this joke successfully achieves audience laughter twice, when they are first mentioned, and then when the woman asks the chemist for something to get rid of them. The other joke is that 'chihuahua' can be taken to be a word for vagina. 'Chihuahua' bears no particular likeness to any existing word for vagina, but because it is a foreign word, which sounds vaguely exotic, it could be mistaken for a technical term or a slang word for vagina. This joke is realized after the line 'It's not for my legs, it's for my little chihuahua', which provokes audience laughter, but they also laugh at the last line, 'don't ride your bike for a fortnight', which is effectively the same joke, merely reinforcing the 'chihuahua'/vagina link. As in the first excerpt, it appears that the blueness of the material made it funny enough in the eyes of the audience to bear repetition. Covert sexual references were not restricted to male comedians. For example, Suzette Tarri used blue material: 'Then the Captain introduced us to a friend of his- a stoker- such a nice man he was...with his shirt off and a map of the continent of America tattooed on his chest. Well I'd just managed to trace Florrie's journey down to California when the foghorn sounded.'<sup>136</sup> Here, the tattoo of the map on the chest makes a connection between geography, and the geography of the body; this gives the idea of tracing a journey down to California a sexual connotation, implying a movement down the body towards the genitals.

Not all smutty humour made covert references to sexual matters. Sometimes the humour was lavatorial, and made references to non-sexual bodily functions. For example, one of Billy Russell's Second World War routines contained the following joke: 'We don't know where to put 'em all, runnin' about, the wife gets worried these dark nights. Kids running about. She feeds them on onions so she can

find them in the dark.'<sup>137</sup> This contains a covert reference to flatulence: onions are associated with causing flatulence; the idea of the joke is that by feeding the children on onions, the wife will be able to find them in the dark, by following the smell of the anal emissions caused by the onions.

Blue humour is peculiar, because it involves referring to taboo subjects without appearing to refer to them. By doing so, it makes audiences have an increased awareness of possible sexual connotations. This point can be illustrated by examining one of Billy Bennett's jokes:

I want to say that it may be all right to allow women to vote, but I certainly think it's wrong to allow them to serve on a jury. For instance, supposing there was a jury of six men and six women, and they're locked in a room to consider their verdict. Do you think anybody would believe them when they came out and said, 'Not guilty'? Get away!<sup>138</sup>

The point of this joke is that it assumes that six men and six women would have sex with each other if they were locked in a room together. This gives the phrase 'not guilty' a double meaning: it can either be seen as their verdict on the case; or a plea of innocence to their own crime of copulation whilst locked in a room together. The only clue to the sexual meaning is the fact that there is an even number of men and women, and that they are *locked* in the room together; the slightness of this clue suggests that for an audience to pick up the sexual meaning, it must have had a fairly acute awareness of potential sexual connotations. The use of such jokes implies a kind of conspiracy between the comedian and the audience; this conspiracy is dramatized in one of Max Miller's jokes:

Now there's a soldier, soldier standing in the dock. The judge is at the back, the jury over there, the defending counsel down 'ere. The judge said to the soldier, 'This is a very serious case. We shall have to hold this in camera.' And the soldier said, 'What does that mean?' And the judge said, 'It won't make any difference to you. The jury, they know what it means. The defending counsel, he knows what it means, and I know what it means. Clear the court.' And he said to

the soldier, 'Tell me exactly what happened,' so the soldier said, 'Well,' 'e said, 'I..I met this girl,' he said, 'and er, she asked me to see 'er 'ome, she told me she lived out in the country. Well, I took her the short way, across the field. And- when I got to the centre of the field, I dunno what came over me; but I got 'old of 'er. No rough stuff, no, no rough stuff, that came later, see? And I started to kiss 'er, and she passed out. She passed right out. Then after that, it was all la-di-da-di-da.' And the judge said, 'All what?', the soldier said, 'All la-di-da-di-da,' and the judge said, 'What does that mean?' The soldier said, 'Well, the jury, they know what it means. And the defending counsel, he knows what it means. And if you'd've been there with your camera, you'd've known!'<sup>133</sup>

This is quite a complex joke, in which material is reincorporated in an incongruous context, and the word 'camera' is given a double meaning, being used first as a legal term, then as a piece of photographic equipment, which in context has connotations of sexually voyeuristic photography. What is particularly interesting about the joke, though, is that it dramatizes the process of communication which occurs in blue jokes. When the soldier says 'it was all la-di-da-di-da', this is taken to mean that he had sexual intercourse with the woman; this is not overtly stated, but the jury knows what it means, and the defending counsel knows what it means. This mirrors the communication between Miller and the audience: as soon as Miller says 'la-di-da-di-da', the audience knows what it means; Miller is taking the part of the soldier, and the audience is taking the part of the jury and the defending counsel. Such is the conspiracy between the comic and the audience: the comic is allowed to hint at taboo subjects, and the audience is so acutely sensitive to the hints that it will always pick them up; however, the comedian is not allowed to make overt reference to the taboo subjects. In this joke, the audience is so sensitive that it spots the possibility of sexual activity as soon as the soldier says that he took the woman home 'across the field', and laughs in realization.

Sometimes the conspiracy of covert communication between the comic and the audience was explicitly referred to. For example, in a routine by Billie Barlow dating from 1903, a servant girl describes her relationship with her master:

Now the master of course, he's quite different, I can get along with him all right, rather, oo, he's a nice fellow. He doesn't treat me a bit like a servant, you know. Treats me more like, well er...well, er, he treats me more like one of those, well, you understand what I mean, course you do, well he treats me more like that than anything else.<sup>140</sup>

Here, there is no double meaning or euphemism, merely an omission; Barlow simply refuses to say what he treats her like. Because she refuses to say it, the audience assumes she is referring to something taboo, and therefore assumes that she means he treats her like a prostitute. What is interesting is that this covert communication process is overtly referred to, Barlow tells the audience, 'You understand what I mean.' Max Miller played on the covert communication conspiracy in a different way, protesting his innocence, and rebuking the audience for picking up potential sexual meaning, telling them 'You're the kind of people who get me a bad name!'<sup>141</sup>

Whilst all humour is culturally specific to an extent, smutty humour is particularly rooted in its specific cultural context, in that it draws its effect from the taboo nature of the subjects to which it alludes. Once those subjects become acceptable for open discussion, there is no reason why references to them should be covert, and the smutty jokes lose their point. There are several examples of jokes from Music Hall and Variety which refer to subjects which are no longer taboo. Florence Desmond's 'The Hollywood Party', which dates from 1932, contains a covert reference to underwear. The routine, which consists of a series of impressions of Hollywood film stars, contains a moment in which Jimmy Durante gives Janet Gaynor an unspecified present:

[Durante:] I got a present for ya!

[Gaynor:] Oh Jimmy, how sweet of you. Why, it's a pair of...

[Durante:] That's O.K., I've got a million of 'em, ha ha ha ha, I got a million of 'em!!<sup>142</sup>

Similarly, one of Max Miller's poems dating from 1938 hinted at a word which was obscene at the time, but is now widely used:

She's a girl that's just built to my liking,  
A wonderful figure is Nellie,  
Two rosy lips, and very broad hips,  
And a nice little mole on her shoulder.<sup>143</sup>

Here, the suspended rhyme technique is used: a word which rhymes with a taboo word is used, leading to the expectation of the taboo word, which is then replaced by a non-taboo word which does not rhyme. In Desmond's joke, the word hinted at is 'knickers'; and in Miller's poem, the word hinted at is 'belly'. In the 1930s, it would have been very daring indeed to have used either of these words on stage, but this is no longer the case, and knickers and bellies may now be openly discussed. This means that at best such jokes would be appreciated by modern audiences in a different way, the old-fashioned quaintness of their covert references to subjects which are no longer taboo being the main source of the humour; and at worst, such jokes are now obsolete.

On one level, smutty humour seems to be subversive, in that it establishes a method of communication which allows taboo subjects to be mentioned, thus effectively undermining the prevailing morality which prevents overt mention of the subjects. However, this point should not be overstressed. Smutty humour may undermine the prevailing morality, but it does not change it: taboo subjects do not become acceptable by appearing in blue jokes, because the mention of them is always covert. Indeed, smutty humour relies on its subject's taboo status for its point: as the examples from Florence Desmond and Max Miller cited above illustrate, there is a symbiotic relationship between the taboos and the smutty humour which hints at them. Moreover, whilst smutty jokes make reference to taboo subjects, they do not question the prevailing morality. Blue jokes do not question prevailing attitudes to sexuality, or discuss the nature of sexuality, they merely make covert references to the

sexual act or sexual organs, rather like children writing rude words on the blackboard behind the teacher's back. Indeed, when Variety comedians told blue jokes which did imply attitudes towards sexuality, their stance was generally conservative. For example, the joke which Miller tells about the soldier's being tried in camera takes a conservative stance on sexual matters, reinforcing the idea that men are sexually active and women sexually passive: not only is the woman in the joke sexually passive, she is actually unconscious. Her lack of consciousness implies that she is raped. The audience's attitude to this is light-hearted: when the soldier says, there was 'no rough stuff, that came later', thus implying sexual violence, the audience laughs. This light-hearted attitude suggests a conception of rape as a non-serious crime; it is doubtful that they would have taken a similar attitude if the joke had been about murder instead of rape. In one of Tommy Trinder's jokes, standard notions of sexual attractiveness are reinforced: 'I said to the wife, "Why are you ironing your bra? You've got nothing to put in it." She said, "I iron you underpants, don't I?"'<sup>144</sup> In this joke, Trinder insults his wife by telling her she has nothing to put in her bra, in other words that she has small breasts; she returns his insult by telling him that he has nothing to put in his underpants, in other words that he has small genitals. For either of these to work as an insult implies that large breasts and genitals are desirable; thus, the established idea of sexual attractiveness which held that large sexual organs are desirable was reinforced. Therefore, blue jokes are not as subversive as they may appear to be: they do not destroy taboos, indeed they rely on them for their existence; they do not discuss sexual matters, they merely make mention of them; and when they do reflect values with regards sexuality, their stance is often conservative.

Given this conservatism, it is perhaps surprising that homosexuality was mentioned at all in Music Hall and Variety comedy, but there were isolated jokes about it. In most of these, homosexuals were a figure of fun. For example, at the end one of Billy Bennett's monologues he pretends to be homosexual: 'But it's cured me of

dancing with p'licemen/ Only sailors and chorus boys now. [camp voice:] And now I'm going to have a small port. Ta ta!''<sup>145</sup> The particular tone of Bennett's camp voice here suggests sneering ridicule. Max Miller used a similarly derogatory camp voice in a joke about 'two of those considerate boys'.<sup>146</sup> However, Miller's stage persona sometimes flirted with campness and even homosexuality. He would talk about wearing a corset, which would have been considered effeminate, addressing the audience with camp voice and movements: 'I've got 'em on, and they're nice too, lovely...not drawn in, honest I'm not. Innit nice, I feel nice.'<sup>147</sup> He also used the following introduction to one of his songs: 'Now, shall I start it off, Sidney? Shall I? And will you creep in...will you? I'll give you the key, see.'<sup>148</sup> This joke uses musical double meanings to imply a homosexual encounter: Miller says 'will you creep in?', meaning 'will you gradually bring in the accompaniment to the song', or possibly 'will you creep into my house'; he says 'I'll give you the key', meaning 'I'll give you the key which the song is in', or possibly, 'I'll give you the key to the house'. In both of these examples, the attitude to homosexuals is ambiguous: Miller is suggesting that he may be homosexual, but there is nothing which suggests that this is being overtly ridiculed. However, Miller's flirtation with campness and homosexuality may not have been as ambiguous as it seems: homosexuality was far from being accepted throughout Miller's career, indeed it did not become legal until after he had died, so it seems likely that audiences interpreted his campness as a ridiculing of homosexuals.

In general, the sexual politics of Music Hall and Variety comedy were solidly conservative. Domestic jokes ridiculed deviation from established roles within marriage, but seldom questioned the actual institution itself. Smutty jokes successfully dodged the censors, by establishing a conspiracy of covert communication between the comic and the audience; but whilst this allowed taboo subjects to be mentioned, it did not allow them to be discussed, and prevailing attitudes towards sexuality were seldom questioned. The only

examples of comedy which can be considered to have been subversive were Max Miller's ambiguous attitude towards homosexuality, and his apparent tolerance of marital infidelity.

### C. Race

A predominant feature of British Music Hall was its fierce patriotism, its love of royalty and its support for the British Empire. Its association with royalty continued into the age of Variety, and Royal Variety Shows are still an annual ritual. Its support for the Empire was conspicuous. Perhaps the most famous example of this was G.H. Macdermott's song 'We Don't Want To Fight', supposedly the origin of the word 'jingoism'. The song, which was written in 1877, soon after the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish war, advocated British intervention in the war; it was taken up by the Right, being whistled and sung by parades of Young Conservatives smashing up radical assemblies, and mobs which attacked pacifists and smashed the windows of Gladstone's house.<sup>149</sup> Music Hall artists actively supported Britain's role in the First World War, singing songs encouraging young men to enlist in the armed forces; Vesta Tilley and Harry Lauder were particularly notable for their commitment to the war effort, Lauder being knighted for his services to war charities.<sup>150</sup> The single-mindedness of their patriotic support inspired a bitterly critical poem by Siegfried Sassoon called 'Blighters'.<sup>151</sup> Support for the Empire was even implied by the fact that many of the actual Music Halls were called 'Empires'; Oswald Stoll even used this as an advertising campaign, using the slogan 'Support the EMPIRE' to promote his halls.<sup>152</sup> The ideology of the Empire implied the racist belief that England was a superior nation, which inferior foreigners could look to in the same manner with which an obedient child would look up to a fond parent. Songs referred to 'the dusky sons of Hindostan' standing by the British banner, or Native Americans looking up to Queen Victoria as the 'Great White Mother far across the sea'.<sup>153</sup>

Another aspect of Music Hall entertainment which could be considered to be racist was the 'nigger minstrel' tradition. Michael Pickering has outlined the problems of branding the 'nigger minstrelsy' a simple piece of racism<sup>54</sup>: it was not linked with an immediate racial conflict, as there was no significant black population in early Victorian England; working class people may have identified with black people, seeing them as a similarly oppressed group; and the 'nigger minstrel' represented a device which could be used to reverse Victorian values and notions of respectability. However, as Pickering himself points out, there were unquestionably elements of racism in the tradition, and the 'nigger minstrel' may have fulfilled a need in working class people to 'invent others who were perceived as more inferior in order to compensate for the stigma of low status'.<sup>55</sup> 'Nigger minstrels' also promoted the belief that black people are in some way alien. Their differentiation from whites was highlighted, not least by the way in which they were portrayed physically: the 'nigger minstrelsy' tradition portrayed black people as semi-human oddities, with 'lips like a pound of liver split/ And a nose like an in-jum-rubber shoe.'<sup>56</sup>

Given Music Hall's aggressive patriotism and loyalty to the Empire, and the link with the 'nigger minstrel' tradition, it is perhaps surprising that racist humour was not a particularly important part of stand-up comedy in Variety. It seems that the patriotism and the 'nigger minstrels' became far less important in the era of Variety than they had been in Music Hall. The difference in the attitude of Variety artists in the First and Second World Wars is interesting: as we have seen, in the First World War, performers tended to act as unofficial recruiting sergeants; in the second, there was an element of unthreatening dissent amongst the patriotic songs. For example, as we have seen, one of Billy Russell's wartime routines contained jokes directed against the A.R.P. Wardens before pledging allegiance with a defiant statement to 'Mr 'Itler, Goebbels and the other Nasties', and a rendition of the patriotic song 'We're Going To Hang Out The Washing On The Siegfried Line'.<sup>57</sup> This move away from fanatical patriotism seems to have begun by the 1920s. Billy

Bennett, whose Variety career began after the First World War, used material which parodied the patriotic pro-Empire culture. His song 'No Power On Earth'<sup>158</sup> is set to a stirring patriotic tune, and begins like a typical patriotic Music Hall song, with lines like 'The British Empire has a flag that flies throughout the world/ And no power on Earth can pull it down.' However, it soon dissolves into parody, with no power on Earth being able to pull down kilts, undervests, and land girls' trousers, and Bennett commenting between verses: 'I'm marching up and down now. I'm waving a big flag. It's got the three brass balls on.'<sup>159</sup> The 'nigger minstrel' tradition also seems to have become less important. Blackface acts did play the Variety circuit, but they were as likely to be straight singers like G.H. Elliott, or cross-talk double acts like Billy Bennett and James Carew's Alexander and Mose, as they were to be solo stand-up comedians like Nosmo King.

Racist humour does not seem to have been a particularly important part of stand-up comedy in Music Hall and Variety. When jokes did involve racist elements, it seems that these were often incidental to the actual joke. For example, in Dan Leno's 'Mrs Kelly', the woman which Leno plays talks of her marriage to a Spanish count: 'he said that the olive complexion was the colour of the people in his country. I found out it was dirt!'<sup>160</sup> This joke tends to de-humanize Spanish people, by making their skin colour seem incongruous, and by implying that they are a dirty race. However, the joke is essentially one of disappointment. It is part of a series of short jokes about how the woman's hopes were built up by the Spanish count and then incongruously brought to nothing: she thought he was a count but he is just a counterfeit, she thought he was a bullfighter but he just works at a slaughterhouse, and what is more, his skin is not really olive-coloured, it is just dirty. This is not to say that the racism here is any less real, but merely that it is not the main point of the joke, and is not particularly hostile or aggressive. Similarly, Max Miller told a joke about a 'coloured woman':

And talking about clothes, there's a coloured woman, a coloured woman was washing clothes down by the river, and she was sitting down, well, sitting down on her haunches, you see. And all of a sudden, an elephant came down, to get a drink. And he walked behind her, you see, and he must've touched her with his trunk, you see. So without turning round, she said, 'I don't know who you is, man...but I'm here every Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays.'<sup>161</sup>

As with most of Miller's material, the point of the joke is sexual, the implication being that the woman mistakes the trunk for a man's penis. However, in the telling of the joke, racial stereotypes are reinforced, showing black people as jungle dwellers who wash their clothes in streams, and talk in funny voices, using phrases like 'I don't know who you is, man.' As with Leno's joke about the Spanish count, the racism is not the main point of the joke, and whilst it relies on a racial stereotype, it is not particularly hostile. However, it does not follow that because the racism is not the main point of the joke, it will automatically be non-hostile. In Dan Leno's 'The Recruiting Sergeant', there is a joke set in Africa:

The colonel walked on; but, following close behind him I saw a black face. At once I drew my sword and cut it off. Next morning I discovered it was one of our own men, who had been to a nigger entertainment, and hadn't washed his face. My word! What a life!<sup>162</sup>

The point of this joke is that the protagonist makes a mistake, inadvertently killing one of his own men; indeed it is part of a routine which consists of a series of mistakes, for example, the recruiting sergeant recruits a man without realizing that he only has one arm, because 'he kept the arm behind him that he hadn't got.' It would be possible to argue that the joke does not even contain an element of racism. The mistake which is made is that the recruiting sergeant kills a man who he thinks is black, but who is in fact white; however, he would not have killed a black man simply because he was black, but because the enemies in this particular conflict were black. The joke would not have offended black people, because as England had a very small black population at the time, it seems very unlikely that there would have been any black people in the audience to offend. However, the joke is racist in that it

implicitly supports the British Empire, and implicitly portrays black people as the enemies of Queen and Empire. Whilst this is not the main point of the joke, and is merely an assumption which forms part of the build up of the joke, it undoubtedly shows a hostile attitude towards black people, portraying them as the enemy.

If the racism in some jokes was incidental rather than central, jokes about regional groups from within the British Isles promoted stereotypes more actively. Scots were shown as being mean and addicted to whisky. Even performers like Sir Harry Lauder who were fiercely proud of their Scottish identity played up to such stereotypes: for example, Lauder cultivated a reputation for meanness offstage.<sup>163</sup> Jokes about Scots would emphasize their meanness by exaggerating it to the point of incongruity. For example, George Bolton joked:

A Scotsman bought a chemist's shop- he stopped up all night to watch the vanishing cream. He was too mean to go on his holiday, he stopped at home and let his mind wander. Another Scotsman walked ten miles to a football match and when he got there he was too tired to climb the fence.<sup>164</sup>

In other jokes, like this one of Billy Bennett's, the addiction to whisky is exaggerated in a similarly incongruous manner: 'Into the same ward they brought the Scotchman, who was suffering with the gathering of the clans. The doctor painted his back with whisky, and he broke his neck trying to lick it off.'<sup>165</sup>

Irish jokes do not appear to have been particularly common. In the political songs of the Music Hall, the Irish were portrayed as 'traitors and agitators'<sup>166</sup> rather than mental defectives. One of Max Miller's jokes featured a 'mad Irishman'.<sup>167</sup> The use of the word 'mad' seems superfluous, as it is a convention of the Irish joke that the Irish are supposed to be mentally defective; therefore, this may imply that it was not particularly common for Variety comedians to tell Irish jokes, and that Miller needed to use the

word 'mad' to ensure that the audience were aware of the supposed mental defectiveness.

There were a number of Jewish comedians on the Variety circuit, notably Julian Rose and Issy Bonn. Rose and Bonn were from different eras: Rose was an American born in 1879 who came to Britain in 1905 and built up a career on the Variety circuit; Bonn was a Londoner born in 1903, who began playing in Variety as part of a triple act in 1923, and worked with E.N.S.A. during the war, emerging as a solo stand-up. However, there were marked similarities in their styles. Both exaggerated their Jewishness in their stage personas, and presented exotic stereotypes of Jewish people. This exotic quality was exaggerated by the fact that both portrayed American Jews. Rose actually was American, and Bonn made his stage persona American rather than London Jewish: he used a mid-Atlantic accent, and his theme song contains a reference to having been brought up in 'an East Side tenement'.<sup>168</sup> Both used exotic-sounding Jewish names for the characters in their jokes: Rose's act had references to characters with names like 'Levinsky', and 'Abraham Cohen' and his daughters 'Rachel and Becky'.<sup>169</sup> and Bonn referred to his son 'Sammy' and his friend 'Finkelfeffer'.<sup>170</sup> As well as creating an exotic feeling of Jewishness, they also presented stereotyped characteristics of Jewish people in their jokes, particularly the idea that Jewish people have a heightened business sense. Jokes based on this idea worked by exaggerating this business sense to the point of incongruity, particularly by showing Jewish people treating non-business situations as business situations. For example, in one of Julian Rose's jokes, he interprets the word 'cut' meaning the style of a suit, as if it means a cut in price: 'And he had on our latest cut. Cut from four guineas to two pounds ten.'<sup>171</sup> The joke also conforms to stereotype in portraying Rose as a tailor, Jewish people being strongly associated with the clothing business. Issy Bonn also told jokes in which non-business situations were interpreted as business situations, for example:

They got a boy, Sammy- what a boy! Last week in school the teacher said, 'Come here, I'll try you out in'...er...arith...math...adding things up, you know? The teacher said, 'If one pair trousers costs ten shillings, how much would you pay for ten pair?'- Sammy said, 'Ten pair, ten shilling a pair- four pound ten.' The teacher said, 'You're wrong, it's five pounds.' He said, 'No, no- four pound ten, it's my best offer- take it or leave it.'<sup>172</sup>

This joke promotes the view that even as children Jewish people have a sharp business sense, as Sammy interprets a hypothetical mathematical problem as a real commercial situation. These jokes came from the more complimentary end of the spectrum of this stereotype: at the derogatory end, Jewish people not shown as having a heightened business sense, but were simply held to be mean and avaricious. Some of Julian Rose's jokes tended towards the derogatory end of the spectrum; for example, he joked: 'I could've laughed in his face, but why should I show him a good time for nothing?'<sup>173</sup>

It seems clear that comics like Julian Rose and Issy Bonn did present Jewish stereotypes, using American-Jewish accents, obviously Jewish names, and playing on stereotyped characteristics. However, it is less clear how this was interpreted by Variety audiences. With Jewish jokes, context is particularly important in determining meaning. Freud's analysis, that Jewish jokes told by Jewish people are 'instances of a people making fun...of its own character', but told by non-Jews they are 'brutal comic stories'<sup>174</sup> seems a little simplistic, because it is not simply a question of who tells the joke which determines its meaning, the group to which the joke is told is also important. In Jewish circles, Jewish jokes seem to operate as a satire on values and mores, whereas in non-Jewish circles they inevitably seem to make Jewish people seem strange and alien. In order to ascertain the meaning of Rose's and Bonn's acts, it will not do to simply say that because they were both Jewish, their humour was an instance of a people making fun of its own character; the audience at which their humour was directed must also be examined. It seems likely that Variety audiences contained a Jewish element; according to one source: 'It was common knowledge

that Jewish people in the main, particularly in the East End of London, they used to be Variety fans.'<sup>175</sup> However, it also seems unlikely that Jewish people were a majority in Variety audiences, and therefore that Rose's and Bonn's acts were simply a satire on Jewish *mores*. It seems more likely that the majority of people who made up Variety audiences were not Jewish, and that the stereotypes which comics like Rose and Bonn presented reinforced the idea that Jewish people were strange, exotic and slightly alien, with imperfect English, and odd surnames. In this sense, the humour was racist, but it seems that the racism was distinctly benign. Rose was billed as 'Our Hebrew Friend'<sup>176</sup>, and this suggests both the racism, and its benignity. The 'our' implies an 'us', which is the group that comprises the Variety audience, and because Rose is 'our friend', it is implicit that he is not part of this group; however, whilst he is not actually part of the 'us', he is 'our friend', so this implies that the audience's attitude towards him and Jewish people in general was not hostile. Similarly, it seems unlikely that Bonn's sentimental theme song, 'My Yiddishe Momme' would have been well received by an ardently anti-semitic audience: whilst it reinforces stereotyped ideas about Jewish family relations, it sentimentalizes rather than ridiculing, with lines like 'I long to hold her hand once more as in days gone by/ And ask her to forgive me for things I did that made her cry'<sup>177</sup>; ultimately, this kind of sentimentality suggests empathy rather than hostility. It seems likely, then, that comics like Rose and Bonn were not seen as objects of hateful ridicule, but members of a strange and exotic race, whose ways and customs were worthy of laughter.

Whereas Music Hall had been a staunch supporter of the Empire, and the implicitly racist ideology which supported it, the stand-up comedy which emerged out of the comic songs of the Music Hall did comparatively little to promote racism. Some jokes were undoubtedly racist, but in many cases the racism was not the main point of the joke, it was merely one of the assumptions contained in the build-up of the joke. It was more a question of passively accepting society's attitudes on race, rather than actively promoting them. It is

arguable that Jewish comics like Julian Rose and Issy Bonn did actively promoted racist ideas, in that they presented stereotyped images of Jewish people, but this racism seems to have been benign rather than hostile.

#### V. The forces which shaped Music Hall and Variety

In general, Music Hall and Variety produced stand-up comedy which was stylistically and politically conservative. Humour's potential subversiveness is connected with its unexpectedness, its deviation from normality; but as we have seen, Music Hall and Variety comedy tended to be characterized by its familiarity, rather than its unexpectedness. The same comic types appeared again and again, the same subjects were joked about again and again, and even the same jokes were endlessly recycled. The comedy was clearly framed and separated from normal discourse, both by its position in the bill, and by certain aspects of the acts themselves, like the use of comic character. There were few overt references to politics, though working class radicalism and the suffragette movement were subjected to ridicule. Jokes about social class sometimes involved an element of snobbery. Jokes about domestic matters nearly always ridiculed deviation from roles within marriage, but seldom questioned marriage itself. Smutty jokes evaded the censors, but rarely questioned prevailing attitudes towards sexuality. Jokes about race tended to passively accept racist values.

This conservatism is surprising, because some of Music Hall's ancestors were much more controversial and politically radical than this. For example, the broadside ballad, a form of popular song in the early nineteenth century, commented on current events like the Napoleonic Wars<sup>178</sup>, and often operated as a form of popular protest: a song sung at the Canterbury Arms called, 'Satan's Address to his Imps' made a savage attack on the Poor Law.<sup>179</sup> Broadside balladingers sang and sold their songs on the streets, and also sang in impromptu pub sing-songs known as free-and-easies.<sup>180</sup> Given Music

Hall's radical roots, it seems necessary to examine the structure of Music Hall and Variety entertainment, to see if there was anything in it which could have replaced this radicalism with conservatism.

#### A. Factors which encouraged stylistic conservatism

One of the factors which seems to have contributed to the stylistic conservatism of the comedy was the professionalization which accompanied the development of Music Hall out of the various forms which had preceded it. This meant that whereas their predecessors had been amateurs or semi-professionals, Music Hall and Variety comedians relied on their performing to make a living. This put them under a great pressure to succeed, because if they went down badly with an audience, this could mean unemployment. In the Variety era, acts made up a bill which would play at a venue for a week. An act which went down badly with the audience on the first day would be paid off; this meant having the rest of the week's appearances cancelled, but still being paid for the whole week. The problem with being paid off was that it discouraged future bookings, because theatre managers sent reports back to booking managers.<sup>181</sup> If a number of bad reports were returned, this could mean that the act would find it difficult to get booked, as comic singer Alf Pearson has recalled: 'If you had a few bad weeks, it would go round like the jungle drums- "He's dying the death that fellow, don't book him."<sup>182</sup>

In addition to this, acts had to work under fairly difficult conditions. Audience rowdiness was one of the problems which faced performers. Audiences seem to have become less rowdy as tavern sing-songs were superseded by Music Halls, and then the more respectable Variety theatres. Maurice Willson Disher made the unlikely claim that old boots and even dead cats could be thrown at performers in tavern sing-songs.<sup>183</sup> Whilst Music Hall audiences may have stopped short of throwing dead cats, they could be very noisy, 'whistling, shouting, hissing, and joining in the songs'.<sup>184</sup> Even Variety audiences could be difficult, especially in the second house, and

whilst it was a comparatively rare occurrence, comedians were occasionally heckled. Harry Secombe has described the problematic nature of some Variety audiences:

You *had* to get the audience's attention...whereas a comic is paid to get laughs, the audience is not beholden to give up its laughter...you went out to face the enemy in some cases. They came to see the top of the bill, and you had to be sat through. Someone said to me at Oldham, 'Nearly had me laughing when you were on, you know'- and that was a compliment!'<sup>25</sup>

The pressure to succeed would almost certainly have discouraged experimentation, which always implies the risk of failure. As failure could mean unemployment, it would be much more likely for comics to rely on tried and trusted formulae than to try out new ideas. This is particularly true in view of the fact that audiences were often difficult to please.

Another aspect of Music Hall and Variety entertainment which may have affected the style of the comedy was the length of time which comics were allowed on stage. In Variety, a comedian starting his or her career would occupy the second spot on the bill, and would be allowed seven or eight minutes. Later, he or she would graduate to a twelve minute spot. Even the act at the top of the bill would only be given twenty minutes in front of the audience, although after the Second World War the top of the bill tended to be given longer spots. The length of time which a comedian was given would also have been rigidly adhered to, because the twice nightly system meant that Variety bills could not overrun; some theatres even placed coloured lights in the footlights which would indicate to the performer that he or she had to finish off the act and get offstage.'<sup>26</sup> This meant that if an aspiring comic went down well with the audience, he or she could not afford to reinforce the good reception by extending the act. Denis Norden has described the problems posed by having such short spots:

A comedian in those days had only seven minutes to come on, register with an audience, win their attention, without breaking any of the

traditions or the constraints on the sorts of jokes he could tell, and then go off, with them wanting to see him again. All in seven minutes.<sup>149</sup>

The difficulties presented by the short amount of time which comedians were given to make an impression with an audience help to explain why Music Hall and Variety comedians tended to rely so heavily on familiarity. One way of making an impression with an audience would be to assume an instantly recognizable stage character or persona. This would help to make the comedian stick in the minds of the audience, particularly if he or she wore an outlandish costume, or had a visual trademark like George Robey's painted eyebrows. A memorable catchphrase would reinforce this effect. Basing a persona on an established comic type would also help to establish a rapport with an audience. Once the audience had recognized the type, they would be more likely to be in tune with the kind of humour which the comic was presenting. This would mean that the comic would need to spend less time establishing the basic comic idea. This effect would have been reinforced by the use of bill matter, which would let the audience know roughly what to expect, and allow them to tune into the humour more easily. Bill matter would also allow the comic to be remembered more easily. All of these techniques tended to reduce the potential subversiveness of the humour, by reducing its unexpectedness, but probably helped comics to build their career by establishing themselves with Variety audiences. It seems likely that, say, Max Miller's rise to fame was aided by the fact that audiences could remember him as 'The Cheeky Chappie', or as the man who said 'Ere listen!' or 'There'll never be another', or as the man who wore the gaudy suits.

#### B. Factors which encouraged political conservatism

One factor which probably helped to establish the politically conservative nature of Music Hall entertainments was that whilst many of the performers may have been from working class backgrounds, the songwriters were mainly from the lower middle class, and aspired

to become part of a higher social class. Their social aspirations would probably have been matched by a political conservatism, which they would have expressed in their songs. Similarly, as Music Hall became professionalized, the performers also began to nurse upwardly-mobile aspirations, seeking respectability, and buying shares in Variety theatre companies.<sup>183</sup> The epitome of this tendency was Sir George Robey, who emphasized his lower middle class background, and led a conspicuously respectable lifestyle, involving Freemasonry, a love of serious literature, classical music, and antiques, and a false claim that he had been educated at Jesus College, Cambridge; another part of this lifestyle was political conservatism.<sup>184</sup>

However, perhaps the most important factor in establishing Music Hall and Variety's conservatism was the fact that it was subjected to a sustained process of censorship and manipulation, which arose from a complex interplay of local government, theatre managers, and various commercial forces. The stated aim of the censors and manipulators was to make Music Hall respectable. This was certainly the aim of the state censors. In 1902, George Sims of the London County Council described their success in achieving these aims:

Who has brought that family public to the Music Hall? The County Council. What is it that attracted the father, mother, cousin, sister, and aunt? It is because we have said Music Halls and theatres should be decently conducted, and that they should be so proper for the public, profitable for the employer, because we dare to be Daniels, we dare to repress vulgarity- and to check indecency, and will not allow the Music Hall to resemble the ante-chamber to a brothel, or the annexe to a vulgar public-house.<sup>185</sup>

The first stage of the state's manipulation was selection. Whereas many have seen Music Hall's evolution as a natural and inevitable process, Penelope Summerfield has argued that the process was one of deliberate selection by the state. Entertainments in public houses were not affected by the theatre monopoly created in 1660 and maintained by the Licensing Act of 1739, which in any case had been

loosened by an act in 1843; instead, they came under the Disorderly Houses Act of 1751, which required pubs to have a license to sell alcohol. To qualify for a license, publicans had to be respectable, and had to ensure that the entertainment was not too riotous. This legal position was used by the state to suppress the informal pre-Music Hall sing-songs, and thus to encourage the more formal Music Hall entertainments. Sing-songs in taverns continued to exist alongside the emerging Music Halls, but from 1860 onwards magistrates began to refuse to renew licenses, and to deny new ones, and this meant that many publicans simply stopped applying for new licenses. As a result, there was a dramatic decrease in the number of song saloons, and Music Hall became the dominant form. The last song saloons were deliberately eliminated in 1889-91, largely by refusal of licenses. According to Summerfield, the evolution of Music Hall was not a simple linear development, but one in which one form of entertainment was deliberately suppressed, thus paving the way for another.<sup>131</sup>

Later, the licensing authorities imposed controls which were nearer to actual censorship. The London County Council based their decisions on where to renew and revoke licences not on the general type of the Hall, but on reports from inspectors and testimonies from the police concerning the specific nature of the entertainment which went on in them.<sup>132</sup> Susan Pennybacker has described the work of the licensing authority inspectorate: 'L.C.C. inspectors inhabited a furtive, twilight world. Amidst the gaiety of the Halls, they darted from section to section, checking seating provisions, watching suspected prostitutes, scribbling down remarks on lyrics and performers' styles, even contributing drawings to the Committee on their inspection forms.'<sup>133</sup> As reports of vulgarity from the inspectors could lead to licences being revoked, this meant that they effectively acted as censors: In 1892, it was estimated that a licence could be worth anything from £10,000 to £40,000 to the owner of the Hall, so it would be very rash to ignore the wishes of the licensing authorities.<sup>134</sup> Later, in the Variety era, local Watch Committees continued in this role, acting as censors on behalf of

the magistrates, and maintaining a strict control over the entertainments.<sup>195</sup>

Music Hall managers also censored and manipulated the entertainments. Most of the earliest Music Hall proprietors were self-made men, who had been publicans<sup>196</sup>, and who controlled most of the running of the Halls themselves; amongst the most famous of these were Charles Morton, known as 'The Father of the Halls', and Billy Holland. Then, in the 1880s and 1890s, proprietors like H.E. Moss, Edward Thornton, Oswald Stoll, and the Livermore Brothers began to build larger Halls in the provinces<sup>197</sup>, and large chains of Halls began to be formed: by 1907, twenty percent of all the money invested in Variety theatres was represented by the Moss and Stoll combine.<sup>198</sup> The people who controlled the large chains were more businessmen than impresarios, and had less contact with the artists, who were hired by booking managers and agents.<sup>199</sup>

Throughout these changes, it seems that the management certainly had the power to control the output of the artists. The earliest Music Hall proprietors demonstrated their power by making their presence felt in their Halls: Charles Morton's monogram was reproduced in relief around the walls of the Oxford, Morris Syers had life-size oil paintings of himself in his Halls, and proprietors readily allowed themselves to be called on stage.<sup>200</sup> In theory, the performers were not subordinate to the proprietors, but proprietors gradually achieved dominance: in the 1870s, the proprietor of the Forester's Hall said of one of the performers who worked for him: 'Miss Thorne does as I tell her...she is my servant.'<sup>201</sup>

The pressure from the licensing authorities encouraged the managers to use their power to impose forms of censorship. In 1883, the Music Hall Proprietors' Protection Society stated 'It is the desire of every Music Hall proprietor to prevent songs of an objectionable character from being sung.'<sup>202</sup> Proprietors began to impose House Rules, which forced performers to submit their songs to the management a week before performance, which allowed them to void

contracts for performances to which the local authorities objected, dismiss performers for vulgarity, and fine them a night's salary for addressing the audience in an improper manner.<sup>203</sup> The main aim of the censorship which the proprietors imposed was to suppress vulgarity, but topical and political songs were also affected: the House Rules from Collins' Music Hall stated:

No offensive allusions to be made to any Member of the Royal Family; Members of Parliament, German Princes, police authorities, or any member thereof, the London County Council, or any member of that body; no allusion whatever to religion, or any religious sect; no allusion to the administration of the law of the country.<sup>204</sup>

Such control continued into the Variety era. The chains of Variety theatres had House Rules which would apply for all of their theatres; for example, the McNaghten circuit informed the audience that 'Anything of an objectionable nature should be reported to the manager. It will receive my immediate attention.'<sup>205</sup> The individual theatre managers would have been responsible for ensuring that the performers did not say anything too vulgar, because they were legally responsible for anything that went on in their theatres. This sometimes led to theatre managers appearing in court when one of the performers had said something vulgar; for example, Sam Harbour, who was the manager of the Coliseum for forty years was once taken to court for something Max Miller said on stage, and had to claim that Miller had added the joke to the act without his knowledge.<sup>206</sup>

The widespread censorship imposed by theatre managers and inspired by the licensing authorities and Watch Committees probably explains the popularity of smutty jokes in Music Hall and Variety. As we have seen, smutty humour hints at taboo subjects without overtly mentioning them, and it loses its point if the subject which it hints at is no longer taboo. Censorship provided a whole range of subjects which could not be overtly mentioned, so offered a wide range of possibilities for smutty humour. The subversive appeal of jokes which seemed to cheat the censor by hiding their forbidden

references with double meanings certainly helps to explain the success of comics like Max Miller. Some comics even heightened this subversive appeal by making jokes which explicitly addressed the question of censorship. There was a story in Variety circles of a joke which George Robey made at the expense of the Watch Committee in Birmingham. A visiting ballet company had been prevented from performing with bare legs, and had been ordered to wear tights. Some weeks later, Robey appeared at the same theatre, and covered the legs of the stage piano with Aston Villa football socks. It is alleged that he was fined for contempt of council.<sup>207</sup> Max Miller regularly made jokes about censorship. One of his techniques was to pretend he was performing material behind the theatre manager's back:

Now I've got to be very careful about this next number, because before I went away on a cruise I said to Bertie, Bertie Adams, the manager, I said, 'Bertie- I've got a little number that I want to sing you when I come back,' so 'e said, 'Let me hear it,' because he hears all my songs, you see and all my gags, because he tells me what to cut out, you see. He does, he tells me, I don't take any notice, but he tells me, see. And 'e told me, says, 'You're gonna **work it** when you come back, be careful.' Now, I'd better have a look, he might be on the side [of the stage], you see. He's there. I'll sing it dead quiet. He might go away, see.<sup>208</sup>

After a couple of verses of the song, Miller announces that the manager has left the side of the stage, and sings another verse of the song, presumably one which the manager would not allow. Another comic who made jokes which directly addressed the question of censorship was Jack Warner, best known for his appearances on the Second World War radio programme Garrison Theatre, who substituted the words 'blue pencil' for any obscene words in his script.<sup>209</sup> This was a reference to the Lord Chamberlain's office, which was responsible for theatre censorship (including comic sketches, which counted as short plays), which used a blue pencil to cross out sections of the submitted scripts which were deemed obscene.<sup>210</sup>

In addition to the actual censorship which the Music Hall managers imposed, they also manipulated the nature of the entertainment in

more general ways. Even before the pressure to censor from the licensing authorities, certain managers appear to have had the desire to make the entertainment more respectable: as early as 1854, Charles Morton wrote a promotion pamphlet for the Canterbury Hall, stating: 'It has been the constant endeavour of the proprietor...to form and refine the public taste.'<sup>211</sup> Music Hall proprietors also wanted to attract a middle class element to their audiences, and attempted to do so by removing certain types of song, and introducing pieces of operetta and ballet.<sup>212</sup> As the pressure from the licensing authorities mounted, rather than simply censoring the entertainment, proprietors began to exercise even more direct control over it; for example, some employed their own songwriters rather than allowing performers to buy their songs on the open market.<sup>213</sup>

As the large chains of Variety theatres were formed, the proprietors had less contact with the artists, but they could still impose forms of control. For example, Oswald Stoll imposed strict time discipline on the performers, insisting that they should stay in their dressing rooms until called to the stage by stage hands.<sup>214</sup> However, most of the control was passed on to the booking managers and agents. Booking managers had control over which acts would be allowed to play on the large Variety circuits, so had the effective power to decide which acts succeeded and which acts failed. Their standards for booking acts were exacting. Cissie Williams, booking manager for the Moss and G.T.C. circuits from 1932 until the 1950s, had a fearsome reputation, and it was claimed that she would not book acts with dirty shoes.<sup>215</sup> Hunter Davies has described her power to affect the content of the acts:

Alongside her, on either side of the aisle, would sit a clutch of anxious agents, watching her every move. Every so often an agent whose performer happened to be on stage would be summoned to the great lady's side where he would crouch while judgement was passed. 'This act is going on too long.' 'This has got to come out.' At the interval it was a race for the pass-door between the agents and Cissie's assistants to see who could get to the artiste first to pass on the good/bad news. 'Her word was law,' says one agent. 'If

it didn't go well, that could be a whole year's work up the spout. You often felt your whole career was on the line.<sup>216</sup>

The censorship and manipulation imposed from within the structure of Music Hall and Variety entertainment, exercised by proprietors and booking managers could well have been used to weed out subversive humour, and to encourage political conservatism. There were also other forces, less directly connected with Music Hall and Variety which may have encouraged political conservatism. For example, in 1885, an important Music Hall journal called The Era urged proprietors to suppress political songs:

Proprietors who cater (as it is in their interests to do) for the tastes of the general public would do well to keep the political song nuisance decidedly in abeyance, and we do not despair of the day when such allusions shall be severely reprobated as, from the manifesto now so often to be read on Music Hall programmes, we see that impropriety is.<sup>217</sup>

The political songs objected to here were specifically anti-establishment songs, not the chest-beating patriotic paeans to the Empire which proliferated in the Halls.

There is also evidence of forces outside of the entertainment business making moves which would have affected the nature of Music Hall and Variety entertainment. For example, it was rumoured that G.H. Macdermott, a singer who sang a number of staunchly patriotic songs, notably 'We Don't Want To Fight', as well as making frequent attacks on Liberals like Gladstone, was subsidized by the Conservative Party.<sup>218</sup>

Certain commercial forces, particularly breweries, also appear to have had an ability to exert subtle control over performers' material. Breweries were an important source of investment in Music Hall, and indeed had helped to pioneer tavern entertainments<sup>219</sup>; later, in the 1860s and 1870s, proprietors continued to rely on 'the usual l g-up given by brewers and distillers'.<sup>220</sup> Given the association between the drink trade and Conservative politics, it

seems unlikely that breweries would have been interested in investing in forms of entertainment which promoted anti-establishment politics. It also seems possible that breweries would have had the power to influence the nature of Music Hall entertainment. Evidence of this is provided by the many songs which criticized Sunday closing and restrictive licensing legislation<sup>221</sup>, and later, jokes about teetotalism. Dan Leno had a joke about getting 'a drop of something' before going to a teetotal meeting<sup>222</sup>; and Billy Bennett ridiculed teetotalers more directly: 'Pussy-foot people tell us that beer kills more men than bullets. It may be true, but I'd sooner be full of beer than bullets.'<sup>223</sup> However, jokes about teetotalism may also have had other motivations. They could have been part of a general ridicule of progressives, as teetotalism was frequently linked with progressivism.<sup>224</sup> They could also have been a response to the London County Council's attacks on Music Halls, the drinking of alcohol in the Halls being a particular focus of these attacks.<sup>225</sup> Later, in the Variety era, other commercial interests exerted a more subtle influence. For example, in Moss Theatres, the second spot comics had to perform in front of a backcloth painted with a street scene which contained advertisements for various businesses; the comic was expected to keep moving during his or her act so that he or she did not obscure any of the advertisements.<sup>226</sup> Similarly, various comedians were sponsored by firms to mention their product during their act: Freddie Desmond did a joke about Singleton's Snuff in exchange for two hundred cigarettes a week; Sam Mayo did a song about Johnny Walker's whisky, and received a case of whisky a week in payment; and Douglas Wakefield blew up an inner tube until it was very big in one of his routines in return for money from the India Tyre Company.<sup>227</sup>

## VI. Summary

Stand-up comedy evolved out of comic song in the late Music Hall era. It went through various stylistic changes, for example moving from character-based comedy to pure joke-telling, and from comic

song to comic patter. However, in spite of such changes, Music Hall and Variety comedy was notable for its stylistic conservatism, and lack of innovation. The humour was clearly framed within the structure of the entertainment as a whole, and by certain elements of the style. The same comic types, the same subjects for jokes, and even the same jokes tended to be used again and again. This stylistic conservatism was matched with a political conservatism. Jokes about social class often involved the ridiculing of working class radicalism, and sometimes contained an element of snobbery. Domestic comedy tended to attack deviation from roles within marriage rather than the institution of marriage itself. Smutty jokes dodged the censors, but failed to challenge prevailing ideas about sexuality. There was also an element of racism in some of the humour. Given the radicalism of some of Music Hall's roots, notably broadside ballads, this artistic and political conservatism seems surprising. However, there were various aspects of Music Hall and Variety entertainments which seem to have encouraged conservatism. The pressure on comedians to succeed with audiences, often under difficult circumstances, tended to discourage experimentation. The difficulty of making an impression with an audience in the short amount of time given to comedians would have encouraged them to package themselves in certain ways. The censorship and manipulation brought about by an interplay of management and local authorities seems to have encouraged the popularity of smutty jokes, and also seems to have discouraged political radicalism. In addition to this the upwardly mobile aspirations of Music Hall and Variety comedians, the use of middle class songwriters, and pressure from various commercial forces all seem to have contributed towards the political conservatism.

## Chapter Four; Stand-Up Comedy in Working Men's Clubs

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## 1. Introduction: Working Men's Clubs as a social institution

When the last Variety halls shut down in the late 1950s, British stand-up comedy needed a new breeding ground. This need was met by Britain's Working Men's Clubs, which together with the larger variety clubs provided the only major outlet for live stand-up comedy until Alternative Comedy emerged in 1979.

Working Men's Clubs are an important part of British culture. In 1982, the Working Men's Club and Institute Union (C.I.U.) had a national membership of three million, and in 1986, there were 3,726 clubs affiliated to it.<sup>1</sup> The history of the clubs began at around the same time as the beginning of the Music Hall and Variety tradition. The Working Men's Club movement formally began in 1862, with the foundation of the C.I.U. by a Unitarian minister called Henry Solly, although as Stan Shipley has pointed out in Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian England, clubs existed before this point, and even after it was founded, not every club belonged to the C.I.U.<sup>2</sup> The organised movement of Working Men's Clubs was not the product of working class people, but was imposed from above: Solly sought the financial backing of wealthy aristocrats, including eleven dukes and the Prince of Wales, and whilst Solly remained in control of the C.I.U., its ruling body was dominated by wealthy and aristocratic men<sup>3</sup>; and on a local level, clubs were set up by landowners, capitalists, clergymen, and their wives.<sup>4</sup> The aim of the movement was to 'improve the character and condition of the Working Classes'.<sup>5</sup> The ultimate purpose of this improvement was to improve the efficiency of working class men, to wean them off beer by providing alcohol-free alternatives to the public house, and to put them on good terms with their employer, in order to prevent demands for 'shorter hours and higher wages' which 'often mean injury to the employer's interest.'<sup>6</sup> Many early clubs failed, largely due to the ban on beer; this led to the movement's becoming more democratic, and by 1884, member clubs were electing the council of the C.I.U. As the control of the clubs fell into the hands of working class people, they began being linked with radical politics: many clubs

had the word 'Radical' in their title, as well as being named after figures like John Bright and William Gladstone; socialists like George Bernard Shaw and William Morris lectured in them; they became associated with anti-royalism and atheism, and drew up lists of demands including Home Rule for Ireland, manhood suffrage, women's suffrage, and the abolition of the House of Lords; and it was the clubs who organised the march on 'Bloody Sunday' at Trafalgar Square in 1887.<sup>7</sup> By the 1890s, the political activities of Working Men's Clubs were on the decline, with the social functions, like entertainments becoming more popular. The membership of clubs increased dramatically, and in many cases this necessitated expansion. This led to financial difficulties for many clubs, and some, like the United Radical, were forced to shut down. Financial assistance could not be obtained from increased subscription fees, as most patrons of Working Men's Clubs would not have been able to afford them. Many clubs turned to breweries for financial assistance, and began to be run as businesses, introducing an admission charge for concerts, and increasing the number of customers, to boost profits from drink sales. Clubs now had to have larger memberships to survive, and the existence of clubs with fewer than two hundred members was threatened; professional club officers, like full-time stewards, paid secretaries, and caterers (later to become 'entertainment secretaries' or 'concert secretaries') were introduced; and political activities were elbowed out.<sup>8</sup> After the function of Working Men's Clubs had become primarily social, the number of clubs in Britain steadily increased, with two periods of rapid expansion: after the First World War, when the number of clubs rose from 1,666 during the war, to 2,269 in 1922; and with the introduction of new housing estates in the 1960s, when nearly five hundred new clubs joined the C.I.U. The number of clubs peaked in 1974, with 4,033 clubs affiliated to the C.I.U.<sup>9</sup> The recession and mass unemployment of the early 1980s took its toll on the Working Men's Clubs, and many were forced to close. In response to financial difficulties, many clubs have turned to the breweries for assistance, but this has tended to lead to a loss of autonomy, with breweries insisting on playing a more active role in the running of

the club: for example, Darnall Working Men's Club in Sheffield was closed in March 1983, and reopened by the Wards brewery as The Green Social Club, with an official of Wards as the Secretary.<sup>10</sup> In other cases, clubs have been forced to re-open on an entirely different basis, either as private clubs, like the Grimesthorpe Social Club, or the Barber Street Club at Hoyland (bought and re-opened by club comedian Charlie Williams), or as high-class pubs, like Midhill W.M.C.<sup>11</sup>

## II. Entertainment in Working Men's Clubs

Entertainment has always played a role in Working Men's Clubs. When they were being run by aristocratic patrons, this took the form of Penny Readings, which consisted of recitations and songs designed to improve the working men. The content of these readings was carefully regulated to ensure respectability. After the clubs began to run themselves, parodies of these Penny Readings began to appear.<sup>12</sup> As the clubs moved into a period of political radicalism, Penny Readings were replaced by several different forms of entertainment: Judge and Jury Classes, in which club members would act out courtroom scenes for entertainment and political education; amateur dramatics; and most importantly, free-and-easies.<sup>13</sup> Here, the term 'free-and-easy' is used to refer to rough and ready variety concerts, rather than to the pre-Music Hall tavern sings-songs. Free-and-easies in Working Men's Clubs were run along similar lines to Music Halls, with a chairman announcing the acts, and a selection of Music Hall songs being sung alongside Labour Movement-related songs. Initially, club members would provide the turns, but gradually, they began to be professionalized: clubs began to borrow performers or whole parties from neighbouring clubs, and to employ professional artists. The club circuit became like a minor branch of the Music Hall circuit, with artists playing both the clubs and the minor halls, and some even breaking into the West End halls; occasionally, some of the big names of Music Hall, like Marie Lloyd and Albert Chevalier would perform in charity concerts in Working Men's Clubs.<sup>14</sup> The free-and-easies were important because it was

their popularity which helped to oust political activity from the clubs, and encourage them to be run more along business lines; they also established the semi-professional nature of club entertainments, which to a greater or lesser extent still exists today. After about 1957, club entertainments became much more commercialized. The closure of the Variety theatres meant that many performers had to turn to the clubs for bookings, and this trend was noted by The Stage: 'Edinburgh, minus Variety theatres, seems to have taken on a new music-hall lease of life via its social and miners' clubs. The same goes, of course, for Fife, which has always been a weekend bonanza for club performers.'<sup>15</sup> With clubs attracting big names, and with club artists going professional, artists' fees increased dramatically. The 1960s saw the opening of variety clubs, which also provided a new home for old Variety artists. In his novel A Card for the Clubs, based on his experiences of working in clubland, Les Dawson describes the emergence of these clubs:

The enterprise meant the takeover of an old cinema; breweries did the fittings in conjunction with the backers; on average these venues could seat about a thousand patrons, so a fair return could be expected with confidence. On the strength of the turnover, top class variety acts were booked and so for the added sum of twopence on a pint of beer, the customer could have a night out that rivalled anything in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

Frankie Howerd, who worked these proprietary clubs after the Variety theatres had shut down, claims that in the 1960s, it was possible to tour for three years without playing the same club twice.<sup>17</sup> They succeeded in attracting big names to remote areas, allowing neighbouring Working men's Clubs, who would not be able to afford them otherwise, to offer them bookings.<sup>18</sup> Since the 1960s, many proprietary clubs have closed down, but some still exist, and together with the Working Men's Clubs, they form a kind of two-tier system of entertainment. Acts begin in the Working Men's Clubs, sometimes having performed in pubs before that. Some have long semi-professional, or professional careers in the clubs, building up a reputation in their own area, sometimes even achieving legendary status, and still remain unheard of outside of clubland: an article

in the Sheffield Working Men's Clubs listings magazine, Our Clubs mentions a song and dance duo called Barry Anthony and Ray Young who have played the clubs for 27 years, a comedy impressionist called Paul Martin who has been working them for 30 years, a soprano singer called Gail Mar-shel who has played them for 32 years, and a singer called Marlene Clair who has played them for 40 years.<sup>19</sup> Other club performers graduate onto the proprietary clubs, and some eventually build careers on television.

### III. Stand-up comedy in Working Men's Clubs

The spoken form of entertainment known as stand-up comedy evolved out of the comic songs of the Music Halls. As we have seen, the Music Halls were a major influence on early club entertainments in the 1890s, and several aspects of Music Hall entertainment could also be found in the clubs, notably, female impersonators; people who impersonated members of different racial or regional groups, calling themselves 'The Hibernian Ambassador' or 'The Black Philosopher'; and clog dancers.<sup>20</sup> However, before the influence of Music Hall, there was a separate tradition of spoken entertainment in Working Men's Clubs, which may have contributed to the emergence of stand-up comedy in the clubs. There were socialist orators like George Bernard Shaw and William Morris; 'Democratic Readings', with workman-poets like John Bedford Leno reciting their work; and most importantly, raconteurs like Marcus Wilkinson, who performed in London's clubs in the 1880s. Wilkinson, who had worked in the pre-Music Hall tavern entertainments, presented a form of patter entertainment, telling stories like 'The Warden's Story' and 'A Tall Tale of A Stork', which were not exclusively comic, but certainly contained an element of comedy:

'Yes, I was there, isolated and alone, racked with pain, not even an orange to moisten my fever-parched lips. For weeks I lay forgotten, but one morning a nurse came, and said 'Please sir, there's someone to see y u'. I clasped my hands. 'Who is it?' I asked. She replied 'A p'lic man'. I said, 'Where's my trousers?'<sup>21</sup>

Out of the raconteurs and sub-Music Hall comics of early club entertainments, a form of comedy developed in the clubs, which was stylistically quite different from that of the Variety Theatres. There were links between Variety comedy and club comedy: some comedians, like Ted Lune and Ron Delta started their careers in pubs and clubs, and moved onto the Variety circuit; others, like Jimmy Clitheroe and Frank E. Franks moved onto the club circuit after the Variety theatres had shut down.<sup>22</sup> There were also many comedians who worked both the Variety Theatres and the Working Men's Clubs. Eric Thomas, writer for Our Clubs magazine, involved in the Sheffield club scene since 1938 remembers: 'Even in the old days, when places like the Empire, Lyceum and Royal were all going, what they used to do, entertainers used to work in theatres on Saturday night, stay the weekend, and work clubs Sunday noon and Sunday night.'<sup>23</sup> However, there was a generation of comedians, who worked principally in the clubs, whose work was very different from that of their contemporaries working in Variety theatres; for example, in the Sheffield area, there were comedians like Jackie Hood, Harry Buxton, Harry Bendon, Billy Walsh, and Freddie Talbot.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV. Early club comedians

Very little, if anything, is written on this generation, so most of the information comes from personal memories. This is problematic, because there is a danger that people will have idealized memories of the past, and a jaundiced view of the present. However, this information is supported by recordings of the work of Bobby Thompson, possibly the only comedian of this type whose work has been recorded. Thompson came from County Durham, and began performing in smoking concerts and Friday night suppers in Working Men's Clubs, and in concert parties. He performed in North Eastern clubs for over fifty years until his death in 1988. His wider fame was the result of his work on a B.B.C. regional radio programme in the 1950s called Wat'cheor Geordie. The information from personal memories, supported by recordings of Bobby Thompson reveal several characteristics of early club comedy.

## A. Style

One aspect of early club comedy which distinguishes it from both Variety comedy and later club comedy was the stage attire worn by comedians. Eric Thomas, columnist for the Sheffield clubs listings magazine Our Clubs has described this standard costume: 'in the old days, the typical dress was a scarf, a muffler, and probably an old football jersey to add a bit of colour.'<sup>25</sup> Bobby Thompson's stage costume fitted this description, consisting of a pair of over-large trousers, a shabby-looking sweater and a flat cap; in his army routine he wore a different costume, a shabby and over-large army uniform. The flat cap and the shabbiness of the costume signalled that the comedians were working class. However, in contrast with Variety comedians like Billy Russell who presented a working class character to a mixed-class audience, these early club comedians were announcing their working class origins to a working class audience. It seems unlikely that their acts would have contained the elements of snobbery present in Russell's act.

Another aspect of the style was that in contrast to later club comics, early club comedians tended to deliver their material slowly. Sheffield club secretary Frank Eames remembers that comics 'used to be droll and take their time; nowadays, they've got to rush it, and you miss half the jokes'<sup>26</sup>; veteran club comic Ron Delta argues that 'the young comics today, they're good, they're very fast, but sometimes they're too fast. You've got to give people a chance to think. Besides, some of these young comics today, they'll go through about twelve gags, whereas such a bloke in my day would do about five, or perhaps only all the way through one'<sup>27</sup>; similarly, Eric Thomas argues that the older generation of comedians used a slower pace, 'because it made their material go further.'<sup>28</sup> Thompson's delivery was certainly very slow and relaxed compared with that of modern club comedians, and his timing of the jokes was enhanced by his smoking a woodbine cigarette. Other notable aspects of Thompson's style were his use of a continuous monologue, as

opposed to a series of unconnected jokes, and the extent to which his humour was specific to the north east of England. His geordie accent was very thick, to the extent that it would have been difficult to understand for anybody from outside the North East.

## B. The politics of early club comedy

### 1. Class

If Bobby Thompson was in any way typical of the early club comedians, it seems that their comedy was very specific to the working class. Much of Thompson's humour was based on the idea of ridiculing people with upwardly mobile aspirations, in particular working class people who present themselves as being middle class. For example, he ridiculed the kind of language which such people use to make their debt sound respectable: 'It's astonishing ya knaa, when you get back to reality, debt, 'cos we call it "debt", see. Others calls it "credit". Committee men's wives, "On account", huh! Well, I'm in debt on account o' not being able to pay me credit.'<sup>29</sup> In another of his jokes, he discusses going on holiday with his wife: 'She says to me [exaggerated posh voice:] "Darling"...'cos the window was open, she says, "are we going to Blackpool for our holidays?" So I shut the window. I says, "Close your clatter," I says, "how can we go to Blackpool on the money you're making?" Then I oppened the window, I says, "Where are we flying from?"'<sup>30</sup> The humour here relies on the mismatch between the real situation, and the way in which it is presented to the world: when the window is open, the voices are posh, and they talk about going on holiday; when it is closed, they need not pretend, so crude expressions like 'close your clatter' may be used, and the truth about not being able to afford to go on holiday may be referred to.

Thompson explicitly addressed the poverty in his audiences, one of his opening lines being: 'Why y'all reet, are ya? How's ya debt?'<sup>1</sup> He drew attention to poverty in the audience, flying in the face of those who would try to disguise it. For example, in one of his recordings, he says to a woman in the audience: 'I'll tell you what

I'll do wi' ya, pet, I'll gi' you a glass of brandy, and Bob says he'll give you a bottle of brandy, if you can tell me you pay the electric bill before you get the red letter.'<sup>32</sup> Similarly, he says to the audience: 'Why, this place would be a nudist camp if aal the women took their catalogue stuff off.'<sup>33</sup> The first joke draws attention to the fact that nobody in the audience would be able to afford to pay their bills before they received the final demand, and the second draws attention to the fact that many members of the audience would have to rely on hire-purchase catalogue buying for their clothes. In addition to directly addressing the poverty in the audience in this way, Thompson also frequently dealt with the subject in the flow of his patter.

Thompson's act was rarely overtly political, although one of his jokes relies on the assumption that voting Conservative is wrong: 'Come in quarter to twelve at neet, drunk as a b...drunk as a monkey. Comin' up the path, "Ai-ee-ee-ee! That Consarvative, what a lovely man!" I says, "You haven't voted for the Tory have you?" She said, "No, I've crossed him out."<sup>34</sup> The joke here is simple, that by crossing the Conservative candidate out, the wife would have been inadvertantly voting for him, but it relies on the assumption that she should not have voted Conservative. This assumption is about as near as Thompson's act ever got to making overtly political statements, but his attitudes to class, work and debt were often subversive. Many of his jokes were based on the incongruity of imposing aspects of working class life on state institutions, and members of the ruling class. For example, he would declare that if he ever became an M.P., he would change the law so that tax would be collected like club money<sup>35</sup>; and in a routine about a court case, his wife mistakes the court papers for bingo cards, declaring, 'Bobby, there must be a housie on before the case.'<sup>36</sup> Similarly, when Thompson rings Neville Chamberlain, he is out fetching the coal, because it is the only day he can borrow a bicycle, and his wife is cooking chips; he meets Adolf Hitler in a fish and chip shop; the Duke of Gloucester plays bingo in a Working Men's Club; and the Queen has to take her mother's catalogue money round for

her.<sup>37</sup> This kind of humour is subversive, because it makes organs of the state and members of the ruling class seem strange and incongruous by imposing working class values on them. Another subversive aspect of his humour was his attitude to work and debt. He reversed conventional ideas about work by being openly and proudly lazy: 'No, but I think if you're..if you're off work, ya shouldn't be skitted. I don't mean on the dole, I mean you've got a job, but you're not keen.'<sup>38</sup> Here, Thompson reverses the capitalist work ethic by arguing that lazy workers should not be subject to ridicule. Similarly, he reversed conventional ideas about debt, arguing that neglecting to pay off debts is a sensible strategy: 'You believe Bobby Thompson. If ya pay what ya owe, you'll niver ha' nowt. Let them worry what wants it off ya. The dole is my shepherd, I shall not want.'<sup>39</sup> He also ridiculed debt collectors, incongruously exaggerating their efficiency: 'D'ya knaa what? There's some of these knockers, ya knaa what I mean, Credit Callers. Aal that snaa wa had, never kept one away from our door. Come on a sledge.'<sup>40</sup>

## 2. Sexual politics

Whereas Thompson's class-based humour was often subversive, his attitudes to the family were solidly conservative. As with the Variety comedians, he ridiculed deviation from accepted roles within the family. His wife and mother-in-law were ridiculed for being too dominant, and he frequently impersonated his wife's nagging, which was often a response to his laziness, or his drinking sessions. She was also ridiculed for not fulfilling her role as housekeeper: '[she says] "Tell us what th'wants for th'supper before the fish shop shuts." I says, "Not again, hinnie, we've had so many chips this week, we've emptied fower fields o' taties.'<sup>41</sup> The biggest laugh here is not produced by the incongruous exaggeration of the number of potatoes he has eaten in the form of chips, but by the idea that the wife is going to the fish and chip shop to get the supper rather than cooking it herself, thus neglecting her role as housekeeper. Similarly, Thompson ridiculed himself for neglecting his role as

breadwinner: 'And ya knaa, she keeps saying, "Get some knives and forks, get some teacups." Well, you canna have ivereverything. I bowt her a new pair of laces, you canna get ivereverything.'<sup>42</sup> As with the Variety comedians, Thompson also ridiculed his wife for being ugly, using incongruously grotesque descriptions: she has a sore on her lips that makes her mouth look like boiled ham; her breasts are referred to as 'the Cheviot Hills'; her body is so lumpy that when she is lying on the beach, she looks like 'a bag of coal on a bike.'<sup>43</sup> Like Billy Russell's joke wife, Thompson's joke wife was also incongruously fat: 'She says, "Get me somewhere to strip." Now where could I find a marquee?'<sup>44</sup> Another deviation from conventional family roles in one of his jokes is his son's lack of respect for his father: 'He says to me, "Hello. Out that chair!"...so I got oot, and er...'<sup>45</sup> Here, there are two jokes. The first is that the son incongruously breaks the rules of his family role, by disrespectfully ordering his father to get out of the chair; the second is that the father incongruously breaks the rules of his family role by acquiescing to his son's demand, and not punishing him for it.

Whilst Thompson used the same kind of domestic jokes as the Variety comedians, he did not rely nearly so heavily on smutty jokes and innuendo. Indeed, it has been claimed that one of the major differences between early club comedy and modern club comedy was the comparative lack of smut. Eric Thomas argues: 'In the old days, comedy was a bit more subtle, but today, it seems that the bluer you are, the better you get on'<sup>46</sup>; Sheffield club agent Mike Tunningley, who has been involved with the Sheffield club scene for twenty years, claims that, 'they were far cleaner comedians that didn't have to resort to bad language and blue jokes in the '50s, but today more and more comedians are gaining big reputations throughout clubland using bad language and mucky jokes'<sup>47</sup>; similarly, a letter to Our Clubs magazine complains 'after a long absence from the club scene I have just started the habit again and am dismayed by the lewd, crude and disgusting comedy spiel served up these days. Subtle wit seems to have given way to a non-stop barrage of blue gags

punctuated via a bountiful selection of four letter words to presumably spice the issue.'<sup>48</sup> Such memories should perhaps be taken with a degree of scepticism, as it is possible that the past is being seen through rose-tinted glasses here; however, standards of what is deemed obscene have changed, and this has affected radio and television comedy, so there is no reason to suppose that it has not affected club comedy in a similar way.

### 3. Race

There is a conspicuous lack of racism in Thompson's comedy. Whereas in Variety comedy and later club comedy, negative characteristics like stupidity or meanness were attributed to members of different regional or racial groups, in Thompson's work they were attributed to members of his joke family. Jokes based on stupidity were about his wife or his brother-in-law: 'I called the neet, he says, "Want some petrol?", I says, "No. Check me tyres", he says, "One, two, three, fower."<sup>49</sup> This is a fairly typical example of the sort of joke which would normally be about an Irishman, and the fact that it is not is therefore conspicuous. Similarly, whilst many comedians would show meanness as an attribute of Jewish or Scottish people, in Thompson's act, he makes himself the butt of such jokes.

There are several notable features of Thompson's humour. His delivery was slow and laid-back, and he used a continuous monologue rather than a series of unconnected packaged jokes. His act was firmly rooted in working class culture: his costume announced his working class status, he directly referred to the poverty of his audience, and he ridiculed pretention and deviation from working class values. As with the Variety comedians, his domestic comedy reinforced roles within marriage. His comedy was conspicuously lacking in racism. It is impossible to tell whether these characteristics were common amongst early club comedians, and the extent to which his style was typical, in the absence of recordings of any of his contemporaries. However, as some of the characteristics of his act correspond with personal memories of the

early club comedians, it can be assumed that his style was not totally atypical. If this is the case, the style of the early club comics was very different from that of contemporary club comedians.

#### V. Stylistic aspects of contemporary club comedy

In the 1960s and 1970s, Working Men's Club comedy began to appear on television. Previously, most television comics had begun their careers in Variety, but as the Variety circuit was extinct by about 1960s, television producers began to have to look to the clubs for new comedians. Possibly the first club comedian to make a name on television was Les Dawson, who began to work in the medium in the early 1960s, and made his name with Yorkshire Television's Sez Les.<sup>50</sup> Then in the early 1970s, Granada made a conscious attempt at transferring club comedy onto television with two pioneering series, The Comedians, and The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club, which featured club comedians like Bernard Manning, Charlie Williams, Ken Goodwin, Frank Carson, Mike Read, Jim Bowen, George Roper, Colin Crompton, and Duggie Brown. The style of comedy that these comedians used was vastly different from that of Bobby Thompson, or of the descriptions of the earlier generation of club comics. This suggests that the style of club comedy had been transformed. Eric Thomas estimates that this change occurred in the 1960s.<sup>51</sup>

#### A. Framing

One aspect of modern club comedy which is immediately obvious is the reliance on standard packaged jokes. By far the most common format adopted by modern club comedians is a series of unconnected packaged jokes. The language and structure of packaged jokes is such that they are immediately recognizable as jokes, and therefore they are framed and separated from normal discourse. This framing is reinforced by the fact that most modern club comedians seem to use a series of unconnected jokes, and rarely make any attempt to personalize them, or bind them together into a continuous monologue.

The fact that the jokes are told one after the other rather than being disguised by being woven into part of a larger discourse means that they are even more clearly recognizable as jokes. The framing is made even more obvious in jokes which use standard opening phrases, like 'Did you hear about...?'; jokes which use such standard opening phrases are common in contemporary club comedy.<sup>52</sup> In addition to the framing that is built into the structure of the act and the particular joke, the jokes are also framed by being referred to as jokes. It is fairly common for club comedians to refer openly to the process of joking. For example, Mike Burton boasts about the joke he is about to tell: 'You'll love, you'll love, you'll love this one. You'll love, this one will bring the house down.'<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Steve Faye introduces a series of jokes by saying, 'I love the clever gags, like...'<sup>54</sup> Frank Carson even has a catch-phrase which explicitly refers to the process of joking: 'It's the way I tell 'em!'

Because packaged jokes and standard joke formats are commonly used in contemporary club comedy, they are occasionally satirized by comedians. For example, Stu Francis comments:

I don't know if you've noticed, but when you watch the telly, especially at home, or you go to the theatre at the seaside, you always find when a comedian comes on, to get on they always begin by saying, 'A very funny thing happened to me on the way to the theatre tonight'. Well it did.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, Colin Crompton starts one of his jokes as follows: 'There were three fellers in one night, an Englishman, a Scotsman, and a Jew..'cos there always is in jokes, i'n't there? The Irishman was ill.'<sup>56</sup> It is interesting to note that while Stu Francis comments on a comic convention that may have existed at one time, the phrase 'A very funny thing happened to me on the way to the theatre tonight' is not a particular feature of club comedy, and there is not one example of it in any of the recordings of club comedy which I have examined. It is also interesting to note that both Francis and

Crompton go on to make the type of joke which they ridicule. In any case, this kind of satirizing of standard joke formats is not particularly common in club comedy, particularly considering the opportunities for satire afforded by the widespread use of such formats.

If framing devices help to separate the humour from normal discourse, this separation is heightened by the fact that that many of the jokes have settings which are clearly fictional, and far-removed from the experiences of their working class audience. For example, many jokes involve exotic animals, or animals behaving like humans; there are jokes about mischievous parrots, escaping lions, hyenas arguing with monkeys, elephants in the jungle, goats eating films in Hollywood dustbins, and monkeys making toast.<sup>57</sup> There are also many jokes which are based on fairy tales, television programmes, and films.<sup>58</sup> This is not to say that humour must be directly linked to the actual experiences of its audience in order to be subversive. Fairy tales, television and film are all an important part of our culture, which help to create our world for us, and a critical *humorous approach to them could be very* subversive. However, in most of these jokes, the fictional settings are used as the basis of very simple, and unchallenging jokes. For example, Steve Faye's joke about monkeys making toast is just a simple wordplay:

And the two monkeys in a cage, and one said to the other, 'I'm starving,' he said, 'Well there's plenty of bread, what do you want?' he said, 'I want toast,' he said, 'Well how are we going to make toast?' he said, 'Stick it under the g'rilla.' [gorilla/griller]<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, Bernard Manning's joke about The Three Bears offers no humorous critique on the story, but merely posits an unexpected explanation as to why the bears have no porridge: 'The Three Bears was all sat there, and Daddy Bear said, "Who's been eating my porridge?" and the Baby Bear said, "Who's been eating my porridge,"

and the Mummy Bear said, "I don't know what you're all bleeding mithering about, I've not made the porridge yet!"<sup>160</sup>

## B. Familiarity

As with Music Hall and Variety comedy, club comedy often allows audiences to know what kind of joke to expect. This is because it often relies on old jokes, and the same jokes will often be used by many different comics, as Eric Thomas points out: 'You will find that if you go and watch one one night, you will probably hear a lot of the same material from one that you do from the other, and everybody's pinching one another's material, you see, borrowing it, taking it, whatever.'<sup>61</sup> Certainly, there is evidence of this in recordings of club comedians: for example, a joke about Pakistanis and Chinese people told by Bernard Manning in 1977 is told by Johnny Wager in the late 1980s<sup>62</sup>; a joke about a man with two wooden legs told by Frank Carson in 1971 is told by Bernard Manning in 1977<sup>63</sup>; and a joke about Irishmen playing bingo is told by both Stu Francis and Bernard Manning in 1971.<sup>64</sup> One joke, told by Jos White in 1971, and by Bernard Manning in 1977 even has the same incidental joke in the build up to the main punchline:

He knocked at my front door, this Chinese feller, knocked at my front door! I said, 'Go round the back.' Well, you don't like it, do you? All the rice on the path. He went round the back, he knocked at the back door, I opened the window. I said, 'What do you want?' he said, 'Your house same size as my house. How many rolls wallpaper you use on front room?' I said, 'Sixteen rolls.' I saw him a fortnight after, he said, 'Me got six rolls left over.' I said, 'So have I!'<sup>65</sup>  
(Jos White)

I've got a Chinese just moved next door but one to me. He says, er, 'Mr. Manning?' I said, 'Yes, what d'yer want? And get off the path, get off the path.' Bleedin' rice all over the path, d'yer know what I mean? He said, 'Your house same size as my house. How many rolls of wallpaper for your front room?' I said, 'Fourteen.' Saw 'im a week later, he said, 'Mr. Manning, I got four rolls left over.' Said, 'So 'ave I.'<sup>66</sup>  
(Bernard Manning)

This joke is based on the idea of tricking somebody into buying more wallpaper than they need, and part of its appeal to the audience is that the tricked party is of another race. There is no particular reason why he should be Chinese, any resented race would do, and the joke could just as easily have been told about a Pakistani or a West Indian; but in both versions, a Chinese person is the victim, and the joke about rice on the path also appears in both, even though it is by no means essential to the main joke.

This repetition of jokes is partly the result of comics stealing each other's material. Club comedian Johnny Wager has admitted this, arguing that few comics use original material:

Sometimes I make up a joke myself, without any assistance from outside. I think if anybody's speaking frankly, this doesn't really happen so much, I think that people glean humour from different avenues, and probably put 'em together themselves, and say they've written it themselves, but in actual fact, they haven't, they got it in a sly way from someone else.<sup>67</sup>

However, the lack of originality in club comedy is not simply a question of one comic making up a joke, and others stealing it. It is more a question of comics drawing on a body of material which has been built up from various different sources. This body of material will be different in different geographical areas, as Sheffield club agent Mike Tunningley points out:

Especially what you will find is that in the Yorkshire area, maybe that's a bit too large, in Sheffield/ Chesterfield/ Worksop area, a lot of the gags are pretty similar...but if you have comedians brought in for a ten day run, say from the North East...and work them in the Sheffield clubs, then it is a different sense of humour.<sup>68</sup>

Another reason why the same jokes tend to crop up again and again is connected with the type of scriptwriters which some club comics use. These scriptwriters, who advertise in the classified section of The Stage provide photocopied sheets or booklets of jokes entitled '1

Liners', or '100 Good Strong Club Gags', which cost anything from £2.00 to about £10.00.<sup>69</sup> Because these writers send out the same packages of jokes to many different comedians, this contributes to the repetitiveness of club comedy.

#### C. Attitude towards incongruity

As we have seen, the potential subversiveness of a joke is reduced if there is a negative attitude towards the incongruity in the joke, if it is seen as an error rather than a valid alternative to normality. This phenomenon is fairly common in club comedy, which often attributes the incongruous or surreal elements of the jokes to mental defectiveness or drug-inspired illusion. For example, there are many jokes which involve inventively unconventional use of language and logic, but reduce the impact of this by setting the joke in a lunatic asylum.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, in the early 1970s there were jokes in which the incongruity was shown to be a result of hallucinogenic drugs, as in a joke by Mike Burton about hippies: 'Did you hear about this hippy...who was out of his mind on L.S.D., and he's on top of this block of flats saying, "I'm a jumbo jet, I'm a jumbo jet, I'm a jumbo jet." And he dived off the top. And halfway down, two other hippies hijacked him and flew him to Cuba.'<sup>71</sup>

#### D. Exceptions to the general trends

It can be seen that a good deal of club comedy is stylistically conservative. Comedians tend to rely on a series of unconnected packaged jokes, which are clearly separated from normal discourse, and are rarely original. The incongruity in many of the jokes is seen as error, being portrayed as the result of lunacy or hallucinogenic drugs, thus implying that any deviation from normality is simply incorrect. However, whilst this kind of conservatism is very common, there are comedians who are more artistically adventurous, and who rely on more than just a series of standard jokes. One such comedian is Ken Goodwin. Goodwin's act consists of unconnected jokes, but his comedy relies more on the way

he presents the jokes than the jokes themselves. Goodwin has the stage persona of a grinning Northern idiot, and most of the laughs are generated not by the jokes in themselves, but by the fact that he can barely get the punchline out without disintegrating into apparently uncontrollable laughter. An excerpt from one of his routines illustrates this:

Hey, and what about..what about this horse that collapsed in Picadilly, and this policeman was stood there with his notebook ten minutes..and the sergeant said, 'Well, what you waiting for?' [Goodwin giggles] He said, 'How do you spell Picadilly?'. [Goodwin laughs, and audience laughs] He said, 'Umm..P-I-K...O...drag it into Tib Street'!!! [Goodwin laughs, and audience laughs. Still laughing:] 'Drag it into Tib Street'!!! [still laughing:] 'We'll all have belly-ache, won't we?' [Goodwin laughs, and audience laughs]<sup>72</sup>

In this excerpt, it can be seen that Goodwin's technique of peppering the joke with seemingly uncontrollable fits of laughter causes the audience to laugh, even though there is nothing funny in the actual words he is saying. There is nothing particularly funny about the line 'How do you spell Picadilly', except perhaps the incongruity of a policeman not being able to spell a fairly easy word like 'Picadilly'. The audience laughter that follows the line stems more from Goodwin's crazy laughter at the line than the line itself. Even by itself, his laughter is enough to make the audience laugh: one of his gags is to just laugh for thirteen seconds, which makes the audience laugh, then he says 'What you laughing at?', which makes them laugh even more.<sup>73</sup> Part of the explanation for the success of Goodwin's humour lies with his closeness to the audience. He laughs with them at the jokes, and constantly comments on them, for example, saying 'It's good that, innit, eh?...I made that one up'<sup>74</sup>, or 'D'you get it, eh?'<sup>75</sup>; such comments separate him from the jokes, and make it seem that he and the audience are enjoying the jokes together, rather than the comic giving the jokes to the audience for them to enjoy. He also overtly identifies himself as part of the same group as the audience, with comments like, 'We'll all have belly ache [from laughing too much], won't we?'; and 'I'm a riot, aren't I? We're having a good time, aren't we?'<sup>76</sup> His idiotic

persona also accounts for some of the laughs, particularly when he overtly plays on it: 'This village idiot joined the army, wasn't me, but I knew him. [audience laughter]'<sup>77</sup> His humour is also conspicuously less vicious than that of his contemporaries, in that it relies less on ridiculing standard targets.

Whilst comedians like Ken Goodwin work more by establishing a comic persona and an unthreatening relationship with the audience than by relying on standard jokes, his approach is unusual, and most club comedy is characterized by its stylistic conservatism. This is often matched by a political conservatism.

## VI. The politics of contemporary club comedy

Any examination of the politics of club comedy must take into account the widespread use of aggressive humour. Club comedy often directs hostility at various social groups, and this is usually connected with social conflicts relating to social class, gender and race. This means that the incongruity in the humour is usually used as a form of ridicule.

### A. Class

The 'traditional cap, scarf and baggy trousers'<sup>78</sup> of the early club comedians has been replaced by a much smarter form of stage attire, which disguises rather than exaggerating the working class origins of the comedians. Most of the performers who appeared on The Comedians wore suits instead of flat caps and football jerseys. Younger comedians, like Duggie Brown often wore fashionable 1970s-style suits, and a dinner jacket with dress shirt and bow tie was also common. The use of dinner jackets is particularly significant, because they connote upper class values, the very opposite of the populist scruffiness of the early club comics.

Similarly, whereas Bobby Thompson based much of his act on poverty, directly confronting the fact that many of the members of the audiences he played to faced hardship, this kind of humour is comparatively rare in contemporary club comedy. Even when poverty is mentioned, it is usually shown as part of the past, rather than being a contemporary problem, and is often romanticized. For example, Ken Goodwin has a routine in which he recalls childhood games born of poverty:

But you know, I used to, I used to make up me own games. 'Ands up all the fellers, in the audience tonight, that used to play with a wheel and a stick. Come on, put your 'ands up, let's see yer, come on, let's see yer, 'ands up all those that played with a wheel and a stick. Come on, put your 'ands up, let's see yer, be honest about it. There's one! There's one! [laughs] And if you had a tyre on it, you were posh, weren't you? Happy days, I don't know... I'll never forget, though, because you know, when you don't have much money, and, I remember me mam sayin', 'Our Kenny', she said, 'go to the butcher's, and tell 'im we want a sheep's head, and ask 'im to leave the legs on!'<sup>79</sup>

Here, poverty is cosily represented: a poor childhood is looked back on as 'happy days'. In a similar routine by Charlie Williams, the memories of a poor childhood address less pleasant aspects than playing with a wheel and a stick: 'I lived in a terraced row, terraced row, hairf a mile long. They wa', weren't they them days, terraced rows, hairf a mile long. Toilets round t'back, and tha'd got to be fast! It's true, it's true! You'd got to motor, else you'd have chapped legs.'<sup>80</sup> However, even though the joke here is about poor lavatory facilities leading to people wetting themselves, this is part of a nostalgic look back at poor living conditions which are seen as part of the past. In taking a nostalgic look at poverty, both of these routines tend to romanticize it, and imply that it is a problem of the past, not the present.

However, some club comics do address contemporary poverty. For example, Bernard Manning has a routine about some local councillors answering the questions of their constituents on a television programme. The councillors are portrayed as living in luxury: 'Get

the picture, in the studio, Councillor Smith, Councillor Jones, Councillor Brown. Sat in champagne bucket chairs, smoking King Edward cigars, sipping Napoleon Brandy, fitted carpets, the best of everything.' This is contrasted with the problems of their constituents on the Wythenshawe estate in Manchester:

'Councillor Jones, can you hear me?'  
[posh voice:] 'Yes, I can hear you.'  
'It's about our roof.'  
'Yes.'  
'We want one. Four pound fifteen a week for these 'ouses, councillor, it's a disgrace, we've got bugs.'  
'Well pull your bed away from the wall.'  
'We've done that, they pull it back. I threw a bucket of petrol on 'em the other night, they come out on motorbikes. I'm sick of these 'ouses, I'll tell yer. The walls are that thin, I opened the oven door the other day, there's a feller dippin' 'is bread in our gravy.'<sup>81</sup>

This routine expresses anger about poor housing conditions, by exaggerating them to the point of incongruity, and this is set against a portrayal of councillors as privileged and uncaring. This routine is unusual, in that it is an expression of class conflict, but it involves some analysis: the councillors are resented because they are shown to be privileged and far removed from the problems of their working class constituent. In general, club comedy which expresses class conflict tends to be more straightforwardly abusive, and lacks any analysis.

Some jokes express class conflict by taking an aggressive attitude towards politicians. Sometimes, this aggression is linked with particular grievances. For example, in the early 1970s, George Roper told a joke about Ted Heath:

Did you hear about Ted Heath getting knighted? The birthday honours. Can you imagine him? Queen sat there in a sou'wester and a pair of wellies. Imagine? Kneeling there in the slush. She gets the sword out, she puts it on his right shoulder, 'Rise, Sir Hedward.' He doesn't budge. Puts it on his left shoulder, 'Rise, Sir Hedward,' and he still doesn't budge. So she planted it on his head. 'Rise, Sir Hedward!' Little postman in the crowd shouted, 'Get him to "Get up." He doesn't know what "a rise" is!'<sup>82</sup>

Here, the word 'arise' is played on, so that Heath mistakes 'arise', meaning an order to 'get up' for 'a rise', meaning a wage rise, and thus he is shown as being incongruously intransigent with regards wage settlements. Similarly, in the late 1980s, Janice York ridiculed Margaret Thatcher, and the American industrialist Ian McGregor:

D'you like Margaret Thatcher? You'd like to take her for a vindaloo curry and sew her arse up? Well, would yer or wouldn't yer? 'Course yer bloody would, what's she done for the country, she's ruined it, ha'n't she? Look at that Ian McGregor she brought over here, shut our bloody pits down. Went for a circumcision last week, the surgeon said, 'I can't operate on this man,' he said, 'there's no end to that prick.' We're up against it, yer see.<sup>83</sup>

Here, the ridicule is much more general than in Roper's joke about Heath. Whilst there is some vague political analysis, in the assertion that Thatcher has 'ruined' the country, and in the reference to Ian McGregor's policy of pit closures when he was head of the National Coal Board, this is separate from the actual jokes, which are merely general humorous abuse. In other cases, the jokes are entirely devoid of any kind of political analysis. For example, in the mid-1980s, Johnny Wager made the following comic attack:

Margaret Thatcher, eh? Oh God, I'm tellin' yer. She's goin' to Bangkok, she might as well, she's banged every other bloody thing, ha'n't she? Too posh, i'n't she, eh, too posh. Went to the doctors. Doctor examined her, she'd got rheumatism. She said, 'I want a second opinion,' he said, 'All right, you're an ugly cow as well.' You know why she wears them long dresses, don't you? So you can't see her bollocks.<sup>84</sup>

Most of the humour in this excerpt is pure insult: Thatcher is 'too posh', she is an 'ugly cow', a weird man-woman hybrid, who wears a dress, but has 'bollocks' (testicles).

Other jokes express class conflict not by humorously insulting politicians, but by portraying situations of inter-class rivalry, in which working class characters better or outwit middle class characters. Bernard Manning provides an example of this: 'So... this

vicar said to this coal miner, "I've not seen yer in mass," and the coal miner said, "I've not seen you down the bloody pit either."<sup>85</sup> Similarly, George Roper tells the following joke:

Must tell yer this one. A young solicitor, young solicitor, just started in business you see, and he hadn't got any clients. So a knock comes on the door [taps on microphone], and he lifts up the 'phone quick, pretend there was somebody on the 'phone. [posh voice:] 'Hello. Come in. [to 'phone:] Wilson versus Jones, yes. Of course. Sit down sir.' Feller sits down. [to 'phone:] 'Yes, Wilson versus...yes, seventy five thousand pounds. Of course we will, we'll get damages dead easy. We might make it eighty thousand out of court. Certainly we will. No, not to worry. Thank you very much. Bye bye.' He said to the gentleman sat down, 'Yes, what can I do for you, sir?' he said, 'I'm from the G.P.O., I've come to connect the 'phone up.'<sup>86</sup>

In both of these jokes, the middle class character is put down, by the joke-logic of the miner in the first joke, and by his own pretension in the second. Jokes like this which take middle class characters as the butt are matched by jokes which ridicule sections of the working class. Whereas Bobby Thompson's laziness was to be admired, and thus represented a reversal of the capitalist work ethic, contemporary club comedy tends to ridicule laziness. This is achieved by ridiculing certain groups, which are portrayed as being incongruously lazy. One of these groups is dockworkers, and George Roper provides an example of this type of joke: 'Did you hear about the docker, walking along the dock road...kicking a tortoise to death. The policeman said, "What are you doing that for?" he said, "It's been following me about all day."<sup>87</sup> Such incongruous laziness is certainly not to be admired, and in one of Steve Faye's jokes, the docker is suitably punished: 'There's one feller, they call 'im "The Poet". He says, "This job is just like heaven/ I 'aven't done a tad since half eleven." And the boss 'eard 'im, he said, "Hickory Dickory Dock/ Pick your cards up at five o'clock."<sup>88</sup> Another group which is portrayed as being incongruously lazy is Liverpudlians. Janice York provides a particularly vicious example of the lazy

Liverpudlian joke: 'Then you get further bloody north, and you get to bloody Liverpool, that's where they don't catch A.I.D.S., 'cos they're never off their arses long enough. They're lazy buggers them Liverpoolians, I'll tell yer.'<sup>29</sup> Such jokes are inspired by the notoriously high rate of unemployment in Liverpool, which began in the early 1980s. The implication of these jokes is that it is lazy individuals who are to blame for unemployment, rather than the policies of politicians. In one of Bernard Manning's jokes, working class radicalism is also seen to be the result of laziness:

Mr Kasegin's going round this big factory, with Ted Heath. He said, 'What time they start work here?' He said, 'Well, they start about half eight, clocking on,' he said. 'In Russia, we start at six o'clock in za morning. Any breaks?' 'Oh,' he said, 'they knock off about ten o'clock, all this wagon comes up, and...cup of tea and that.' 'In Russia, no breaks. How long for dinner?' He said, 'Well they get an hour,' he said, 'Some like a bet,' he said, 'It takes 'em half an hour.' 'In Russia, ten minutes for dinner. Sandwiches, Russian sandwiches, by the machine. What time they finish?' He said, 'Oh, they're pumping their bikes up at four o'clock,' he said, 'before they miss children's hour,' he said, 'on the television.' 'In Russia, we work 'til ten o'clock at night. Six in the morning 'til ten o'clock at night in Russia.' He said, 'You couldn't get these lads to do that,' he says, 'Why not?' He says, ''Cos they're all communists.'<sup>30</sup>

This joke strikes a double blow against communism. On the one hand the English workers are shown to be incongruously lazy, and the line about pumping up their bikes at four o'clock, so as not to miss children's television gets a laugh from the audience; this slackness in working practices is attributed to the fact that they are communists, in the punchline to the joke. And on the other hand, the workers in Russia are shown to have appallingly draconian working practices, even though Russia is a communist country; therefore, communism is portrayed as failing to provide the freedom that it promises.

In general, jokes about social class seem to be conservative. Poverty is joked about, but only in cosy memories of the past, and

humour which expresses anger about poverty, like Bernard Manning's Wythenshawe routine, are rare. Jokes about class conflict are rarely politicized, and are often little more than generalized comic abuse. Indeed, jokes which take middle class characters as the butt are matched by jokes which ridicule certain sections of the working class, and jokes which ridicule working class radicalism.

## B. Sexual politics

### 1. Family

As with Variety comedy, and early club comedy, jokes about wives and mothers-in-law are an important part of contemporary club comedy. The importance of wife and mother-in-law jokes is such that it is seen as a problem if a comic cannot tell them: 'Stu Francis is 22. And that's a problem for a comedian. For Stu doesn't get laughs when he tells jokes about mothers-in-law and wives. He explains: "People don't think I'm worldly enough to crack jokes about mums-in-law or wives. They think I'm too young."<sup>21</sup> However, whereas jokes about wives and mothers-in-law in Variety comedy and early club comedy were based on the idea of ridiculing deviation from established roles within the family, in contemporary club comedy they are little more than comic abuse. This abuse takes several forms. Firstly, there are jokes which insult the wife or the mother-in-law by calling them ugly. Bernard Manning tells a joke in which the wife figure is referred to as 'an ugly bastard'<sup>22</sup>, and Charlie Williams tells the following joke about a mother-in-law:

Two lads at a party, and one says, 'Hey, look at that ugly old bat over there...the one with the four chins, the big red nose, the orange hair and the warts.' The other lad said, 'That's my mother-in-law.' 'Ooh, I am sorry,' said the first one. 'YOU'RE sorry! How do you think I feel?'<sup>23</sup>

Secondly, there are jokes which involve the mother-in-law or wife being gratuitously insulted. For example, Janice York tells the following joke:

Well there's an old couple from Wigan, who went on their holidays to Spain, and she's bloody deaf. Can you imagine it, out of the 'plane, into t'taxi. The taxi driver said, 'Where d'you wanna go love?' the bloke says, 'Want to go to the Hotel Splendide!' She says, 'What did he say?' 'He were just asking where we're going to, but I just telled him the Hotel Splendide,' she said, 'Oh.' They're driving on, he said, 'What part of the world do you come from?' 'Hey. We come from Wigan.' She said, 'What did he say?' 'He were just asking where we come from, I just telled 'im, Wigan,' she said, 'Oh.' 'Oo', 'e said, 'I'll tell you what, pal,' 'e said, 'when I went to Wigan I 'ad the worst jump [copulation] ever.' She says, 'What did 'e say?' 'Oo, 'e says 'e knows yer!'<sup>34</sup>

Here, the only motive for the insult to the wife's sexuality is that she is 'bloody deaf'. In other cases, the insult is even more gratuitous. For example, Mike Burton tells a joke in which the insult to the wife is surprising, because it appears to be about the husband's fanaticism. The joke begins with a description of an incongruously enthusiastic football fan, a Liverpool supporter who wears his football hat and scarf to bed, and chants his support for his team around the house in a semi-human grunt. However, at the last moment, the joke turns around and insults the wife: 'His missus put his jam bread in front of him one morning, and she said, "D'you know, d'you know, Charlie?" she said, "I think you love Liverpool more than you love me." And he said, "I love Everton more than I love you."<sup>35</sup> The joke here is that Liverpool and Everton are rival teams, so the final line is a particularly strong insult. The build-up paints a picture of the football fan's fanaticism not to eventually ridicule it, but to add weight to the final insult aimed at the wife: bearing in mind his fanaticism, the fact that he loves Everton more than he loves her is even more insulting.

Thirdly, there are jokes in which the death or serious injury of the mother-in-law is greeted with an unexpected reaction. For example, Charlie Williams tells the following joke:

A chap took his mother-in-law on safari in the jungle. They were walking along a track, when a big lion jumped out, grabbed the mother-in-law and ran off with her into the bushes. 'Quick!' she shouted, 'Shoot it! Shoot it!' The chap said, 'I can't. I've run out of film in my camera.'<sup>36</sup>

The basic joke is a simple wordplay based on the phrase 'Shoot it': the mother-in-law uses it to mean 'shoot the lion', but the man takes it to mean 'photograph it'. The point of the joke is that rather than trying to avert his mother-in-law's death as one might expect, the man wants to record it for posterity, presumably because he sees it as a great moment rather than a tragedy.

Finally, there are jokes which take the actual murder of the wife as their subject. For example, Bernard Manning tells the following joke:

Feller talking to 'is mate, 'e said, 'I've 'ad a lot of bad luck,' 'e said, 'with marriage,' 'e said, 'I wouldn't get married again,' 'e said, 'I've been married twice. Full o' bad luck.' 'E said, 'Why?' 'e said, 'Well, first wife died, eating poison mushrooms.' 'What about your second wife?' 'e says, er, 'Fractured skull.' Says, 'Ow was that?' 'e says, 'She..she wouldn't eat her mushrooms.'<sup>27</sup>

This joke is based on leading the audience to believe that the man's wives have died accidentally, but this expectation is overturned by the final line, which reveals that he murdered them. Its appeal relies on antipathy towards the wife, which allows the deeds of a poisoner and a skull bather to be turned into a humorous episode rather than a horrific one.

Whereas jokes about wives and mothers-in-law in Variety comedy and early club comedy were conservative, ridiculing deviation from roles within marriage, in contemporary club comedy they are usually little more than expressions of misogyny. Wives and mothers-in-law are gratuitously insulted, their deaths are greeted with rejoicing rather than mourning, and some jokes even envisaging them being murdered. As well as being misogynistic, such are also stylistically conservative, because they allow the audience to know exactly what to expect: as soon as it is established that the joke is about a wife or a mother-in-law, it is almost certain that it will involve gratuitous insult, a reversal of the expected attitude towards death, or murder.

## 2. Sexuality

As with domestic humour in Variety comedy, contemporary club jokes about sexuality work by ridiculing deviation from the norm. These jokes imply a conception of normal sexual relations being conducted between a man and a woman, with the man being the dominant partner, the woman passive.

### a. Sexual power

The idea that sexual intercourse is something that men do to women is a basic assumption in many club jokes. For example, Frank Carson tells the following joke: 'They've just invented a new pill for catholics, weighs three and a half tons. You put it up against your door, and your husband can't get in.'<sup>28</sup> This joke relies on the idea that the husband is the active sexual partner, because it is he who must be stopped from getting to the wife, and not *vice versa*. The language which Bernard Manning frequently chooses to use to describe the sexual act implies male dominance and female passivity in sex: for example, in a joke about a woman's marital infidelity, her adulterous sexual encounter with a male partner is described in terms of his 'givin' 'er one on the side.'<sup>29</sup> The fact that this is expressed in terms of the man 'giving one' to the woman clearly implies that he is seen as the active partner, and she the passive one. Another assumption based on the idea that the man is the active sexual partner is that sexual satisfaction is seen as something which can only be brought about by a man: in a Bernard Manning joke about marital infidelity, the sexual encounter is pleasurable, because 'e give 'er a good un, there's no problem.'<sup>30</sup> The implication is that sexual intercourse is enjoyable because the man performs well, rather than being the result of mutual effort. The same assumption is present in a joke which Johnny Wager tells about premature ejaculation:

Feller went to the doctors, he said, 'Doctor, I can't satisfy me wife any more.' He said, 'It's all over before we, before we start,' he said, 'Finished.' Doctor says, 'Well, think about something else

when you're having it away,' he said, 'What do you mean?' he said, 'Well, think about a three-course meal.' So that night, he's at it, he's saying, 'I'll have a..I'll have a bowl of soup. Then I'll have a roast beef..and gravy..and carrots, and potaters, and roast potaters, and rhubarb and custard, and a cup of coffee!!!!'<sup>101</sup>

The beginning of the joke explicitly implies that sexual satisfaction is exclusively connected with the male partner: the problem is not that the couple cannot enjoy sex together, it is that the man cannot satisfy his wife. The actual humorous element of the joke is the bisociation of eating a meal and copulating, and it relies on the delivery of the joke for its effect: the menu is spoken slowly and hesitantly at first, it speeds up, and finishes with a desperate burst of speed, thus simulating a premature ejaculation. It may be assumed that man in the joke is being ridiculed for his sexual problem, which is seen as a form of incompetence: he cannot fulfil his role, he cannot satisfy his wife. The joke upholds the idea of male sexual dominance by ridiculing men who are unable to fulfil the dominant role.

The build up to one of Bernard Manning's joke takes the idea of male sexual dominance further, by implying that men are also the dominant partner in procreation: 'This feller was outside a maternity ward, the nurse comes out, she said, "By God, you must be a big lad!" 'e said, "I'm not bad." She said, "Yer wife's just had quads."<sup>102</sup> Here, the fact that a woman has given birth to quads is not attributed to her own fertility, it is attributed to the man being 'a big lad', in other words, having a large penis.

Jokes about large female genitals and small male genitals are also connected with the idea of male sexual dominance. Jokes about incongruously large and cavernous vaginas are common. The following examples are provided by Johnny Wager and Bernard Manning respectively:

She said, 'Put yer 'and in,' I put me 'and in. She said, 'Put yer other 'and in,' I put me other 'and in. She said, 'Now clap.' I said, 'I can't!' she said, 'Tight, aren't I?'<sup>103</sup>

Bus conductor married his bus conductress, and they got married, and on the opening night, well not the opening night, the wedding night...well, it *is* the opening night really, innit? And she's laying there without a stitch on, and she said, er, 'Room for one on top?' And they got bangin' away, 'e said, 'Yer didn't say there was room for five standing inside!'<sup>104</sup>

Such jokes are not exclusively told by male comedians. Janice York tells the following joke:

There's a bloke and a woman in a pub, *having a drink, sat at a table*. And you know the bloke always decides 'e wants to go to the bog, dun't 'e? So there she is, sat on 'er own, and this man's watchin' 'er. Eventually, 'e plucked up the courage, and walked up to 'er, said, 'D'you know, love,' 'e said, 'I've been looking at thee now for the last two minutes,' he said, 'I've decided I'd like to pick thee up, tip thee upside down, rip yer knickers off, and fill yer thingy full of Guinness, and drink it.' She said, 'I beg your pardon?' 'E said, 'I'm tellin' thee. I'd like to pick thee up, tip thee upside down, rip yer knickers off, fill yer thingy full of Guinness, and drink it.' 'Oo,' she said, 'you disgusting person, now go away.' So 'e walked off to the bar. Next minute, 'er 'usband comes back. She said, 'You see that man, at the bar there,' she said, 'He had just come up to me and insulted me.' She said, 'E told me that 'e'd like to pick me up, tip me upside down, rip me knickers off, fill me thingy full of Guinness, and drink it.' He said, 'What man?' she said, 'That man there, at the bar.' 'E says, 'Give over,' 'e said, 'e couldn't drink five pints of Guinness.'<sup>105</sup>

In all of these jokes, the incongruous vastness of the vagina is seen as a negative attribute. The point of the Johnny Wager joke is that in spite of having a huge vagina, the woman boasts of having a tight one. This implies that it is desirable to have a tight vagina rather than a vast one. In the Bernard Manning joke, when the man extends the bisociation of running a bus and copulating to suggest that the woman has an enormous vagina, he is supposed to be annoyed. The woman 'didn't say' she had a large vagina, and this implies that having a large vagina is shameful, something to be hidden. Whilst the third example is told by a woman, its perspective is very male: the fact that the joke talks of the man who makes the lewd suggestion 'plucking up his courage' suggests that he is to be sympathized with, and the voice given to the woman suggests that she is uptight and prudish. This suggests that the husband's comment

implying she has an enormous vagina is an insult rather than a compliment, uttered in revenge for her prudishness. Jokes about large vaginas are connected with male sexual dominance because a large vagina suggests sexual power. This point is supported by the fact that in each of these jokes, the woman is sexually assertive: in the first, she orders the man to place his hands in her vagina; in the second, she initiates the sexual act ('Room for one on top?'); and in the third, she asserts herself by rejecting the man's sexual advances. The power suggested by large female genitalia threatens the idea of male sexual dominance, so it is ridiculed. Because genital size is related to the idea of sexual power, men with small penises must be ridiculed, because their lack of size implies a lack of power. In the following joke told by Johnny Wager, the derisive incredulity which the doctor shows on seeing the penis implies that it is incredibly undesirable for a man to have small genitals:

Feller went to the doctors. Said, 'Doctor, I've come about me cock [penis].' Doctor said, 'Take your trousers down,' 'e said, 'No,' 'e said, 'you'd laugh at me.' 'E said, 'Don't be ridiculous, I'm a medical man, take off your trousers.' So 'e took 'is trousers down, there it was. Fuckin' half inch. Doctor said [laughing:], 'Fuckin' 'ell,' said, 'what's that?' 'E said, 'See, you're laughing at me.' 'E said, 'I'm terribly sorry, I shouldn't have laughed, what's wrong with it?' 'E said, 'It's fuckin' swollen.'<sup>106</sup>

Because women are seen as sexually passive, any assertiveness on their part is ridiculed, and this includes refusal to indulge in sexual activity. Duggie Brown tells the following joke: 'Oo, she was common. Oo, and rough. Oo. All night, four-letter words, all night: "don't", "can't", "won't", "shan't".'<sup>107</sup> This joke relies on the phrase 'four-letter words', a term used to refer to obscene language; here, the four letter words are 'don't', 'can't', 'won't', and 'shan't' (even though 'shan't' actually has five letters), which are taken to be refusals to indulge in sexual activity. The implication is that it is obscene for a woman to refuse to have sex with a man. In one of Colin Crompton's jokes female celibacy is seen to be the result of irrational paranoia:

There were two old ladies lived in Morcambe once, and they'd, they'd never been out with a feller, they were frightened of fellers these two ladies, and they, oo they really locked 'emselves in the 'ouse, they 'ad their groceries pushed through the letter box and everything. And they had a little cat called Minnie, and they wouldn't let the cat go out in case a tom got it, they...they hated all the male sex, animals an' anything, you see, didn't like 'em. And one day, the milkman got his foot inside the door, 'cos the milk bottle wouldn't go through the letter box, and...[laughs] It finishes up, it finishes up his marrying one of these ladies. And the other one's scared to death, she says, 'I'm worried for you-going off with a man like that. You must send me a telegram first thing in the morning, let me know you're all right.' Telegram arrived, it said, 'Let Minnie out.'<sup>102</sup>

Here, antipathy towards men is seen as irrational and ridiculous, based on paranoid fear rather than genuine grievances. When one of the women finally has contact with a man she marries him, and her fears are finally cast away when she has sexual intercourse with him. The implication is that if women feel antipathy towards men, this is the result of sexual frustration. Thus, feminism is implicitly dismissed with a single copulation.

#### b. Homosexuality

Contemporary club comics tell several different types of joke about homosexuality. Firstly, there are jokes which are connected with the male sexual dominance. Homosexual men pose a threat to the conception of normal sexual relations which is upheld by contemporary club comedy: if sexual intercourse always involves one active partner and one passive partner, sex between two men will always involve a man taking the passive role. More importantly, homosexual men who take the dominant role may see any man as a potential passive sexual partner. Fear of this situation has inspired jokes which portray male homosexuals as rapists, with heterosexual men as their victims. Johnny Wager provides an example of this: 'Went in, there's a big sign on the wall, it said: "Beware of homosexuals." Walk on, there's another sign, it said: "Beware of homosexuals." Walk along, there's another sign, nearly on the floor. I bent down, it said: "You have been warned twice!"'<sup>103</sup> The joke relies on the idea that in bending down to look at the sign, he is

laying himself open to anal rape from one of the homosexuals he has been warned about. The fact that the joke shows homosexuals as something which heterosexual men should 'beware' of implies a fear of being seen as a passive sexual object.

Jokes about lesbians also tend to enforce the dominant conception of sexuality, concentrating on the idea that sexual intercourse without a penis is totally incongruous. For example, Bernard Manning tells the following joke: 'Two lesbians in Belfast, fighting over a rubber bullet.'''<sup>o</sup> The idea of the joke is that the lesbians both want the rubber bullet as a penis substitute. The fact that they are fighting over it suggests a crazed sexual desperation. This joke not only ridicules lesbians and reinforces the idea that they are strange and abnormal, it also reinforces a very phallicentric conception of sexuality. One of Johnny Wager's jokes makes sexual intercourse between men seem similarly incongruous: 'This copper caught two [homosexuals] up an alley, and one run off. And the copper said, "If I could've caught your mate," he said, "I'd've rammed this truncheon right up 'is arse." And a voice said, "I'm in the dustbin."'''' This joke shows male homosexuality to be totally perverted, because the point of it is that something which is supposed to be thought of as a punishment, having a truncheon inserted in the anus, is thought of as pleasurable by the homosexual man in the joke.

The ridicule which contemporary club comics direct at homosexuals is not restricted to their sexuality. Homosexual men and women tend to be portrayed almost as if they were alien beings. The build up to one of George Roper's jokes ridicules the way homosexual men talk: 'I went to a dance in Blackpool one night, all fellers. All fellers! Fancy going to a dance, all fellers! I said, "Where's all the... 'Ey!" I said, "Where's all the birds?" He said [exaggerated camp voice:], "This is a man's club." [big laugh]''''<sup>2</sup> The humour of the camp voice is observational, because it does not rely on a joke structure as such; it observes and exaggerates the way some homosexual men speak so as to make it strange and incongruous. It is conservative, because it imposes the perspective of a majority

group, ardent heterosexuals, on the ways of a minority group, homosexual men, in order to reinforce the idea that they are abnormal and incongruous. Other jokes imply that homosexuals are more alien than abnormal. Johnny Wager tells the following: 'Funny about them queers, innit? They can't reproduce, and yet there seems to be more of 'em.''<sup>13</sup> The implication here is that homosexuals are not people with a certain sexuality, but are a separate race, which 'can't reproduce'; the fear of being taken over by this separate race is implied by the statement 'there seems to be more of 'em.' The idea that homosexuals pose a threat to society as a whole is implied more specifically in one of Paul Melba's jokes:

I was coming out of the house last night, and one of those typical B.B.C. men was on the telly, he made an announcement, he said [posh voice]: 'Did you know, that on average in this country, every year, twenty thousand couples are drawn together in happy matrimony...[very camp voice:] and it's just gotta stop, umhmm!''<sup>14</sup>

The point of this joke is that it builds up the expectation that the B.B.C. announcer is pleased about the number of people getting married, and this expectation is overturned by the final line, which suggests that he is actually displeased about it *because he is gay*. The implication of this is that homosexuality and heterosexuality are incompatible, and that homosexuals would like to see the destruction of the institution of marriage. Homosexuals are seen as a threat, trying to impose their way of life on others. The opposition of homosexuality and marriage also means that people who do not conform to the institution of marriage may be branded as homosexuals. Bernard Manning provides an example of this: 'That big fat poof, what's his name? Cyril Smith? Lives on 'is own with 'is mother, [camp:] ummm.''<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Misogyny and sexual conservatism

The approach taken to family matters and sexual issues taken by contemporary club comedy is very different from that taken by Variety comedy. In Variety comedy, jokes about family tended to

enforce roles within the family structure by ridiculing deviation from them; in club comedy, jokes about family are usually little more than expressions of misogynist abuse. In Variety comedy, jokes about sexuality were about setting up a system of covert communication which mentioned matters relating to sexuality, but rarely actually discussed these matters; in club comedy, jokes do actually discuss sexuality, in order to ridicule deviation from a dominant conception of what constitutes a normal sexuality. It is deeply conservative, because it ridicules any threat to the idea of male sexual dominance, whether this threat comes from premature ejaculation, large vaginas, small penises, women who refuse sex, or homosexuals.

### C. Race

#### 1. Stereotyping

Racial stereotypes play an important part in contemporary club comedy. Different races are held to have certain characteristics, and jokes which rely on racial stereotypes will rely on these assumptions being shared by the audience. The characteristics involved in a racial stereotype are usually quite straightforward and easy to identify. The main characteristic attributed to the Irish is that of mental deficiency. This manifests itself in several different ways in jokes. Some Irish jokes involve linguistic misunderstandings; for example, Frank Carson tells the following: 'Maggie Murphy went to the doctor's, she said, "I've forgotten to take my contradictive pills." He says, "You're ignorant," she says, "Yeah, three months."' Here, an Irish woman mistakenly says 'contradictive' instead of 'contraceptive', and the punchline implies that she has interpreted the doctor's 'You're ignorant' for 'You're pregnant'. Other Irish jokes involve very simple misunderstandings of situation; for example, Bernard Manning tells the following pair of jokes:

Irish feller up in court for maintenance, the judge said, 'We've decided to allow your wife seven pound a week.' He said, 'Thanks very much, and I'll try and send her a few shilling meself.'

This Irish feller was up for rape, and they got him in the police line-up, this woman walked in, 'e said, 'That's her.'''<sup>17</sup>

Both of these jokes involve very simple, and similar misunderstandings: in the first, the Irishman thinks that the judge is offering to pay his wife seven pounds a week, rather than ordering him to pay it; and in the second, he thinks that the line up is for him to identify the woman he has raped, rather than for her to identify him, so he is unwittingly confessing to the crime. Other Irish jokes involve more complex logical errors. Bernard Manning tells the following: 'Two Irish fellers talking, one says, "I keep my budgie in a goldfish bowl," 'e says, "Why don't you keep it in a cage?" 'e says, "The water keeps getting through the bars.'''<sup>18</sup> Here, there is a slightly more complicated interplay of logic and illogic than in the last two examples. The Irishman has broken with convention by keeping his budgie in a goldfish bowl, but his logic is impeccable when he says, 'The water keeps getting through the bars', given that he has decided to keep his budgie in water as if it were a fish. He has made the illogical move of keeping a bird in water, but he has followed this move through logically by keeping it in a bowl instead of a cage.

In addition to jokes about linguistic and logical errors made by the Irish, there are also jokes which portray them as being incongruously unsophisticated. This facet of the stereotype usually manifests itself in jokes about diet, and jokes about labour. In jokes, the Irish live on a diet consisting exclusively of potatoes: for example, Frank Carson tells a joke in which a group of cannibals decide not to put an Irishman in their cooking pot, because the last one they cooked had eaten all the potatoes.''<sup>19</sup> Joke Irishmen always work in the construction industry, producing jokes like the following, told by Johnny Wager: 'Hear about the Irish teddy boy? Carried a flickhammer.''<sup>20</sup> 'Flickhammer' is an amalgamation of two

words: 'flick-knife', a weapon associated with the 1950s youth cult of the teddy boy; and 'sledgehammer', a tool used in the construction industry. The teddy boy in the joke is Irish: the 'flick-' which he carries is connected with his being a teddy boy; and the '-hammer' is connected with his being Irish.

The principle characteristic of Jews and Scots in jokes is tightfistedness. Some jokes show Jewish people as being simply mean. Bernard Manning provides an example of this: 'What about the Jewish suicide pilot, crashed his 'plane in his brother's scrapyard?'<sup>121</sup> Here, the Jewish pilot is so concerned with money, that even though he is going to die, he ensures that the scrap metal in his aeroplane will not go to waste. Other jokes are more specific, in that meanness is attributed to a heightened business sense. The following jokes by Bernard Manning and Mike Coyne respectively illustrate this point:

There's a tramp walking down Cheatham Hill Road, the rags is lashing him to death, the Rabbi's on the synagogue steps, he said, er, 'Will you gimme two shilling for a bed Rabbi?' 'Yo, fetch it round, I'll *have a look at it.*'<sup>122</sup>

Y'hear about the Jewish Father Christmas, he came down the chimney, he said, 'Now kiddies, who wants to buy some toys?'<sup>123</sup>

In both of these jokes, the expected response is replaced by one motivated by inappropriate business considerations. In the first, the beggar is asking the Rabbi for two shillings to rent himself a bed for the night, but the Rabbi thinks he is offering to sell a bed for two shillings. In the second, instead of *giving* children presents, the Jewish Father Christmas offers to *sell* them presents.

Jokes about Scots are not particularly common in contemporary club comedy, possibly because of the popularity of jokes about Jewish people, who share the same stereotyped characteristic of meanness. However, there are jokes which contain both of these stereotypically mean races. Colin Crompton tells a joke about an Englishman, a Scotsman, and a Jew going for a meal in an expensive restaurant:

'They 'ad a nine-course meal, and the bill was forty two quid. The Scotsman said, "I'll pay that!" You may 'ave seen the 'eadlines in the paper. Said: "Jewish ventriloquist found dead in alley."<sup>124</sup> Here, the audience is surprised when the Scotsman offers to pay the bill, because it is out of step with his stereotyped characteristic of meanness. The punchline reveals that in fact, the Jew was a ventriloquist, who made it look as if the Scotsman had said 'I'll pay that!' in order to avoid paying himself, and the Scotsman is so outraged at being tricked into paying that he kills the Jew.

Joke Afro-Caribbeans are shown as savage jungle-dwelling folk, whose habits are inappropriate to British society; for example Charlie Williams tells the following joke: 'This coloured lad went into a furniture shop. He said, "Can I give you a goat and two leopard skins for that wardrobe?" I'm afraid not, sir," the salesman said. "No barter allowed. I must insist on cash." "All right, then," said the coloured lad. "Here's six coconuts."<sup>125</sup> Jim Davidson's comical Afro-Caribbean creation, Chalky has two additional features. The first is a propensity for drug taking: 'I went to Barbados er, for me wedding, actually. Chalky was best man out there. He come out there with me. He wanted to find his roots. He did, actually, found 'em, dug 'em up, put 'em in 'is pipe, and smoked 'em.'<sup>126</sup> The second is an incongruously large penis, which is the subject of a veritable cavalcade of jokes:

Did you know that Chalky was best man? He definitely was the best man as well, I saw him in the swimming pool, my God! You've heard the stories, it's true, he was scraping the bottom in the three foot six. I've never seen anything... We was in the sea once, said, 'Chalky, swim a bit quicker.' He said, 'I can't, I'm dragging weed.' I said, 'Well swim on your back,' he said, 'I'll never get under the pier.' He went swimming on 'is back out there in, in Barbados, yeah? A feller leapt on 'im, thought 'e was one of them windsurfboards.'<sup>127</sup>

The joke technique here is strikingly basic, each joke merely stressing the incongruous size of the penis in a new way: it is long enough to reach the bottom of a swimming pool; it collects seaweed from the bottom of the sea; it will not fit under a pier; it is as

tall as the sail on a windsurfboard. The fact that Davidson says 'You've heard the stories' implies that the belief that Afro-Caribbean men have immense genitals is a widely held one.

Humour which relies on racial stereotypes is stylistically conservative, because blunts the unexpectedness of the joke. Jokes involving stereotypes inevitably anticipate the incongruity: as soon as it is established that a joke is about a particular racial stereotype, the audience knows that the incongruity of the joke will be linked to one of the race's stereotyped characteristics. Moreover, the incongruity in jokes about racial stereotypes is almost always seen as an error, rather than as a valid alternative. This is particularly true of Irish jokes which often involve quite inventive uses of language and logic, because these are seen as *errors*. Irish people deviate from the normal use of language and logic in jokes because they are held to be mentally inferior, as one of Stu Francis' jokes implies:

You know what it's like when you arrive at the airport, and y'hear all the announcements: 'The flight bound for Majorca, Spain, will leave at twelve hundred hours.' 'The flight bound for New York will leave at thirteen hundred hours.' 'The flight bound for Dublin in Ireland will leave...when the big finger's on twelve..and the little finger's on six.'<sup>128</sup>

The point of the joke is that the time of the Irish flight is read out in a manner associated with teaching small children how to tell the time. The obvious implication of this is that Irish people only have the intelligence of small children. Irish jokes are stylistically conservative because they suggest that unconventional uses of language and logic stem from mental deficiency.

## 2. Hostility

Jokes involving racial stereotypes have been defended both by academics and by people working in the entertainment industry. Christie Davies, a Professor of Sociology at Reading University, ha

defended Irish jokes, arguing that they are 'distinctly benign' rather than being hostile towards the Irish; moreover, he argues that they are entirely unconnected with the political situation in Northern Ireland, and that any claim that they are connected with it is 'fallacious and indeed near paranoid'.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, Mike Scott, programme controller for Granada Television, argued that jokes involving racial stereotypes are not racist, and indeed are positively beneficial:

Thinking of another series of ours, The Comedians, where there was a more sustained flow of jokes, I can remember English, Irish, Jewish and coloured jokes galore which, far from being attacks on the people concerned, were really in the great tradition of British comedians in that over the years, rather than aggravate racist situations, they defused them.<sup>130</sup>

Such arguments are seriously flawed, because it can be shown that jokes using racial stereotypes encourage and express racial hostility in several ways. Firstly, stereotyping tends to suggest that people from racial minorities are strange and alien. For example, many jokes about Afro-Caribbeans involve a comic imitation of an Afro-Caribbean accent. Perhaps the most famous example of this is the exaggerated and generalized West Indian accent adopted by Jim Davidson for his character Chalky. The humour of imitation is essentially observational, because it does not rely on any obvious joke structure. As we have seen, observational comedy produces laughter not simply because of the accuracy with which something is observed, but because it imposes a perspective which makes the thing seem incongruous. This is demonstrated by the fact that imitations of black people by white club comedians are often extremely inaccurate, ranging from a generalized West Indian accent to secondhand imitations of Hollywood-style cotton picking slave figures. Such imitations succeed in making audiences laugh, not because of their accuracy, but because they impose a perspective on the accent which makes it seem incongruous. Davidson's Chalky voice does not simply say, 'This is how West Indians speak', it says, 'The way W t Indians speak is funny.' Such humour is conservative

because it imposes the perspective of the white majority on the black minority; it is racist, because it makes black people seem incongruous and funny. This is true not only of humour which relies on stereotyped accents, it is also true of any aspect of racial stereotyping. Racial stereotypes tend to dehumanise. By portraying a racial group as being stupid, mean, or having giant-sized genitals, jokes stress the otherness of the group, making it seem incongruous and alien. Moreover, stereotypes are not harmless fictions which are created merely for the purposes of joking. As we have seen, Ronald de Sousa has pointed out that a belief cannot be adopted hypothetically merely to appreciate a joke. When club audiences laugh at an Irish joke, their laughter implies that on one level, they genuinely believe that Irish people are stupid. This point is supported by a comment made by the Irish club comic Frank Carson, after telling an Irish joke:

Well I met one of these aborigine fellers, ya see, an' he was carving all these bits of wood, I said, 'Pardon me ' I said, 'What are those statues you're carving?' He says, 'One's an Englishman, one's a Scotsman, and one's a Welshman,' I said, 'Why didn't you carve an Irishman?' he said, 'I couldn't get a piece of wood thick enough.' Takes guts to tell that one!'<sup>21</sup>

The joke itself is simple, playing on a double meaning of the word 'thick', which is used to refer both to the physical thickness of the wood, and to the stupidity of the Irish. What is striking is that Carson says, 'It takes guts to tell that one' after telling the joke, implying that he is being bravely honest in telling a joke which admits that his own race is 'thick'.

Jokes involving racial stereotypes tend to dehumanize members of racial minority groups by portraying them as incongruous and alien, but there are also jokes in which the dehumanizing is much more direct. For instance, there are jokes which imply that Afro-Caribbeans and Paki stanis are manufactured automatons; the following jokes are provided by Charlie Williams and Frank Carson

respectively:

Have you noticed that coloured people have white palms to their hands and white souls to their feet? It's the way they stack them after they've been sprayed.<sup>132</sup>

And the English are having a lot of trouble over this colour problem. They found a Pakistani head in a suitcase in Birmingham, they say that's how they're smuggling them in. And assembling the parts in Wolverhampton.<sup>133</sup>

Johnny Wager provides a more extreme example of this type of joke, in which one race is dehumanized by being shown as a kind of foodstuff, in order to ridicule the eating habits of another race:

'Plenty of Pakis, aren't there? Mind you, there's not so many of them now, since the Chinese found out they taste like chicken.'<sup>134</sup>

None of these jokes represent literal beliefs: it is highly unlikely that anybody would really believe that black people are actually painted black, that Pakistanis can be stripped down and re-assembled, or that Pakistani people taste like chicken. Instead, these jokes articulate a belief that Afro-Caribbeans and Pakistanis are *less than human*. In addition to this, the second joke strengthens the belief that Pakistanis are desperate to get into Britain, and the third strengthens the belief that Chinese people have bizarre eating habits, and taps into the urban myths of dog meat being served in Chinese takeaways.

A second sense in which jokes involving racial stereotypes are racist is that stereotyping is often used as an expression of hostility. As we have seen, Michael Phillips has pointed out that stereotypes do not exist merely to promote certain ideas about certain races, they promote these beliefs as a way of insulting these races. This point is supported by the fact that club comedians tell jokes involving racial stereotypes alongside jokes which articulate racial antipathy in a much more direct and obvious way. Some of these jokes simply show members of a despised racial group

being tricked or outwitted by white characters. The joke which both Bernard Manning and Jos White tell about tricking the Chinese neighbour who is wallpapering his house into buying too much wallpaper is an example of this. Janice York tells a more savage joke based on the same principle, in which her husband tricks their Pakistani neighbour into allowing him to kick him in the testicles.<sup>135</sup> Such jokes imply antipathy towards the tricked character, otherwise the trick would seem unnecessarily unfair. Similarly, jokes about sexual intercourse between a black person and a white person often imply a basic racial antipathy. For example, Bernard Manning's joke about the 'big lad' whose wife gives birth to quads involves this kind of antipathy:

This feller was outside a maternity ward, the nurse came out, she said, 'By God, you must be a big lad!' 'e said, 'I'm not bad.' She said, 'Yer wife's just had quads.' 'E said, 'I call it me chimney,' she said, 'You better get it swept, they're all bleeding black.'<sup>13</sup>

This joke is based on a bisociation of a chimney and a penis, which is extended by the nurse, who implies that the babies are black because the penis/chimney is dirty. The point of the joke is that the man's self-confidence is built up by the nurse's compliment about his virility, but this compliment is overturned when it turns out that the babies are black, and therefore, that he is not their natural father, so his wife must have been unfaithful to him. The joke relies on antipathy towards black people, because the implication is that it is an even bigger blow to his inflated ego that his wife has been unfaithful with a *black* man. In one of Johnny Wager's jokes, a sexual relationship between a black woman and a white man implies antipathy towards black people more directly: 'Couple got married, said, "I should've told you before we got married, love," he said, "I'm colourblind." She said, "You sure am, baby."<sup>137</sup> The point of the joke is that because the man is colourblind, he has not realized that his wife is black. The clear implication of this is that a white person would only marry a black person by accident.

However, the most direct form of racial antipathy appears in jokes about Pakistanis. The Pakistani is a key figure in club comedy. There are few stereotyped characteristics of the joke Pakistani. Indeed, the word 'Pakistani' seems to be used in a very loose sense, a a generic term for people from the Indian subcontinent, and does not specifically refer to people from Pakistan. The figure of the 'Pakistani' serves as a general focus of race hatred in contemporary club comedy. It is not unusual for jokes about Pakistanis to envisage their death. Some of these jokes merely show a callous attitude towards the death. For example, Janice York tells the following:

Pakistani goes in chemist's, 'e says, 'Oi,' 'e says, 'I've come for me prescription,' so the chemist gives it 'im, 'e walks out of the shop. Next minute, the chemist runs after him. ''Old on! Just 'old on a minute!' 'e said, 'I've give you wrong tablets.' 'E says, 'I've gone and give you cyanide.' 'e says, 'What is the difference?' 'E said, '40p.'<sup>138</sup>

The joke is that the audience is led to believe that the chemist runs after the Pakistani because he is concerned for his life, but this expectation is overturned by the punchline, which reveals that he is merely concerned about losing the extra forty pence which the cyanide costs. The implication is that a Pakistani's life is worth less than forty pence. In other jokes, the death of the Pakistani(s) is deliberate rather than accidental. The following examples are provided by Bernard Manning, Johnny Wager and Janice York respectively:

This Pakistani went for a job, 'e said, uh, to the... to the Labour Exchange, 'e said, 'I wanna be a conductor,' so they nailed him to a chimney in Oldham.<sup>139</sup>

Big queue of cars on the M6, feller comes, says, 'What's wrong 'ere', feller said, 'Pakistani, middle of the motorway. Poured petrol on himself, burned himself. We're having a collection for his relatives.' 'E said, 'How much have you got?' 'e said, 'Ten gallon.'<sup>140</sup>

And the you see, you get unfortunate things that happen that don't need to happen, but they do. Like the two five year old kids, that st fire to a block of flats. They didn't know there was twenty

Pakis inside, did they? [audience chuckle] Oh come on, how could they know? The twenty Pakis had nowhere to go but the roof. And can you imagine it, twenty Pakis panicking? [Pakistani accent:] 'What what what what what what what what!!!' And me at the bottom, watching. [audience chuckle] And there's smoke, flames, fumes everywhere, when out of 'em walks a white man. 'E says, 'Cease, buggers, I've come to save yer. Ee,' 'e says, 'What yer panicking for, there's no need for 'em. Jump off, ovver t'side! Yer chair's legs'll act as parachutes! I'm tellin' you now, you'll land on that floor safe.' They didn't believe 'im. 'E says, 'All right, I'll jump off first. I'll show you how it's done.' So off he leapt. [flying sound] Onto the floor safe, just like 'e telled 'em. The twenty Pakistanis all leapt off at the same time, [falling sound] Splat! This fireman walks up, 'e says, 'D'you know, sometimes, Superman, you're a bastard, you!' [big audience laugh] Splattered bodies everywhere.<sup>141</sup>

In all of these jokes, the actual joke-structure is unremarkable. The first two involve simple wordplay. In the first, the Pakistani wants a job as a *bus* conductor, but instead finds himself being used as a *lightning* conductor. In the second, the audience takes the phrase 'having a collection for his relatives' to mean collecting money for them, but the punchline reveals that they are actually collecting petrol to *burn* his relatives. In the third, the fact that the white man managed to get safely to the ground but the Pakistanis failed to do so is resolved by the punchline, which reveals that he was Superman, who has the power of flight, and he was tricking the Pakistanis into jumping to their death. What is remarkable about these jokes is they use the violent deaths of Pakistanis as a source of humour. The fact that this is found funny by club audiences may not indicate a literal desire to kill Pakistanis, but it certainly seems to indicate racial hatred. Mike Scott's assertion that racial jokes told by club comedians are 'far from being attacks on the people concerned' is highly questionable in the light of such bloodthirsty jokes.

A third sense in which racial jokes told by club comedians are racist is that they often relate to racist or hostile ideologies. Christie Davies argues that Irish jokes are unconnected with the political struggles in Northern Ireland, yet certain comedians tell Irish jokes alongside explicit references to these struggles. For

example, Bernard Manning's act contains references to lesbians fighting over rubber bullets in Belfast, and I.R.A. bombings alongside standard jokes about the supposed mental deficiency of the Irish.<sup>142</sup>

The stereotypes of Afro-Caribbeans which portray them as uncivilized savages, with tribal culture and gigantic genitals are related to the Victorian ideologies of scientific racism and political Darwinism, which involve the belief that different races are at different points on the evolutionary scale, and that black people are further down the scale than whites. Other jokes are related to fears about immigration, and the idea that Britain is being swamped by people from alien cultures. For example, Charlie Williams jokes: 'But it's these Pakistanis you know, they freeten me. 'Ey, i'n't there a lot, i'n't there, eh? They're comin' ovver 'ere, aren't they, on barrows, camels, oil slicks, owt they can get on, aren't they?''<sup>143</sup> Other jokes concentrate on the exodus from other countries, rather than the influx to Britain; for example, Jos White jokes: 'You should emigrate. And the place to go to is Africa- it's empty!''<sup>144</sup> Such jokes involve exaggeration to the point of incongruity. They do not rely on the literal belief that immigrants are arriving on oil slicks, or that Africa is empty, but without the belief that Britain is being swamped with immigrants, they lose their point and their funniness. A joke told by Mike Coyne takes a slightly different angle, concentrating on the idea that the immigrants are alien and un-British: 'I know a feller spent thirty years in darkest Africa, looking for the lost Matazuki tribe. He found them eventually living over a chip shop in Bradford.''<sup>145</sup> This joke suggests a number of meanings. Firstly, it involves a racial stereotype, portraying Africans as uncivilized savages. Secondly, it is held to be incongruous for the Matazuki tribe to be living in Bradford; African culture, connoted by the 'Matazuki tribe', is held to be incongruous in the context of a British town, and with British culture, connoted by the 'chip shop'. Thus, the underlying belief in the joke is that it is incongruous for Africans to be living in Britain at all.

The logic of this joke is extended in others, which show the insidious takeover of British culture by foreigners. An extract from one of Johnny Wager's routines illustrates this: 'They've got their own television programmes now, you know, in Manchester: "Andy Gandhi"; "Watch With Buddha"; "Asianwide"; "Pakanory"; "Curried-asian Street"; "Bankok's Half Hour"; "Opporcoony Knocks"; "Pakpie."' <sup>146</sup> Here, the names of well-known British television programmes are altered so that they include words and names associated with black people, which supports the idea of a black cultural takeover. In a joke told by Mike Coyne, the black takeover has even reached the monarchy: 'Imagine Christmas Day, five years from now. You've just had your Christmas Dinner, and you switch on the radio, and you hear this voice: "Waho dere, dis am your Queen Mother speaking to you."' <sup>147</sup> Here, the Queen Mother's stereotyped accent indicates that she is black. In a serious, non-joking aside, Johnny Wager blames immigration, and the supposed black takeover for Britain's decline: 'The country's knackered, innit, eh? Innit, it's gone, they let 'em all in, eh? It's bloody gone now, this country, innit, eh?' <sup>148</sup>

Such jokes clearly relate to fears that immigration will lead to a loss of the British cultural identity. The attitude taken towards the immigrants is not only one of fear, but one of hatred. This is illustrated by one of Johnny Wager's jokes, which shows black immigrants as parasites, who should be drowned like rats:

Pied Piper of Hamlyn. Come to this town. And the Lord Mayor says, 'We've got problems here with rats,' 'e says, 'Plenty of rats here, 'e said. 'If you can get rid of these rats,' 'e said, 'there's fifty grand for you.' So the Pied Piper pulled it out of this sack, a green rat. And this green rat led all the rats out of the town from the sewers, all up into the canal, drowned the lot. The Lord Mayor said, 'That's great, that, you've earned your money, here's your fifty grand. You've not got a green nigger on you, have you?' <sup>149</sup>

The laughter which greets this joke may not mean that the audience literally believes that black people should be drowned like rats, but it does indicate a belief that they are a parasitic plague.

It seems clear that racial jokes by contemporary club comedians tend to act as expressions of racism: they dehumanize by stereotyping and by showing people from certain racial groups as objects or foodstuffs; they express hostility by showing members of despised racial groups being outwitted, or even killed; and they relate to racist ideologies, like scientific racism and fears of immigration. However, some racial jokes have been defended on the grounds that they are told by black comedians, and therefore that their meanings are different. For example, an article about the black club comic Charlie Williams in The Listener in 1978 argued that:

What, put over by white comics, could be tedious, if not offensive, is incredibly transformed into an occasion of fun. Charlie Williams's greatest pleasure, in fact, seems reserved for promoting the idea that, as told by him, such jokes cease to be 'racist' and become instruments for coming to terms with racial problems. None of the National Front, Black Power, KKK, or, indeed, the Socialist Workers, are notably strong on humour. To them, no doubt, the least humorous aspects of Charlie Williams are that he helps to mock racial bigotry.<sup>150</sup>

There is some evidence to support this view. Firstly, some of the jokes told by comics like Charlie Williams and Jos White satirize racism by overturning stereotypes within the structure of the joke itself. Charlie Williams provides an example of this:

This coloured lad went into a shop and said, 'Have you got a leopard skin?' The woman said, 'Leopard skin? Don't you know any better, you uncivilized savage? Why don't you buy a pair of pants?' 'I could do,' said the coloured lad, 'but it's going to look funny if I repair the seat of my Mercedes with *them*.'<sup>151</sup>

Here, the woman assumes that the black man wants to wear the leopard skin because she believes in the stereotype of the jungle savage, but in fact the man wants the leopard skin for a more conventional purpose, to mend his car seat; thus her prejudice is ridiculed. However, the joke would have the same effect if told by a white comic, because the ridiculing of the woman's prejudice is part of the structure of the actual joke.

Elsewhere, the material *is* affected by the race of the comic. Both Charlie Williams and Jos White tell jokes which apparently involve white racist attitudes:

Oh, it's all right laughing, all right laughing. I've got a coloured feller living next door to *me*, I know what it's like. They're all over the place, aren't they? (Jos White)<sup>152</sup>

I were talking to our saviour, Enoch Powell, you know. 'Ey, no I wa', because you see I'm a Yorkshire lad, you know, and I telled 'im about job, I said, I telled 'im straight, I says, 'Knocker. Come 'ere, cock!' I did, I said, 'There's too many [immigrants].'  
(Charlie Williams) <sup>53</sup>

There are also jokes about a black takeover, told in the first person, rather than the third:

Oh wait 'til we take over. No, it's only a matter of time, we've got the Labour Exchanges already. (Jos White)<sup>154</sup>

I telled 'em, I said, 'I'm your next king.' (Charlie Williams)<sup>155</sup>

It could be argued that this type of joke satirizes rather than fuels racial bigotry, that by mimicking white prejudice, comics like White and Williams are ridiculing it. When Charlie Williams refers to Enoch Powell, a well-known opponent of immigration, as 'our saviour', it appears that he is being ironic, that he is ridiculing him. This is supported by the fact that he gives him a disrespectful nickname, 'Knocker'. Similarly, when Jos White says 'we've got the Labour Exchanges already', this could be interpreted as a joke which debunks the idea of a black takeover, by highlighting the problem of black unemployment.

However, an alternative interpretation of such jokes is that they all rely on the idea of a black comic taking whites as a reference group. When Charlie Williams says, 'I'm a Yorkshire lad, there's not many of us left'<sup>156</sup>, the incongruity which makes the audience laugh is that Williams is a *black* Yorkshireman. The audience finds it laughable that Williams considers himself a Yorkshireman, because t

is seen as ridiculous that a black person should have a sense of belonging in Britain. This implies a belief that black people will always be foreign, never truly British. White and Williams also take whites as a reference group in telling anti-immigrant jokes, and jokes about black people taking over. When Williams refers to Enoch Powell as 'our saviour', this need not necessarily be seen as ironic. It is incongruous for a black man to identify with a white bigot, but the joke may be at the expense of the black man who identifies with Powell, rather than ridiculing Powell himself. When Jos White says: 'This feller living next door to me, mind you, he *is* coloured, he's Chinese. He's yeller. Chinese living next door to me! I'm gonna move!' <sup>157</sup>, the audience laughs because he is expressing antipathy towards the Chinese, yet he is black himself. The fact that a black person should express anti-Chinese sentiment is seen as incongruous, because blacks and Chinese are seen as part of the same group, immigrants. In fact, there is no reason why racial tension should not exist between blacks and Chinese. The fact that such tension, as expressed by White, is seen as incongruous and therefore laughable, implies a white racist viewpoint, which sees all immigrants in one group, in opposition to whites. A similar point can be made about Charlie Williams's joke about being 'freetened' by Pakistani immigrants arriving on barrows, camels, oil slicks, and 'owt they can get on', in which he declares: ''Eey, you shouldn't laugh, I'm fighting like 'ell, me, to keep 'em out, I'm fighting! And you're not bothered, you'll laugh, you think, 'Oh, come in, come in'. I'm fighting for yo', me!' <sup>158</sup> In the audience's eyes, it is incongruous for Williams to bemoan the problem of immigration, because as a black person, he is part of that problem. In all of these cases, the humour stems from the fact that Williams and White are taking whites as a reference group, trying to show that they are on the same side as their white audience by copying white racist humour. The joke is that for the audience it is laughable that black people should try to gain acceptability in this way. In this sense, Charlie Williams is the victim of his own humour: he is trying to make his audience laugh when he says, 'I'm a Yorkshire lad, there's not many of us left', yet his autobiography, Ee, I've Had Some

Laughs, reveals that he is indeed a Yorkshire lad, in that he is born in Royston, and has lived most of his life in Royston and Barnsley.<sup>154</sup> Similarly, it is a joke when he talks about immigration, and refers to Enoch Powell as 'our saviour', but in his autobiography, he does express genuine concern about immigration: 'It sounds daft coming from me, but in some ways you've got to get along with Enoch Powell. I reckon that immigration should be on a measured scale and under proper control.'<sup>155</sup>

When comics like Jos White and Charlie Williams make anti-immigration jokes, there are two possible interpretations of them. Firstly, they can be interpreted as in The Listener, as a series of ironic statements, which serve to satirize bigotry; and secondly they can be interpreted as jokes about black people trying to gain white acceptability by taking on white racist values. In order to assess which of these interpretations is the most valid, the audience which the jokes are aimed at must be taken into consideration. For a black audience, or a white liberal audience, it would seem almost inconceivable that a black comic could make such comments without a sense of irony. However, the kind of audience which comics like White and Williams would be used to playing to would be neither black nor liberal. Working Men's Clubs are predominantly white organizations, and some even operate formal colour bars. This non-liberal attitude to race is highlighted by the fact that jokes which stereotype, dehumanize, enforce anti-immigration anxiety, and even envisage the deaths of non-whites are all popular in club comedy. Indeed, both White and Williams tell jokes which rely on the bluntest brand of racist humour. White's joke about tricking his Chinese next door neighbour into buying too much wallpaper relies on the idea that a Chinese person is a legitimate target for such trickery; part of the audience's laughter comes from seeing a despised party being bettered, and this is not altered simply because the joke teller is not white. Similarly, Charlie Williams tells the joke, which Bernard Manning also tells, about a Pakistani who asks for a job as a conductor so they nail him to the wall.

chimney. This joke relies on a callous attitude towards Pakistanis, which allows such an act of violence to be seen as funny, and the fact that the joke is told by a black comic does not alter this.

## VII. Why is club comedy so reactionary?

Contemporary club comedy is both stylistically and politically reactionary. Modern club comedians tend to be little more than tellers of standard packaged jokes, and tend to use the same jokes over and over again. The humour tends to direct hostility at various groups, which are usually minority groups in terms of social power: wives, mothers-in-law, homosexuals, Irish people, Afro-Caribbeans and Pakistanis are all subject to frequent ridicule, which is often savage. Sexual jokes reinforce dominant ideas about sexuality, and racial jokes reinforce anti-immigration anxiety. There is still some evidence of the kind of subversive attitude towards social class and poverty which characterized Bobby Thompson's act, but this is matched by a ridiculing of certain sections of the working class. There are several aspects of the structure of entertainment in Working Men's Clubs which help to explain this stylistic and political conservatism.

### A. Factors which encourage stylistic conservatism

If Bobby Thompson was in any way representative of an older generation of club comedians, it appears that club comedy has become more conservative both stylistically and politically since his era. The stylistic conservatism may be linked with a professionalization of club entertainments which occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, which according to Eric Thomas was the period in which club comedy changed from the old-generation style to the contemporary style.<sup>151</sup> Writing in the 1950s, Richard Hoggart describes the semi-professional nature of club entertainments as follows:

There seems to be a great shadow-world of semi-professional entertainers, men and women who make a comfortable addition to their normal wages by regularly performing at club concerts, moving from

club to club in the city as they become known, and if they are particularly good, building up a circuit in the industrial towns for thirty miles around.<sup>162</sup>

The 1960s and 1970s saw this semi-professional circuit moving towards becoming fully professional, as John Taylor notes:

The 1960s and early 70s have seen professional entertainment reach unprecedented proportions. It is a growth which has been matched by the creation of club premises designed to project the glamour and glitter of the world of the stage. The old image of the cloth cap, old men and dominoes has been swept away by this sudden boom.<sup>163</sup>

This period of professionalization led to a marked increase in the fees which club entertainers were paid. Articles in Our Clubs have reproduced information from concert secretaries' diaries which suggests that artists were paid up to seven times as much in 1962 as they were in 1956; for example, in 1956, Ronnie Dukes and Ricky Lee were paid five pounds, and in 1962, they were paid thirty five pounds.<sup>164</sup> This kind of increase led to resentment from the clubs. In 1968, the president of the Stocksbridge Victory Club estimated that artists' fees had risen by fifty percent, and complained: 'We've had artists for forty years. I've never known a situation as bad as this. The fees are too high.'<sup>165</sup> Resentment like this led to action, and in the same year, the South Yorkshire branch of the C.I.U. approved a three month ban on hiring artists at nearly two hundred clubs in the region, after several clubs had already imposed such bans.<sup>166</sup> In the economic recession of the early 1980s, entertainments were one of the first areas to be affected by the economic hardship which many clubs suffered. Club officials blamed artists for this, claiming that their fees were excessive and that they were pricing themselves out of the market. Kevin Smythe, education officer of the C.I.U. said, 'More and more clubs are realizing that entertainment isn't bringing in the people- so it's not worth putting on.'<sup>167</sup>

This kind of antipathy from some club committee members places extra pressure on performers to succeed at all costs, in order to justify

a fee which may well be resented. This will tend to discourage experimentation, which always involves the risk of failure. The club comic cannot afford the risk of failure, which may affect his or her future employment. Artistic experimentation is also discouraged by the position which stand-up comedy plays in club entertainments. Working Men's Clubs are primarily social institutions, and in many cases, the entertainment provided is a secondary attraction. An important aspect of club life is the fact that the club provides a place to go and drink, with drinks costing slightly less than they would in a public house. Drinking has always been an important part of club life, since 1867, when the C.I.U. decided that the main reason for the slow growth of the club movement was the ban on beer, and so lifted the ban.<sup>168</sup> The involvement of the breweries in the club scene indicates the continued importance of beer in club life. Another attraction of the clubs is the various forms of gambling which they offer. Gambling in the clubs also has a long history: as early as the 1890s, clubs held raffles to ease financial difficulties.<sup>169</sup> In 1956, the Small Lotteries and Gaming Act allowed clubs to introduce bingo (also known as 'house' or 'tombola'), and lotteries, providing that they should not be used for private gain. Bingo is a major attraction of the clubs, and an examination of a copy of Our Clubs, the Sheffield clubs listings magazine, reveals that thirty six out of forty six of the clubs which advertize in it mention tombola as one of the attractions.<sup>170</sup> A more recent form of gambling in clubs involves videos of horse and dog races, and football matches, the outcome of which is betted on by club members.<sup>171</sup>

With regards performance-based entertainments, stand-up comedy competes with musical acts and strippers. Musical acts are the most important form of entertainments in the clubs. Music has been a part of club entertainments since the earliest days, when supposedly ennobling songs were included in the Penny Readings. When the clubs achieved autonomy, the choice of songs became bawdier, and club entertainments developed into a kind of sub-Music Hall scene. Singers would have been accompanied on the piano, but more recently,

the piano has been replaced by an electric organ and drums. However the financial difficulties of the 1980s have seen organ and drum backing replaced by self-contained musical acts, which perform to backing tapes. Artists can buy backing tapes cheaply from small local firms; for example, a Doncaster firm called Back Trax charges fourteen pounds for a custom made recording, and eight pounds fifty for a track from their back catalogue.<sup>172</sup> There are many types of musical act, including male and female vocalists, duos, and pop groups; according to club agent Mike Tunningley, the self-contained male vocalist (one who uses backing tapes) is by far the most common act on the club circuit.<sup>173</sup> The institution of having a stripper on a Sunday lunchtime is a fairly common part of club activities, arguably testifying to the level of male dominance in Working Men's Clubs.

Stand-up comedy is a minor branch of club entertainment, which, in turn, is only a secondary part of club life as a whole. Most club concerts have a free admission, and where an admission fee is charged, it is usually only about twenty to fifty pence. This suggests that club audiences will not be particularly committed, not necessarily having come to see the act at all. Typical members of a club audience will be at least as interested in drinking and talking to their friends as with what is going on on the stage, so winning their attention can be a difficult task. Stand-up comedy is the most problematic form of entertainment in such a context. With bingo, or any other form of gambling, there is a financial incentive for the audience to pay attention, because an attention lapse can mean that there is a chance of missing out on prize money. As a result, bingo receives the audience's rapt attention, and the concert room falls silent when a game is being played. Musical acts are better adapted for the club environment, because they require less attention. Listening to a song does not involve the same sort of cognitive process which listening to a joke does, and unlike comedy, music can be appreciated as background noise, so it does not matter so much for the singer if the audience talks whilst he or she is performing

In addition to this, musical acts are generally louder than comedians and will therefore be less susceptible to being drowned out by audience chatter.

A comic performing in a Working Men's Club will generally find that the audience will continue to talk for the first five or ten minutes of his or her act. It is probable that some sections of the audience will continue to talk throughout the act. Veteran club comedian Ron Delta has described the difference between performing in a Variety theatre and performing in a club:

You'd got to realize that in the theatre they were sat there, and they've come to see the show, and there was no bingo, and they had fifteen minutes in the interval for a drink. There was no drink on the premises when you were actually working, and you were on the stage, and they were in their seats. You had to be prepared to go on stage in a club, and people walking up and down and calling out 'Two pints!', and you could hear them all over the place, and you learn to live with it.<sup>174</sup>

Variety comic Jimmy Jewel has argued that this lack of audience attentiveness has restricted the artistic possibilities of club comedy:

Now there are the clubs- and you can't do sketches or productions in the clubs. There isn't the room to put a set on stage or to fit up proper lighting; and because the audience is eating and drinking, they haven't the concentration for three- or four-handed dialogue, just straightforward jokes from a stand-up computer gag man.<sup>175</sup>

Packaged jokes are possibly the most suitable form of comedy for an environment in which the audience's attention cannot be guaranteed, as they tend to be based on standard structures. The familiarity of these structures means that the audience will have to pay less attention in order to appreciate the joke. A joke about going to the doctor's, or a joke set in a lunatic asylum will require less mental effort from an audience, because they will know roughly what outcome to expect from the hundreds of other jokes that they have heard about doctors and lunatic asylums. This also helps to explain the

reliance on stereotypes in club comedy. As soon as the audience hears that a joke is about an Irishman, they know that it will involve mental deficiency, or a lack of sophistication; as soon as they hear that a joke is about a Jew or a Scotsman, they know that it will involve meanness; and as soon as they hear that a joke is about an Afro-Caribbean, they know it will involve primitive tribal behaviour, drug taking, or large penises. This type of stereotypical comedy requires much less mental effort than comedy which is genuinely observational. In observational comedy, the audience have to compare what the comedian describes with their experience of the described object, and relate this to their conception of the world. In stereotypical humour, the process is more simple: when, for example, the word 'Irish' appears in a joke, this automatically connotes mental deficiency, and there is no need to resort to memories of actual experiences of Irish people. Humour's complexity is reduced to the dull chugging into place of a mental cog.

The lack of attentiveness in the audience also helps to explain why club comics tend to use a series of unconnected jokes rather than a continuous comic monologue. With a series of unconnected jokes, the comic is starting afresh every few minutes with the beginning of every new joke. If a member of the audience has missed one joke, he or she can listen to the next. This is not true of a continuous monologue, which requires a more sustained kind of attention.

In addition to the lack of audience attention, another factor which encourages stylistic conservatism is the fact that club comics are usually expected to perform for a period lasting from forty minutes to an hour. This demands a lot of material. There are professional comedy writers who can supply comedians with material. However, this does not guarantee originality, because rather than writing for individual comedians, these writers provide standard joke sheets. In addition to this, the jokes printed on the joke sheets are often far from being original: a sheet produced by Stan and Ken Warby entitled '100 Good Strong Club Gags' makes no claim to originality, being

'written and compiled by Stan Warby' [my emphasis]; one of the jokes it contains was originally told by Max Miller.<sup>176</sup> Many comedians do not rely on scriptwriters, instead opting to re-cycle material used by other comedians, as club comic Johnny Wager has admitted. This not only reduces originality, it also encourages the use of packaged jokes, which are easier to steal from somebody else's act than a section of continuous monologue.

Another aspect of the club circuit which tends to encourage artistic stagnation is the fact that once a comic has been booked by a club, he or she will probably not be re-booked there within the following twelve months.<sup>177</sup> This means that comedians can afford to stick with their old material. Club agent Mike Tunningley claims, 'If you see one comedian one week, and you saw him six months later, you'd see exactly the same comic say exactly the same gags'; and Mansfield club comic Wee Georgie Wheezer admits that his act has been fixed for years.<sup>178</sup> The fact that club comics do not need to produce new material means that the chances of artistic innovation are seriously reduced.

#### B. Factors which encourage political conservatism.

As we have seen, the history of Working Men's Clubs has involved various shifts of power: when the movement first began, it was dominated by the middle and upper classes; clubs then attained autonomy, the power shifting from the wealthy patrons to the actual club members, and clubs became involved with political radicalism; then, as the membership of the clubs increased, emphasis was shifted onto the social aspects of club life, and this led to a gradual shift of power into the hands of the breweries. Such a history has created a politically mixed institution. On the one hand, Working Men's Clubs still support Labour Movement-related causes. The C.I.U. has raised money for charities involved with alleviating poverty in the coalfields, and Working Men's Clubs helped to raise money to support striking miners in the coal dispute of 1984-85.<sup>179</sup> On the other hand, prejudices like sexism and racism are ingrained, if not

institutionalized in Working Men's Clubs. Whilst women make up about one third of the total membership of the C.I.U., they are still not allowed full membership. In 1990, the C.I.U. conference overwhelmingly rejected the idea of full membership for women, for the fourth time in fifteen years.<sup>180</sup> There are also examples of institutionalized racism in clubs. In the 1970s, there were two cases in which clubs were operating a colour bar, and the C.I.U. sided with the clubs, arguing that it was interested in upholding the clubs' right to privacy. There are still cases of clubs which have been found to be operating formal colour bars; for example, in 1988, the Handsworth Horticultural and Allotments Association in Birmingham was accused of operating a colour bar, and was investigated by the Commission for Racial Equality.<sup>181</sup> Given that sexism and racism are, to an extent, institutionalized within the structure of Working Men's Clubs, it is perhaps unsurprising that club comedy contains such a large element of antipathy towards women and members of racial minority groups. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that some club comedians tell racist and sexist jokes to satisfy the demands of the audience. One club comedian, Frankie Allen claims that he does not like the racist material which he uses, but that he is responding to a demand in the audience: 'If you go to Yorkshire, and you're on stage, and you don't do any, kind of, Pakistani jokes, the audience aren't interested in you.'<sup>182</sup>

Another factor which helps to explain the hostility which club comedy directs at minority groups is the difficulties which club audiences pose to comedians. As we have seen, club audiences will often talk through a comedian's act, and club audiences can also be very hostile. This helps to explain why club comedy is so reliant on hostile jokes. A performer faced with a hostile audience may choose to deflect that hostility by directing it onto a third party, like the wife, the mother-in-law, or the Pakistanis. This explanation is supported by the fact that club comics do not restrict the hostility to their packaged jokes, they also direct hostility at people who are actually in the club concert room. There are many examples of this. A standard technique which club comics employ is to ask if

here are any people in the club who belong to certain minorities. This question is then followed by a comment or packaged joke which relates to the stereotypes connected with that minority. For example, Janice York asks, 'Have we any Scottish people in?', and when somebody shouts 'yes', she replies, 'Have we? Bloody hell, who paid for you then?', thus referring to the stereotype of meanness connected with Scots; later in her act, she asks, 'Any Pakis in?', which gets a laugh by itself, and then acts as a cue for a series of Pakistani jokes.<sup>183</sup> Similarly, Bernard Manning asks:

Any coloured fellers in tonight, 'cos I don't get many in 'ere, you know. Any coloured fellers in? [stereotyped black accent:] Hallo dere...[normal voice:]...are you there? Have we got any in? [no response] Right, there's two coloured fellers sat in the middle of the jungle... [audience laughter].<sup>184</sup>

Here, the joke is that Manning only starts telling the anti-black joke after he has ascertained that there are no black people in the audience, thus implying that he is sneakily talking about them behind their backs. It succeeds in deflecting hostility even though there are no black people in the audience, because it creates the feeling that comedian and audience are joining together to talk about another group behind its back. In addition to comments which direct hostility at members of racial or regional minority groups within the audience, the women in the audience are also targeted. For example, Bernard Manning directs sexually aggressive comments at female audience members, commenting 'I wouldn't mind giving 'er one', and 'Every time you laugh, all your tits go up and down like that.'<sup>185</sup> This technique suggests that the hostility which characterizes the majority of contemporary club comedy is partly an attempt by comedians to deflect hostility away from themselves and onto somebody else, because it chooses targets for the deflected hostility within the actual situation of the club concert room. In some cases, the hostility is not even directed at the standard minority group targets, but at individuals within the club. For example, at a performance at the Firth Park Working Men's Club in Sheffield, Janice York performed a ritual humiliation of one of the

club's committee men, getting him up on the stage, and ridiculing him for several minutes, because he had told her that the audience were 'miserable buggers'.<sup>186</sup> This is a very obvious example of a comic winning the support of the audience by turning their hostility onto a third party. The idea that club comics use vicious jokes to deflect potential audience hostility away from themselves helps to explain the apparent lack of vicious jokes in Ken Goodwin's act. Goodwin takes an alternative approach to potential audience hostility, building up a friendly rapport with the audience, by disarming them with his feigned idiocy, rather than deflecting hostility by pouring scorn on accepted scapegoats.

#### **VIII. A reactionary comedy in difficult circumstances**

Stand-up comedy in Working Men's Clubs became important in around 1960, when *Variety* was issuing its final death rattle. It seems that it was at around this time that club comedy was undergoing major stylistic changes. On the strength of Bobby Thompson's act, it seems that the older generation of club comics were much less reliant on standard packaged jokes, and jokes involving scapegoats than the generation which followed them. Contemporary club comedy is predictable, artistically stagnant, and relies heavily on misogyny and race-hate. The reasons for this partly lie in the structure of Working Men's Clubs. The professionalization of club entertainments which occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, led to considerable increases in artists' fees, and more entertainers going professional. However, this led to more pressure being placed on comedians to please audiences, as their higher fees were resented by many clubs. Given this tension between performers and club committees, if a comic does anything less than please the audience, he or she is unlikely to be rebooked. Such pressures discourage comic innovation, which inevitably means a risk of failure. The pressures on comics are heightened by the fact that because Working Men's Clubs are not exclusively performance venues, the audience's attentiveness is limited. This encourages the use of standard jokes and simple stereotypes. The apathy and potential hostility of the audience also

tends to encourage jokes which direct hostility onto scapegoats. Having said this, there are obviously factors outside of the structure of Working Men's Clubs which contribute to the popularity of sexist and racist humour; for example, the wave of racial jokes told by the comics who achieved fame through The Comedians coincided with popular opposition to immigration in the 1970s, brought to the fore by Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968.<sup>187</sup> However, it is also clear that there are factors within the structure of Working Men's Clubs which have encouraged stylistic conservatism and reactionary politics, particularly since the professionalization of the club circuit in the 1960s and 1970s.

## **Chapter Five: Alternative Comedy**

### **I. The 'Alternative' label**

### **II. A brief history of Alternative Comedy**

### **III. Precedents and influences**

### **IV. Rejecting the old conventions**

- A. Satirizing what had gone before
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- A. Topical material
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- B. Playing to the audience

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- A. Stylistic stagnation
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- A. Professionalization
- B. Cabaret promoters and commercial interests
- C. Professional Alternative comedians
- D. The influence of television
- E. Broader audiences

### **IX. Economics determines style**

## I. The 'Alternative' label

A new tradition of stand-up comedy began in 1979 with the birth of 'Alternative Comedy'. The 'Alternative' label is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, it is not the only term which has been used to describe the tradition, which has also been referred to as 'new comedy' or 'new wave comedy'. Secondly, and more importantly, the term has always been disliked by many of the comedians who have been labelled 'Alternative'.<sup>1</sup> In spite of this, 'Alternative Comedy' seems to be the most widely-used phrase to describe this particular tradition of British comedy, so this is the term that will be used here. If we are to decide on this particular term, it must now be defined. Alternative Comedy has often been defined in terms of style. It has been argued that its definitive features are a rejection of previous traditions of comedy, or sometimes more specifically, a rejection of the sexism and racism of these traditions.<sup>2</sup> However, any attempt to define this tradition of comedy in terms of style is doomed to failure, because over the eleven years of its existence it has been connected with vastly differing styles; even the non-sexist/ non-racist definition has become questionable now that performers have emerged whose material arguably oversteps both of these marks. Instead, Alternative Comedy must be defined in terms of its being a particular circuit, a particular branch of the entertainment industry. In spite of those who have argued that the term has become irrelevant now that performers from the Alternative circuit have moved into the mainstream<sup>3</sup>, the fact remains that there is a particular set of comedy clubs which is still separate from other branches of showbusiness. The Alternative Comedy circuit comprises a particular set of clubs, mainly in London. There is little interchange between the performers who work on this circuit and performers from other branches of showbusiness, for example, Working Men's Clubs. Whilst this circuit remains separate, the definition still has some value. A strict definition of Alternative Comedy would only include performers who still work on this circuit, but here, the term will

be used more broadly, to refer to comedy produced by performers who began their careers on this circuit.

## II. A brief history of Alternative Comedy

Alternative Comedy grew out of the political wing of the Alternative Theatre scene of the 1960s and 1970s. When Alternative Theatre groups like C.A.S.T. and 7:84 began to perform in non-theatre venues like Labour clubs, folk clubs and large pubs, they had to adapt their style to the fact that the audiences in such venues were not so obligingly attentive as conventional theatre audiences. This often meant building shows around the structure of a variety show<sup>4</sup>, which would include addressing audiences directly, in a style of performing akin to stand-up comedy. Indeed, one of C.A.S.T.'s shows, Confessions of a Socialist, originally performed in 1978, is effectively a piece of stand-up comedy with inserted sketches.<sup>5</sup> All of the original set of Alternative comedians had some experience of working in Alternative Theatre. Tony Allen had been involved in West London Theatre Workshop, Pirate Jenny, Mayday, and Rough Theatre; Alexei Sayle had toured with a group called Threepenny Theatre, which originally performed Brechtian cabaret, and later switched to anarchic sketch comedy; Keith Allen had worked for a Bristol-based surrealist theatre group called Crystal Theatre of the Saint. In addition to this, some of the key figures in early Alternative Comedy had had direct experience of the variety-based style of political theatre developed for performing in non-theatre venues: Jim Barclay and Pauline Melville had worked with 7:84, and Andy de la Tour had compered a rock-theatre show for Belt and Braces.<sup>6</sup> These key figures were dissatisfied with the Alternative Theatre scene for various reasons. Firstly, many Alternative Theatre companies were in a difficult financial position, due to a lack of government funding.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, there was an opposition to the very principal of political theatre receiving public subsidy. Catherine Itzin has noted that 'some people on the Left were arguing that the subsidy boom of the seventies was damaging to political theatre, turning commitment and activism ("nothing to lose") into a job of

work with hierarchies and expectations not unlike those of the commercial production system.'<sup>8</sup> This argument was supported by the key figures of early Alternative Comedy. Tony Allen argued:

I believe the audience should pay and therefore you should go some way to pleasing them: with Arts Council money, you don't have to think about that, and you needn't worry if what you're doing isn't sellable. The economics should decide your performances- your style then gets based on reality, not on how much money you've got to spend.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to serious arguments like this, several of the early Alternative Comedians made jokes at the expense of the major political theatre companies which they considered to be over-funded.<sup>10</sup> Thirdly, there was dissatisfaction with the artistic approach of the political theatre groups. Jim Barclay found the work he had done with 7:84 patronizing, in particular a play called The Trembling Giant:

It was a very send-uppable play, full of mid-seventies political zeal, but not completely thought through. It had all the faults of political theatre of the period, and I thought, 'I can't go on doing this- there must be a more honest, less patronizing way of talking to people and getting ideas across.'<sup>11</sup>

Tony Allen found working in political Alternative Theatre frustrating because of the artistic restrictions which it presented: 'It was writing by committee on a decided topic, writing to order- like being told, write something involving two black women, an unmarried mother and saving the whale. I can only write about the way I feel and live, not about car workers.'<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the dissatisfaction with Alternative Theatre, there was also a positive interest in the form of stand-up comedy: Alexei Sayle's anarchic comedy show which he worked on with Threepenny Theatre contained the embryo of his early stand-up work; Pauline M lville had developed her stand-up character Edie whilst working with th feminist cabaret group the Sadista Sisters; Keith Allen had played a bad Music Hall comedian in a show called Radio Beelzebub by

Crystal Theatre of the Saint; Jim Barclay had played a stand-up comedian in a cabaret show about sexism by Mayday; Andy de la Tour had begun to experiment with stand-up whilst compering for Belt and Braces; and Tony Allen performed a forty minute stand-up set at the Oval Theatre in Kennington in May 1979.<sup>13</sup>

The dissatisfaction with Alternative Theatre combined with the interest in stand-up comedy meant that there was a desire for a new form of entertainment. Two events provided a focus for this desire and led to the birth of Alternative Comedy. Firstly, in May 1979, Peter Rosengard opened the Comedy Store. This was important because it brought together those people who were starting to experiment with stand-up comedy, and because it provided a venue for the new form of comedy. However, the importance of the Comedy Store should not be overstressed. There has been a tendency to see its opening as the birth of Alternative Comedy.<sup>14</sup> In addition to this, Peter Rosengard has tried to portray himself as the mastermind of the whole Alternative Comedy movement. In Roger Wilmut's history of Alternative Comedy, Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, Rosengard is given a whole chapter to record his memories of the early days of the Comedy Store, and claims that his intention was to start a whole new form of comedy, an alternative to 'the northern club comics and their mother-in-law jokes on T.V.' He describes himself as 'a self-proclaimed promoter of non-sexist comedy', and claims that he imposed a ban on sexist and racist humour.<sup>15</sup> These claims have been contested by those involved with the early days of Alternative Comedy. Firstly, whilst Rosengard may have been interested in starting a new kind of humour, there is evidence to suggest that he was aiming to initiate something more akin to American comedy than the anarchic political comedy which developed in Britain. This is certainly what Tony Allen has claimed, and Rosengard himself has admitted that he was inspired to open the Comedy Store after visiting the Comedy Store in Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, the idea of the ban on sexist and racist material seems to be pure fiction. Several people have recalled that there were many comics who performed at the Comedy Store who did use sexist and racist

material'<sup>17</sup>, and Lee Cornes argues that when a ban was imposed it did not come from Rosengard:

Rosengard couldn't care less what went on from the beginning. The ethos came from the Alternative Cabaret lot- Tony Allen, Jim Barclay and Andy de la Tour. My stuff was outrageously racist and sexist at the time but no-one mentioned it. They didn't feel they had a right- and with the gong everyone only lasted five minutes anyway. It was only later on that such things got mentioned.<sup>18</sup>

Thirdly, the Comedy Store was not initially set up as a venue for Alternative Comedy, and various different styles of comedian performed there. There were very amateurish acts, and club comics performing alongside the renegades from the Alternative Theatre scene who were interested in a new approach to comedy, as Tony Allen has recalled:

The Comedy Store was full of downmarket showbiz acts...Les Dawson, Lennie Bennett and those people came down to the Comedy Store to perform...there was bills on the Comedy Store that go Alexei comping, me, Keith Allen, Jim Barclay, Andy de la Tour, Les Dawson, Lennie Bennett, and about ten others who didn't know what they were doing. I mean they weren't sure whether they wanted to be sort of Cambridge Footlights, or stand-up comedians.<sup>19</sup>

These different styles of comedian performed on the same bills, in an anarchic melee held together by compere Alexei Sayle, in which part of the point of the evening was to heckle the acts off the stage. It was only after a few months of what Tony Allen has described as a 'civil war'<sup>20</sup> between the different types of acts that the Alternative comedians were victorious, and the old-style comics stopped performing there.

The second focus for the early Alternative comedians was the founding of Alternative Cabaret. At around the same time as the Comedy Store opened, Tony Allen was trying to form a loose organization bringing together the early Alternative comedians to tour around the pubs of London. Originally, the principal members of Alternative Cabaret were Tony Allen, Alexei Sayle, Andy de la Tour,

Pauline Melville, Jim Barclay, a comedy/folk duo called Gasmask and Hopkins, and the Combo Passe band, though other performers, notably Keith Allen, also performed with them.<sup>21</sup> Later, when many of the original members of the group had moved on, it continued with newer performers like Sharon Landau and Roy Hutchins.<sup>22</sup> The venue in which the group initially performed was the Elgin pub in Ladbroke Grove, which Tony Allen has described as 'the first Alternative Comedy venue.'<sup>23</sup> They then toured around a circuit of their own making, performing in pubs, arts centres and colleges mainly in London. By December 1979 they were doing an average of four shows a week, and 'just about making a living.'<sup>24</sup> Within eighteen months of its inception, the group was invited to perform to an audience of 900 people at the Leeds City Varieties.<sup>25</sup> The foundation of Alternative Cabaret was arguably a more important factor in the emergence of Alternative Comedy than the opening of the Comedy Store, because the self-made circuit which they played was the embryo of the current London circuit, and it established the idea of pubs running comedy nights.

The expansion of this circuit was encouraged by the fact that Alternative Comedy soon began to move into the mainstream. The beginnings of this move can be seen in the opening of the Comic Strip in October 1980. The Comic Strip was housed in the same building as the Raymond Revue Bar, and was the joint enterprise of Peter Richardson and Michael White, a producer who had previous associations with professional versions of Footlights revues. The regular performers were Alexei Sayle, Twentieth Century Coyote, The Outer Limits, French and Saunders and Arnold Brown. One of the reasons that The Comic Strip could be considered to be the beginnings of a move into the mainstream is that whereas the Comedy Store put on a different show every week, the Comic Strip used a fixed format, using the same acts in every show. Nigel Planer, half of The Outer Limits has described the formalized nature of the entertainment:

Suddenly the whole thing moved up a gear, and it became a show- which we didn't realize at the time. It was an exciting show, well structured...but we all childishly thought we were in an experimental club, and it took me ages to realize that that was not what we were doing. We were saying, 'Why can't we be like the Comedy Store and write new material every week?' but it became not like that because you've got audiences coming three or four times and saying, 'What happened to the Vanessa routine?' It became silly to do new material which was inferior- it was better just to run the material which was good, and tailor it. Alexei quickly realized this was happening and refused to change his material.<sup>26</sup>

The move into the mainstream began in earnest once television producers became interested in Alternative Comedy. Initially, there was a hostility to the idea of working on television amongst Alternative comics. Lisa Appignanesi noted their 'suspicion of a form which inevitably neutralizes their material by taking it out of their control and re-presenting it as a commodity for mass consumption', and Tony Allen even defined Alternative Comedy as 'the kind of comedy you'll never see on T.V.'<sup>27</sup> The move onto television was pioneered by a producer called Paul Jackson, who produced two editions of a show called Boom Boom, Out Go the Lights, a cheaply produced vehicle for early Alternative comics, like Alexei Sayle, Keith Allen, Tony Allen, Rik Mayall, Nigel Planer, Andy de la Tour and Pauline Melville.<sup>28</sup> However, it was a programme called The Young Ones which really brought Alternative Comedy to a wider television audience. The Young Ones was a situation comedy, also produced by Paul Jackson, which starred Rik Mayall and Ade Edmondson from Twentieth Century Coyote, Nigel Planer from The Outer Limits, and Alexei Sayle. It also featured many of the other early Alternative comics in smaller guest appearances. The success of The Young Ones led to many other television shows featuring Alternative Comedy including cabaret-format shows like Interference (Channel 4, 1983), Saturday Live/ Friday Night Live (Channel 4, 1986-89), Cabaret at the Jongleurs (B.B.C.2, 1988), and Paramount City (B.B.C.1, 1990); sketch shows like Alexei Sayle's Stuff (B.B.C.2, 1988-89) and French and Saunders (B.B.C.2, 1987-90); situation comedies like Happy Families (B.B.C.1, 1985), Girls on Top (Central Television, 1985-6), and Filthy Rich and Catflap (B.B.C.2, 1987); and television

films like The Comic Strip Presents... (Channel 4, 1982-88; B.B.C.2 1990). It seems likely that as Alternative Comedy gained the ability to communicate with a television audience, so the number of people going to live Alternative Comedy shows increased. Certainly, the London circuit has continued to expand, with an increasing number of clubs allowing an increasing number of performers play to increasingly large audiences. Venues and comedians come and go, but the overall level of activity has steadily increased. The average London venue is run in a pub function room, and in 1990, the admission price ranges from £2.00 to £7.00.<sup>29</sup> The late 1980s has also seen Alternative Comedy moving outwards from London, with venues being set up in other cities, notably Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow.<sup>30</sup>

### III. Precedents and influences

Whilst style-based definitions of Alternative Comedy as a rejection of what had gone before have become redundant, it should be pointed out that when the tradition first began it did represent a total rejection of the values of stand-up comedy in both Variety and Working Men's Clubs. However, this rejection was not entirely unprecedented, and there are examples of stand-up comedians who did not fit into the Variety comic or club comic mould who may have influenced the earliest Alternative Comics. Perhaps the remotest influence was that of the conferenciers of pre-war Berlin Kabarett, whose satirical jokes and disdain for audiences often led to clashes with the nazi authorities.<sup>31</sup> A much more direct and widely-acknowledged influence was that of the American comedians of the 1950s and 1960s who became known as the 'sickniks'. The sickniks emerged out of the beat movement, often performing in jazz clubs like San Francisco's hungry i. Their biting political and social satire, and their willingness to delve into the shocking and the obscene foreshadowed Alternative Comedy. Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Shelley Berman, Dick Gregory, and Mort Sahl were all identified with the sicknik movement, but the most important of them was Lenny Bruce, because many Alternative comedians cite him as an influence,

and some even joke about him in their acts.<sup>32</sup> The British folk comedians of the 1970s may also have influenced the early Alternative comics. Comics like Billy Connolly, Jasper Carrott, and Mike Harding emerged from the folk circuit, and their style was very different from that of Variety comics or club comics. They used a continuous monologue and relied more on comic observation than standard packaged jokes, and they lacked much of the conservatism of comics from the Variety circuit or the Working Men's Clubs. Whilst their material was not entirely free of sexism or racism, they shunned much of the sexual and racial hostility of club comedy. Their influence on Alternative Comedy has not been particularly widely acknowledged, but several Alternative comics have cited Connolly as an influence.<sup>33</sup> Another possible influence was Dave Allen, an Irish comic whose style was highly innovative in spite of having started his career as a Butlins redcoat and working his way up through the pub and club circuit. His rejection of standard packaged jokes, the observational basis of his humour, and his willingness to break religious taboos have led Carol Sarler, an observer of the London Alternative Comedy circuit, to argue that he was 'an "Alternative Comedian" some two decades before the phrase was coined.'<sup>34</sup>

Another possible influence was that of a group of comic performers known as the 'Oxbridge Mafia'. There are certainly broad similarities between Alternative Comedy and the work of the Oxbridge Mafia, particularly the social and political satire exhibited in shows like Beyond the Fringe and television programmes like That Was the Week That Was, and the surreal iconoclastic humour of programmes like Monty Python's Flying Circus. However, the early Alternative comics rejected these similarities, and saw themselves in opposition to that tradition of humour. Indeed, there were important differences between the two traditions. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, the Oxbridge performers were not stand-up comedians, working mainly in comic sketches. Secondly, whereas most of the Oxbridge Mafia came from privileged backgrounds, often having attended public schools, and beginning their careers in

undergraduate revues at Oxford or Cambridge University, the early Alternative comedians tended to be from working class backgrounds and most of them had not attended any university.<sup>35</sup> This was an important part of their identity, to the extent that some university-educated Alternative comics denied having been to university.<sup>36</sup> Thirdly, the satire of the Oxbridge Mafia often lacked a hard cutting edge: Willie Rushton lampooned the Prime Minister Harold Macmillan on That Was the Week That Was, but still voted for him; and when a stage version of that show toured America, the cast cut sketches about George Wallace when performing in the Southern United States, so as to avoid the risk of alienating the audience.<sup>37</sup> However, in spite of these important differences, several early Alternative comedians have acknowledged the influence of the Oxbridge set.<sup>38</sup>

#### IV. Rejecting the old conventions

When Alternative Comedy first began, it was an amateur form of entertainment. For the initial period of its life, the Comedy Store did not pay the acts, and even Alexei Sayle was only paid five pounds per night for his role as compere.<sup>39</sup> Because of the anarchic nature of the entertainment in most of the early venues, and because the comedians were not necessarily obliged to please the audience (because they were not getting paid for their work), there was a large amount of experimentation with the possibilities of stand-up comedy. Jim Barclay has described the pioneering spirit of the early Alternative Comedy scene:

The great thing about it was a lot of the performers were discovering stuff for themselves, everybody just watched everybody else's act, and it was just exciting to see how people developed and what they did week in, week out, because you played it [the Comedy Store] every week. There was only one other venue, that was the Elgin, so that's where you did, you worked at the Comedy Store and the Elgin, you worked them every week, and you had a new act every week.<sup>40</sup>

As the circuit of venues expanded, so the entertainment became more formalized, and Alternative Comedy began to be professionalized. However, even whilst this was happening, Alternative Comedy still retained its experimental edge. Jenny Lecoat has recalled the anarchic nature of the entertainment when she first became involved in the scene:

The first time I ever went to the Comedy Store to perform was in October 1982, that was the old Store, and there was David Rappaport who, of course, went on to do Time Bandits and become a big star in America, and Andrew Bailey who worked on the circuit for years, and they were rehearsing this act half an hour before the show opened, they were actually going to do that night, with David Rappaport who was, you know, a little guy, in a bird cage, and Andrew was his master, and he was talking to him in the bird cage, and I just walked in and thought, 'Fucking hell, this is a mental hospital.'<sup>41</sup>

Even in the highly professionalized and formalized Alternative Comedy scene of the late 1980s, there have been comedians who have continued to experiment, and explore the possibilities which stand-up comedy offers. In a sense, this experimentation has been a return to the basic subversive roots of comedy itself, in that much of it has entailed an attack on the rigid conventions which restricted Variety comics and club comedians, and a refusal to be bound by these conventions.

#### A. Satirizing what had gone before

Old-style stand-up comedians who had worked in Variety or in the clubs have been a standard target for Alternative comedians, and this began in the earliest days of Alternative Comedy. Keith Allen claimed to be driven by 'an intense hatred of Max Bygraves', and Alexei Sayle ridiculed old-style comics like Bruce Forsyth, Charlie Drake and Bob Monkhouse by sarcastically referring to them as 'great, great comedians.'<sup>42</sup> Sayle also spewed comic abuse on the whole Music Hall tradition:

A r y, people are always going on about, umm, about the British Music Hall and, umm how and why it died out. I'll tell you why it

died out, 'cos it was *shite!!!* Have you ever seen a bigger load of old shite than the Royal Command Variety Performance, you know all them fucking old acts going, 'Ey up, mind thee marrows!' <sup>43</sup>

As well as this kind of generalized comic abuse, there was also a tendency to satirize the stale conventions of old-style stand-up comedy. As we have seen, much of the artistic conservatism of Variety and club comedy was related to the fact that the unexpectedness of the humour was blunted in various ways. Variety comedians attempted to establish a familiar relationship with the audience, and one of the tools which they used for this purpose was the catch-phrase. The idea of the catch-phrase has been satirized by many Alternative comedians, but perhaps the first to do this was Alexei Sayle. Catch-phrases have been used to establish a friendly, familiar and cosy relationship between performer and audience, but Sayle reversed this idea by claiming that a stream of abuse was his catch-phrase: 'Ere, it's a good catch-phrase that, innit eh, "Shit piss wank fuck cunt", eh, innit? Beats me last one which was, "Don't tell Mr. Mugabe!" Don't know what the fuck *that* one was about, I tell you.' <sup>44</sup> He also used the catch-phrase to make a comic comment on the Right Wing politics of old-style comics: 'You've got to have a catch-phrase as well, you know, like umm, "Nick nick", or "Shut that door", or "Sieg Heil".' <sup>45</sup>

The familiarity of Variety and club comedy was also connected with the predictability of the material, with the same jokes and the same subjects being used again and again, and a heavy reliance on well-established comic stereotypes. In the early period of Alternative Comedy the reliance on established joke formulae was rejected and the emphasis was on originality. Whereas previous generations of stand-up comics tended to rely on joke books, recycled old jokes, or standard packs of jokes written by scriptwriters, Alternative comedians write their own material. In addition to this, the predictable stereotypes which are widely used in club comedy have been satirized by Alternative comics. Tony Allen used to begin h

act by combining as many of them as possible into an incongruously onvoluted joke:

This Pakistani took my mother-in-law to an Irish restaurant and says to the West Indian waiter, 'There's a homosexual in my soup,' and the waiter says, 'What do you expect for 40p...a Jewish squatter?' N w we've got that out of the way, we can get on with it.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, Alexei Sayle made a comic attack on the club comedy convention of asking if there are any members of a certain social group in the audience, and then ridiculing that social group: 'There's obviously no Albanians in tonight. Good! This fucking Albanian goes for a job on a building site...'<sup>47</sup> The incongruity of the joke is connected with taking Albanians as the target of the joke which Sayle pretends to begin to tell. Albanians are not a standard target for racially abusive jokes, and jokes which begin with somebody going for a character going for a job on a building site are usually about mentally defective or unsophisticated Irishmen; it is therefore surprising and incongruous to pretend to begin a racially abusive joke about Albanians. In addition to this, the fact that Sayle has checked there are no Albanians in the audience before pretending to begin the racial joke ridicules the cowardice of this type of racially abusive humour.

In both Variety comedy and club comedy, the humour had been separated from normal discourse, by being clearly labelled as humour. Alternative comedians subverted some of the devices which framed the humour in this way, particularly standard joke structures. For example, Jim Barclay used structures like the one-liner, or the simple two-liner riddle in an entirely new way, using them to make political points, or to impart political information. In the Falklands crisis, he jokingly referred to the sinking of a British warship by placing the information in a one-liner: 'What cost £120,000,000 and lies at the bottom of the South Atlantic?'<sup>48</sup> He also used a two-liner riddle to point out the inaccuracy of nuclear early warning systems: 'What is the difference between a flock of Newfoundland geese and 500 SS-20 missiles homing in on

Manchester and Birmingham? Answer, as far as the Fylingdales Early Warning System is concerned, there isn't any difference, ha!<sup>49</sup>

Whereas Jim Barclay subverted established structures by using them as a tool for political communication, later comedians like Twentieth Century Coyote and The Outer Limits satirized the structures themselves. The Outer Limits subverted the two-liner riddle format:

**Nigel Planer:** Here's my joke- What's yellow and sits at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean?  
**Peter Richardson:** Sand. Great, I love that one.  
**Nigel Planer:** You like it?  
**Peter Richardson:** Lovely joke, yeah, great.  
**Nigel Planer:** I've got another one.  
**Peter Richardson:** Have you?  
**Nigel Planer:** Yeah.  
**Peter Richardson:** Yeah.  
**Nigel Planer:** Shall I tell it?  
**Peter Richardson:** Yeah, make a warm...warm atmosphere.  
**Nigel Planer:** What's yellow and goes into toilets?  
**Peter Richardson:** I don't know.  
**Nigel Planer:** Piss.<sup>50</sup>

In both of the 'jokes' in this extract, the question is structured in such a way as to suggest a riddle. This implies that the answer to the questions will be a joking answer, involving some kind of word play or incongruity. However, the jokes defy this expectation by giving the obvious answer to the questions. The questions lead the audience to expect an incongruous answer, but in fact, a congruous answer is used. The obviousness of the answer is incongruous enough to make the non-jokes funny. This is comedy à u comedy, or metacomedy. Twentieth Century Coyote used a similar metacomedic technique. For example, they subverted the 'knock knock' joke format. 'Knock knock' jokes are based on the following structure:

A: Knock knock.  
B: Who's there.  
A: [christian name]  
B: [christian name] who?

A: [Christian name combined with a surname which makes it sound like a short phrase or sentence]

Twentieth Century Coyote subverted this format by making the knocker take the 'knock knock' as an actual desire to get in through the door, and the person inside taking it as the opening line of a joke:

Ade Edmondson: Joke! Er...knock knock.

Rik Mayall: Who's there?

Ade Edmondson: Open the door.

Rik Mayall: Open the door who?

Ade Edmondson: Open the door please, I want to come in.

Rik Mayall: Open the door please I want to come in who?

Ade Edmondson: [shouting] Look just open the fucking door!!

Rik Mayall: [shouting] Look just open the fucking door who?!!!<sup>51</sup>

In another routine, they satirized the whimsicality of certain types of joke riddle. Mayall says he is going to tell the joke 'What's green and hairy and goes up and down? A gooseberry in a lift.' Edmondson objects to the joke, questioning the likelihood of a gooseberry being in a lift, asking how the gooseberry managed to press the buttons in the lift, and so on. After some frantic and surreal arguing, in which Edmondson claims to know three gooseberries as personal friends, one of them called Derek, Mayall amends the joke in order to make it logical, and so mangles it beyond recognition.<sup>52</sup>

## B. Flirting with unfunny

In addition to subverting and ridiculing the familiar old jokes and joke formulae which had severely restricted the potential subversiveness of Variety and club comedy, Alternative Comedy also defied any kind of artistic boundary. Some Alternative comedians have even ignored the most basic, defining frontier of stand-up comedy, and have deliberately refused to be funny. Keith Allen is one such comedian. Allen began to perform in the Comedy Store in early 1980, and took a wholly unconventional approach to stand-up comedy. He did not have a fixed act, and would usually work out his

ideas for a performance whilst sitting in a pub before the show.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, whilst standing in for Alexei Sayle, he claims to have performed for eighty minutes in front of an audience of 4,000 people in Leeds without really planning his act.<sup>54</sup> His performances would sometimes be funny, but sometimes, he would not even attempt to make his audience laugh.<sup>55</sup> Later comics have also flirted with deliberate unfunniness. For example, Norman Lovett built his entire act around a persona which is totally dull and unfunny. He uses a slow, gently bored delivery, punctuated with unusually long pauses: comedy producer Paul Jackson recalls seeing Lovett pause for three or four minutes before starting his act, and even whilst performing on television, he has paused for thirty nine seconds before starting. He flaunts his dullness, declaring 'Cor, I'm bored now' in the middle of a routine; he also flaunts his unfunniness, commiserating with the audience after a weak punchline to an unnecessarily long joke, wincing and saying, 'Oo, I know, I know, but that's why I don't do jokes, see.'<sup>57</sup> It would be inaccurate to say that Lovett dispenses with funniness entirely, because he does succeed in making audiences laugh, but the laughter is often caused by the very dullness of his delivery, the very lack of funniness. For example, in one routine, he describes an Edinburgh shopkeeper, estimating his age as ' 'bout 55, 56.....57 could've been at a push.'<sup>58</sup> The pause after '56' leads the audience to expect that he is about to move on from estimating the shopkeeper's age, and say something more interesting, but after the pause, he unexpectedly continues to muse over his age, even though it can be of little or no interest to the audience. In other jokes, he exaggerates his boringness to the point of incongruity. In the same routine, he gets pleasure just from watching the glow of a 60-watt light bulb:

I said, 'Two 60-watt...two of your *best* 60-watt bulbs,' and he said 'I'll just try these for you, sir,' and he screwed in the socket, to say...and he didn't do it quickly, to say, 'Oo, that works, that works,' he put it in, and stood back with me, and we watched it glow. We stood back and admired it.<sup>59</sup>

In other cases, he makes humour out of playing against his boring persona, for example: 'There's a steely inner person inside all this. Like Clint Eastwood, yeah. "You feeling fortunate?" I...I take library books back late sometimes. I live on the edge, all the time. Cor, I'm tired now.'<sup>60</sup> The joke here is that the comparison is totally incongruous, and Eastwood's glamour and machismo is at odds with Lovett's dullness. Similarly, in other routines, he recalls losing his temper, something which is unimaginable given the nature of his persona:

I shouted at the fly, I said, 'Just get off there, soon as you like,' you know, like threatened it in a way.<sup>61</sup>

Well, never mind arguing about that now, Bert,' I said, 'Get back out there and do something, for goodness sake,' you know, I lost my temper a bit, really. 'Cos I do at times, you know. Oo, I nearly got angry then, just thinking about it.<sup>62</sup>

The joke is that in addition to the fact that it is difficult to imagine Lovett either issuing threats or getting angry, in recalling the threat and the anger, his voice does not waver from its usual bored monotone.

A comedian who flirts with unfunniness in a different way is Johnny Immaterial, who started performing on the London circuit at the end of 1984. Immaterial's comic technique is highly unusual, in that it relies on making a little material go a long way. His material consists of songs, played on a noisy electric guitar, played through a tiny amplifier strapped to his waist. Much of the humour is based on the limitations of his musical skills: in one song, he plays an interminable guitar solo, which consists of badly-played renditions of well-known tunes, like the theme from EastEnders, 'Rebel Rebel', and 'House of the Rising Sun'. He also tells short jokes, like 'D n't you think it's annoying that Nelson Mandela was named after a student union bar?'<sup>63</sup> and the material is held together by the frequent use of a stolen catch-phrase, an accurate imitation of comic or Kenneth Williams saying 'Oh no, Matron.' However, most of Immaterial's act is based not on this flimsy material, but on

freely improvising, constantly contradicting himself and undermining what he has just said. Part of this technique involves drawing attention to his own unfunny, for example, reacting to the failure of a joke by yawning and commenting, 'Thank God that last joke was just a dream.' Even when a joke is well-received he undermines it, deprecating himself by commenting ironically: 'What a funny thing to say.'

### C. Redefining the relationship with the audience

The relationship between the comedian and the audience as defined in the Variety and club traditions had certain limitations. In Music Hall and Variety, the performance circumstances facing the comic necessitated setting up a cosy, familiar relationship with the audience, snuggled up inside well-used catchphrases, old jokes, and covert communication about taboo subjects. The club comic's relationship with the audience is more adversarial, the constant threat of impending apathy or hostility inspiring ritual insults which are flung at isolated audience members. In both cases, the comic's attitude to the audience has been essentially benign, and the comic's role as the entertaining servant of the audience has not been seriously challenged. Alternative comedians have totally rejected any kind of established relationship with the audience. Keith Allen and Alexei Sayle both took an attitude towards the audience which was far from benign, and rejected the basic idea of a cosy rapport. Allen stated: 'Comedians think they're brave, but they're not- all they're doing is joining that gang, which is the audience. Whereas my idea was always *not* to be one of them.'<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Alexei Sayle stated, 'Every comic there's ever been was to be liked by the audience, except me. I'm not interested in their approbation...what I have is a genuine disdain for the audience, there's no hint of "please like me."'<sup>65</sup> Their adversarial attitude towards the audience goes far beyond that of club comics' pre-prepared put downs. Allen would even resort to physical violence in response to hecklers. At a performance with Alternative Cabaret a

Goldsmith's Art College in London, after all of the other acts had been received badly, Allen threatened potential hecklers with broken fruit juice bottles. At the Comedy Store, he turned a fire extinguisher on a reviewer from the Evening Standard. He has also thrown darts at difficult members of the audience.<sup>66</sup> Allen's performances could even thrive off negative feedback from the audience. One observer described his performances at a concert by The Stranglers, a rock band with a very macho following: 'He did his northern industrial gay character at a Stranglers show recently and you could feel the waves of hate coming off the crowd. The more they hated him the better he got.'<sup>67</sup> Alexei Sayle also made his contempt for the audience clear in his performance, not only in his angry and aggressive delivery, but also in direct verbal abuse. At the Comic Strip, he would reprimand the audience for applauding at the wrong moment: 'No, not yet you fuckfaces, you know what I mean? This is a people's collective, you do what I fucking tell you, all right??'<sup>68</sup> Various Alternative comedians have adopted this kind of aggressive stance, and a notable recent example of this is Gerry Sadowitz, who began performing on the London circuit in the mid-1980s. As well as his general contempt for the audience, he also displays gratuitous hostility to individuals, for example saying to somebody in the front row: 'Are you an actor? Get your feet off the fucking stage then!!!' He responds to hecklers with equal venom, spitting at them, or threatening them with physical violence: 'I'm gonna come down there and fucking kill you!!!' In addition to his comedy, Sadowitz also uses magic tricks in his act, and his approach to audience participation is similarly spiteful: 'These card tricks are incredibly Alternative, what happens is, instead of you pick a card and I find it, what happens is you pick a card and you bloody well find it [throws playing cards at audience].'<sup>69</sup>

In addition to replacing a cosy rapport with gratuitous hostility, Alternative comedians have also redefined their relationship with the audience in other ways. For example, Johnny Immaterial makes heckling redundant by heckling himself. Stepping away from the microphone and placing one hand over his mouth, he shouts abuse at

himself, for example, 'No it isn't Johnny, get on with it, you bastard', or answering his comment 'What am I going to do now?' by shouting 'You can get off for a start, mate!' at himself. He also ridicules his own deliberately weak running joke about his stage name. The joke is that he says 'My name's immaterial...Johnny Immaterial', the point being that the phrase 'My name's immaterial' can either mean 'my name does not matter', or '"Immaterial" is my surname'. The joke surfaces several times in the act, with different surnames, for example 'My name's irrelevant...Johnny Irrelevant.' He then makes the imaginary heckler ridicule this joke, shouting, 'You're shit...Johnny Shit!' He also jokes about this unusual relationship with the audience, saying, 'I always get a bit of a rapport...with myself.'<sup>70</sup>

Another example of a redefining of the relationship between performer and audience is provided by Mark Hurst (formerly known as Mark Miwurdz). At the end of his act, Hurst gives the audience a trivia quiz, in which he asks questions about the details of some of the jokes from his routines, to which the audience shouts the answers.<sup>71</sup> This particular kind of interactive relationship is unusual in stand-up comedy. Not only does it represent a redefined relationship between performer and audience, it also redefines the way in which the audience responds to the comedy material: after laughing at it in the course of the act, they then have to recall the jokes as if they were items of general knowledge, within the context of a pretended competitive situation.

#### D. Comedy without frontiers

As we have seen, Alternative Comedy has refused to be bound in by the rigid conventions which restricted comedians working on the Variety and club circuits. The old traditions and the old comedians have been savagely satirized. The boundaries of stand-up comedy have been challenged by comics who have been deliberately unfunny. Various comics have rejected conventional and cosy relationships with the audience. Because of this rejection of boundaries, vario

'cs have been able to explore the possibilities which stand-up comedy has to offer. Firstly, the choice of language available to comedians has expanded. Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this has been the widespread use of obscene language. As we have seen, obscenity was rigorously suppressed in *Variety*, and the language which comedians were allowed to use was strictly controlled. In *Working Men's Clubs*, these restrictions have been less severe, but many comics still tend to avoid certain obscenities. Alternative Comedy avoids such restrictions, and often makes liberal use of obscene language. It is arguable that Alexei Sayle did the most damage to the notion that stand-up comics should avoid using obscenities. One of his routines, 'Say Hello, Mr Sweary', lasts several minutes, and consists of little else but a stream of obscene words, delivered in an obnoxious cockney accent:

All right, skanking wanking and ranking, all right. Do what, bollocks, knock it on the 'ead, all right, eh? Shit piss wank fuck cunt all right bollocks knock it on the 'ead do what wanker all right you fucking cunt eh shit piss wank fuck cunt bollocks knock it on the 'ead all right eh? Shit piss fucking cunt wank shit piss wank fuck cunt bollocks wanker fucking cunt all right shit piss wank fuck cunt bollocks do what as it 'appens fucking cunt. Eh, you fucking wanker? Eh, shit piss wank fuck cunt bollocks leave it out do what as it 'appens shit piss wank all right give it a portion be lucky be brief. *Fucking* wanker, eh bollocks, 'ow you doin' fucking cunt all right shit piss wank all right, eh? Do what bollocks, leave it out all right shit piss fucking cunt all right? *Fucking* wanker shit piss wank fuck cunt bollocks leave it out all right do what knock it on the 'ead fuck cunt wank all right bollocks shit piss wank fuck cunt bollocks leave it out give it a portion be lucky be brief fucking cunt all right you wanker shit piss wank fuck cunt bollocks...'ere, I don't have to remember any of this you know, 'cos it's all written on the inside of me hat!<sup>72</sup>

The humour here stems from the incongruously gratuitous and monotonous use of obscenities, delivered in a manic high-speed rant. The routine develops into a discussion of philosophers like Jean Paul Sartre and Rene Descartes using the same kind of language, forging an incongruous link between the highbrow and the obscene, mirroring some of the sketches in Monty Python's Flying Circus, in which cleaning ladies discuss philosophy.

The expansion of the linguistic possibilities in stand-up comedy has not been restricted to the use of obscenities. One comic who has used language which is unusual in the context of a stand-up comedy act is Oscar McLennan, a comic who has had links with Alternative Comedy since its earliest days, working with Alternative Cabaret as half of the comedy duo Gasmask and Hopkins. His performance style is more akin to storytelling than to stand-up, using quasi-poetic language which is incongruous in a stand-up comedy act. A routine about being bullied at school contains the following passage:

The crowd fever was up. It was the circus, the Roman arena. Encore, encore. The licked-wet parted lips. The quickened breath. The scent of death strewn in the dust. The sign of weakness. The down-turned thumbs, the up-raised hands, *sieg heil, sieg heil*, the hounds were out, the hunt was up, the yellow eyes surrounding. The corn red creature was getting fucking desperate.<sup>77</sup>

The overstated dramatic language used in this excerpt is very unusual for a stand-up comedy act, and is particularly conspicuous because it serves to genuinely create atmosphere rather than to parody the cheap poetic language of suspense writing, or to serve directly as the build-up to a joke. The routine ends with a punchline of sorts, with the childhood McLennan showing cowardice rather than bravery in the face of the bullies: he tells himself, 'Stand up!! And be a man!!!' And that's when I pissed in my pants.' The humour of this punchline relies on the atmosphere that McLennan has created, rather than on any obvious incongruity or simple comic device. Another boundary-stretching comedian is Kevin McAleer, who played the London circuit in the early 1980s. McAleer's stand-up monologue is so extraordinary that it defies quotation and almost defies description. He begins with a long pause, then starts to ramble in a pronounced but gentle Irish accent, the sense of what he is saying slowly filtering through to the audience out of the disjointed fragments of sentences. What he says is surreal and almost incomprehensible, totally defying conventional logic. It is also long-winded, and he makes a limited discourse on his family's

musical preferences, and soap powder advertisements last for twenty minutes.

M Aler is also unusual because he is one of the performers who has retched the boundaries of stand-up comedy by going beyond simply alking to the audience. He also uses a slide show in his performances, which is as strange and surreal as his monologue, changing the audience's perceptions of the slides by pointing out certain details in them.<sup>74</sup> Another performer who has added unconventional elements, taking stand-up beyond a simple spoken form of entertainment is Julian Clary, originally known as the Joan Collins Fan Club, who uses songs, props, and a performing dog in addition to his comic patter. Steve Murray's act also involves unconventional elements. Murray subjects teddy bears to various horrific processes such as being thrown into a tank of fake pirhana ish, or being guillotined and squirting blood into his face.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to stretching the artistic boundaries of stand-up, A ternative Comedy has also expanded the possibilities of the subject matter that is deemed suitable for comic treatment. As we have seen, Mary Douglas has argued that comedy is ultimately not subversive because it is subject to social regulation, and jokes are forbidden on subjects 'which are judged too precious and too precar'ous to be exposed to challenge.'<sup>76</sup> Alternative Comedy laughed in the face of such restrictions from its earliest days. Keith Allen's material, for example, trampled social taboos: he joked that the I.R.A. had bombed an R.A.F. band in Hyde Park because they were playing out of tune; he also convinced an audience that his father had died in the previous week, and described his funeral in a sombre voice, then told them that he was tired because they had been elebrating the death at a disco, because they hated his father.<sup>77</sup> Su h jokes disregard conventional responses to death and tragedy, and using these subjects to make jokes about demonstrates a total disre a d for the social regulation of humour. Certainly, it seems nli y that such jokes would have been possible in a Variety eatre or a Working Men's Club. However, Alternative Comedy's

expansion of the possible subject matter for humour went beyond increasing the possibilities for sick humour. Another comic who has used highly unusual subject matter in his stand-up routines is Tony Allen, who has material about astronomy and atomic physics in amongst jokes on more conventional subjects.<sup>78</sup> However, perhaps the most important development in terms of the expansion of possible subject matter is the fact that Alternative comedians have the ability to take an overtly political approach to comedy, and to make jokes from politically radical perspectives.

#### V. Radical politics

Alternative comedians have differed from their counterparts in the Variety and club traditions in that they have been openly political. Variety comedians may have satirized suffragettes and progressives, and club comics may make jokes about politicians and immigration, but this does not necessarily imply that they promoted themselves as political comedians, or that they were perceived as such by their audiences.<sup>79</sup> Another significant difference is that whereas both Variety and club comedians have tended to make jokes from reactionary perspectives, Alternative Comedy has tended towards political radicalism. The openness and the radicalism could be seen in the ways in which early Alternative comedians described themselves. For example, Alexei Sayle referred to himself as 'a Marxist comedian' in his act, and Jim Barclay opened his act by describing himself as 'the wacky zany Marxist-Leninist comedian', and adding, 'it's my job to come on here and tell you jokes which precipitate the downfall of capitalism and bring an end to tyranny and injustice wherever it rears its ugly head.'<sup>80</sup> Other comics who proudly advertized their commitment to various radical positions were the feminist comedian Jenny Lecoat, the radical gay comedian Simon Fanshawe, and the anarchist comedian Tony Allen.<sup>81</sup> More recently, Allen has associated himself with Green politics, his 1988 show Sold Out being dedicated exclusively to environmental issues. In addition to comedians who have associated themselves with various radical stances, there have also been a number of comedians who have

used a good deal of political material in their acts without necessarily identifying themselves with a particular political position. This category has included Andy de la Tour, Ben Elton, Jeremy Hardy, Nick Revell, Mark Steel, Mark Hurst, Kevin Day, Mark Thomas, and Bob Boyton.

#### A. Topical material

One aspect of Alternative Comedy's political radicalism has been a satirical commentary on current political events. Certainly, the early Alternative comedians frequently joked about recent events. There are many examples of these topical jokes. Keith Allen joked about the storming of the Iranian Embassy by the S.A.S. which was televised in May 1980: 'Now, I don't know if you saw the show- on the T.V. for us, about the storming of the Iranian Embassy; now, I'm an ordinary punter, much like yourselves, and what I don't understand is, how these blokes- who can save us from every known crisis in the world today- can't get over a two-foot gap on a balcony without fucking ropes and ladders.'<sup>22</sup> Andy de la Tour joked about the report by Lord Scarman on the inner cities, written after various serious outbreaks of rioting in 1981: 'All the bobbies in our local area have all got their own copies of the Scarman Report. Rolled up with a piece of lead piping stuffed down middle.'<sup>23</sup> In addition to this, there were jokes about the Falklands War; jokes about Operation Countryman, an investigation into allegations of corruption in the Metropolitan police; and jokes about a visit which a group of Labour M.P.s made to Afghanistan after it had been invaded by Russia.<sup>24</sup> This tradition of joking about topical political issues has been continued by various comedians. Nick Revell, who has performed on the London circuit since the early 1980s, has produced a number of short, simple jokes about recent events. For example, he has joked about the stockmarket crash of October 1987: 'You remember yuppies. The ones with the smug looks on their faces in last October'; and about the fact that the Austrian president Kurt Waldheim had concealed facts about his war record in order to avoid accusations of being a nazi war criminal: 'I've got a terrible

memory, I really have, I've got a worse memory than Kurt Waldheim.'<sup>85</sup> Jokes about the S.A.S., Lord Scarman, or Kurt Waldheim are significant not simply because of their topicality, but because they take a Left perspective. The S.A.S.'s image of tough and heroic commandos is punctured, and the televising of one of their manoeuvres is ridiculed because the S.A.S. are seen as part of the Establishment. The liberalism of Lord Scarman's report is seen as cosmetic, not changing the police's violent tactics. The stockmarket crash is celebrated because it means financial losses for the Young Upwardly Mobile Professionals, who in many ways embody the Thatcherite vision of dynamic capitalism. Kurt Waldheim is ridiculed because of his past association with the extreme Right.

#### B. Class

Alternative Comedy's attitude towards social class has tended to be a reversal of that of Variety comedy and club comedy, which tended to romanticize poverty and satirize working class radicalism. The early Alternative comedians showed considerable anger about the increased poverty of the early years of Thatcherism. Both Alexei Sayle and Andy de le Tour made a joking link between poverty and fashion. Sayle joked: 'Stoke Newington is a very fashionable place. Umm, at the moment there's a big '60s revival going on- there's whole families trying to live on eight quid a week! And there's a big '30s thing as well, you know, I mean you're nobody unless you've got malnutrition!!'<sup>86</sup> Andy de la Tour's version of this comic idea had a slightly different emphasis, stressing the difference in levels of poverty between the North and South of England:

I'll tell you what it's nice also to be away from in London is there's a lot of trendy bastards in London...a few up here an' all, aren't there? You know what they do? They come and look, and see what's going on in the real world, and they just turn it into a fashion, you know, you've got all this poverty right now, so in London they've got this whole poverty 1930s revival fashion thing, you know what I mean, yeah, you get a recurrence of rickets in the North of England, and in London they turn it into a dance craze [does the dance]. They've got their own clubs, you know, poverty

lubs, Monday Night's 'Diphtheria Night', yeah...videos of people being means tested, it's terrific, you know.<sup>27</sup>

Comedy about poverty was matched with jokes about the mass unemployment of the Thatcher era. Alexei Sayle joked, 'Recession is just a rumour put about by four million people without jobs.'<sup>28</sup> Arnold Brown, a performer from the early days of the Comedy Store, who later became one of the regulars at the Comic Strip, made a joking link between a national census, and the problem of mass unemployment: 'The census in April. The only way the unemployed can get jobs nowadays is by counting each other.'<sup>29</sup> More recently, Nick Revell has made a similar joke, focussing on government training schemes for the unemployed: '[in a stilted monotone:] "Hello Gary, I haven't seen you for ages. Where you been?" "Nah. I've got a job." "A job? Blimey. What yer doin'?" "I've got a job playin' an unemployed youth in a Y.T.S. commercial on the telly."<sup>30</sup>

Alternative comedians have also tended to direct hostility against the middle and upper classes. Alexei Sayle has been particularly vitriolic in this respect, some jokes being little more than abuse:

Those of you who've actually got jobs, I'd like you to think for a minute about your boss, right, think about your boss. Isn't he an a solute fucking knobhead, eh? Isn't that a wonderful fucking system we've got where the fucking total knobheads always rise to the top, you know. <sup>1</sup>

The only joke here is the suddenness and brutality of the abuse. The invitation to 'think about your boss' suggests that Sayle is about to make some sharp comic observations about bosses, but this expectation is overturned when he makes a plainly abusive statement instead. The sentence which begins with the ironic comment about having a wonderful system involves a similar overturning of expectation: the beginning of the sentence leads to the expectation of some analysis of the system, but instead, the second half of the sentence is made up of more plain abuse. Elsewhere, his class hatred is abusive and more analytical:

I'll tell you another fucking myth, right. It's like education, you know like if, er...when you went, when you went to school about twenty years ago, they told you if you came out with two C.S.E.s, you're gonna be head of British Steel, you know? That's a load of bollocks, innit, eh? If you look at the statistics, right, like 82% of top British management have been to a public school and Oxbridge, 83% of the B.B.C. have been to a public school and Oxbridge, 94% of the K.G.B. have been to a public school and Oxbridge...<sup>32</sup>

There are essentially two jokes here. The first exaggerates the optimism of school careers officers to the point of incongruity, and the second makes a link between the Soviet secret police and the British education system, this being a joking reference to the number of upper class public figures who have been involved in spying for Russia. Both jokes are part of an analytical argument about the mismatch in employment prospects for those from privileged backgrounds and for ordinary people. However, as the routine continues, it dissolves into the characteristic Sayle comic abuse, portraying those in positions of power as sexual perverts:

All you get from a public school, right, is, is one you get a top job, the other thing, the only other thing you get from a public school, right, is an interest in perverse sexual practices. That's why fucking British management's so ineffective, as soon as they get in the fucking boardroom, they're all shutting each other's dicks in the door. 'Go on, give her another slam, Sir Michael!', whack! 'Go on, let's play the panzer commando and the milkmaid!', eeuh, eeuh, eeuh... *bastards!!*

In addition to hurling comic abuse at the upper classes, Sayle also made savage satirical attacks on the middle class lifestyle:

The main area of conflict in Stoke Newington is actually between the working class and the middle class, 'cos there's a big kind of middle class kind of invasion, you know. You can always spot the middle class houses 'cos they're always the ones that've been painted blue and they've got fucking carriage lamps outside, you know. It's like putting up a big sign saying, 'Please break in and steal my video recorder.' In one middle class street in Stoke Newington, they all knocked their front and back rooms into one in the same week and the fucking street fell down. I, umm...actually, the other way...you can always spot the middle class houses, the other thing you can always spot is always got those fucking Suzuk jeeps parked outside, you know [exaggerated middle class voice:] 'I

think it's so important to have four-wheel drive when you're going down to Sainsbury's.'<sup>93</sup>

The humour here is observational, in that it observes aspects of a middle class lifestyle, like carriage lamps on the walls, improving old houses, and Suzuki jeeps, and makes them seem incongruous and funny by imposing a new perspective on them: they are seen as aspects of pretension. This perspective is clearly implied in the last line, which highlights the pointlessness of using jeeps in a lifestyle in which the most demanding task for a vehicle is going shopping.

More recently, various comedians have discussed social class within more specific political frameworks. For example, Mark Steel refers to his own membership of the Socialist Workers' Party in his act, and a good deal of his comedy involves a hard class-based analysis. One of his routines begins with a blunt statement of this analysis: 'They've got a war going on between the rich and the poor, right, and it's the only war that only one side knows it's fighting- the rich side.'<sup>94</sup> He has a routine about upper class people occupying all of the positions of power in our society, in which he points out that powerful people always tend to have the same upper class accent. This uniformity of accent amongst the powerful is made incongruous by suggesting that it would be strange if all judges spoke with a Geordie accent, and all company directors spoke with a Birmingham accent; the humour stems from impressions of a Geordie judge and a Birmingham company director.<sup>95</sup> Another routine exaggerates the naivety of the faith which working class reactionaries have in the management to the point of incongruity:

All the bosses could come in one day and go: 'Right, as from tomorrow there's a new rule. Every time you go to the toilet, you've got to hop on one leg. Anyone seen with their foot touching the floor got to buy Mr Grimsby here a blackcurrant lollipop. D'you understand that?' And there'd still be at least one person going, 'Well, you can see their point of view, can't you?'<sup>96</sup>

Another more recent comic who has tackled social class is Jeremy Hardy who, like Steel, supports the Socialist Workers' Party. Hardy's satirical comedy covers a broad range of subjects, and class is one of them. For example, in one routine, he questions the Queen's neutrality, arguing that she is on the side of the ruling class. He illustrates this point by imagining her response to a working class Leftist being elected as Prime Minister: 'If Arthur Scargill was elected, she'd be shouting through the letter box of the palace, going, "They're not here, they've moved. We're just squatters." Which, in a sense, is true.'<sup>97</sup> The final line of this excerpt reverses conventional patriotic attitudes towards royalty, by portraying the Queen as a parasitic squatter, somebody who has no right to live where she is living.

The general attitude towards class issues taken by Alternative comedians has tended to be subversive. There has been a broad range of approaches, with jokes which expressed anger about poverty and unemployment, routines which made scathing satirical attacks on the middle class lifestyle, and jokes about class conflict within such specific political frameworks that they veer towards agit prop. This kind of humour is subversive because its sympathies clearly lie with the working class, which is a minority group in terms of the cultural power which it wields. It also makes the middle class and the ruling class, which in terms of cultural power are majority groups, the butts of the jokes.

## C. Sexual politics

### 1. Feminism

Whereas the first generation of Alternative comedians was politically radical, and at least two of the key figures were self-confessed Marxist comedians, there were no self-confessed feminist comedians. Indeed, whilst Alternative Comedy has undoubtedly encompassed radical sexual politics, it has failed to produce as many female comedians as male ones. In the first wave of Alternative comics, including Alexei Sayle, Tony Allen, Jim Barclay, Keith All

and Andy de la Tour, there was only one woman, Pauline Melville. Similarly, the second generation of performers who worked in the Comic Strip was also mainly made up of men: there were two male comics, Alexei Sayle and Arnold Brown, two male double acts, The Outer Limits and Twentieth Century Coyote, and only one female double act, French and Saunders. In addition to this, Pauline Melville and French and Saunders were not particularly radical acts, and were certainly not tough feminist comedians. Melville used a stage character called Edie, which was used to present a gentle satire on the liberal Left's obsession with mysticism which originated in the 1960s, and Edie's feminism was far from radical: 'I am in the Women's Movement, which should give me a lot of strength, but the trouble is, I'm not in the most militant branch- I'm just in the branch that pulls faces behind men's backs.'<sup>98</sup> French and Saunders tended to use material which was more akin to sketch comedy than it was to stand-up, and their approach to performing was far from aggressive; Jennifer Saunders has recalled: 'All we did was sketches, and then we'd stop and be slightly embarrassed and bow and say, "Thank you"'<sup>99</sup>, and this kind of approach prompted one contemporary reviewer to dismiss them as 'too amicably Guardianish.'<sup>100</sup>

However, the lack of women comedians did not mean that feminism was totally ignored. Jenny Lecoat has recalled that many of the male comedians would do 'right on Women's stuff.'<sup>101</sup> Tony Allen was one who took a particular interest in sexual politics, and Lisa Appignanesi has described his approach: 'Increasingly he has dealt with the difficult area of sexual politics, taking himself as subject and earnestly defining a trajectory which illuminates macho attitudes, advertizing imagery and society's complicity with rape.'<sup>102</sup> One of Allen's most remarkable routines drew a parallel between rape, and the pressure which men exert on women to engage in casual sexual contact.<sup>103</sup> Another male comic who examined sexual issues from a radical perspective was Andy de la Tour. One of his routines dealt with the hypocrisy of his attitude towards pornography:

I'm walking past this shop, and it sells pornographic magazines. I'm looking at this picture- woman, black leather and all the business- and I'm looking at it...critically...denouncing to myself this particular aspect of women's oppression...and to my surprise, I find I'm getting an erection at the same time.<sup>104</sup>

The basic incongruity here is the link between the idea of disapproving of pornography, and yet being sexually aroused by it. This incongruous hypocrisy is clearly condemned later in the routine, when de la Tour admits using pornographic images to overcome sexual problems, and then links such images with sexual violence: 'I wonder if the Yorkshire Ripper carried the same image round in his head?''<sup>105</sup>

As Alternative Comedy developed, more women comics began to appear, including Sharon Landau, Maggie Steed, Maggie Fox, Jenny Lecoat, Helen Lederer, and Jenny Eclair.<sup>106</sup> Jenny Lecoat is a particularly significant figure because she was the first to label herself as a feminist comedian.<sup>107</sup> In her early career, she adopted a stage costume which clearly connoted her feminism, including 'really cropped hair [and] bovver boots.' More recently, Lecoat has tried to shake off the 'feminist comic' label, and there is evidence to suggest that there was an element of opportunism in her use of the label in her early career. In the face of the fact that many early Alternative comics openly and proudly announced their connections with various Left positions, referring to themselves as 'Marxist', 'Marxist-Leninist' or 'Anarchist' comedians, it seems that it was inevitable that somebody would adopt the 'feminist comic' label, and Lecoat has argued that her feminist comedy was merely a manifestation of the kind of feminism which was prominent in the London Left culture of the early 1980s<sup>108</sup>; moreover, she has admitted that she was 'delighted' by the scarcity of other female comics on the circuit at the beginning of her career, because, 'It was my market, wasn't it?''<sup>109</sup> Her comedy involves a variety of feminist approaches. Some of her comedy expresses simple hostility against men. For example, she sang a song called 'The Willy Song' which suggests cutting off and cooking a man's penis in revenge for

the domestic and sexual demands which he has placed on her.'''  
Another aspect of her comedy is a satirizing of the cultural pressure which is placed on women to a dominant conception of femininity. For example, she has joked about magazines aimed at teenage girls: 'I'm obsessed with my weight, because I used to read Jackie magazine. Remember those articles? "Feeling fat girls? Try this simple test. Just slip yourself down between the wall and the radiator...if you can't do it, you're a fat bitch.'''<sup>2</sup> In her early career, her comedy also involved a more radical feminist analysis, as the following excerpt demonstrates: 'The problem is, right, they're all completely obsessed with their willies. Willy, willy, willy, willy, willy- that's all sex is to them. Well, it's all the *world* is to them. I mean, when those missiles go launching off Greenham Common, it won't be 200-foot clitorises flying up there.'''<sup>3</sup> The humour here arises from the incongruous image of 200-foot clitoris-shaped missiles, and the point being made is that nuclear weapons are phallic symbols. The implication of this is a radical feminist analysis, which sees the arms race as a product of male violence, or more specifically, male sexual violence; a socialist analysis would tend to see the arms race as a product of the capitalist system, rather than as a product of male biology.

## 2. Sexuality

Unlike Variety comedy which relied on a system of covert communication which could mention sexual matters but seldom discuss them, Alternative Comedy has flown in the face of taboos surrounding sexuality, and openly discusses sexual matters. One aspect of this openness is the frequent use of obscene language, which has already been noted. A number of Alternative comedians have directly addressed the kind of taboos surrounding sexuality which led to Variety comedy's obsession with covertly mentioning sexual matters. For example, Mark Thomas, a comic who began his career in the late 1980s, discusses his father's sexual ignorance: 'My Dad thinks the clitoris is a wine growing region in Italy. If you mention the word '*labia*', he goes, "No, I won't buy those Russian cars.'''<sup>4</sup> The

humour here is based on the incongruity of the incorrect meanings which his father gives the words. There is a certain plausibility about his incorrect meanings, particularly the second, because 'labia' sounds like 'Lada', a well-known Russian car. However, the joke is more than just gratuitous wordplay, because the incorrectly interpreted words are technical terms for parts of the female genitalia, and the joke is ridiculing the kind of sexual ignorance brought about by taboos. Helen Lederer, a comedian who worked on the London circuit in the early 1980s, made comedy by exploring the limits of sexual taboos. For example, in one routine, she asks her mother the meaning of a forbidden word which she has heard at school:

I said the word, 'masturbation' actually, that was the word, I'm so sorry, I didn't actually tell the customs people I was going to bring that word through when I came, but... So here I am, anyway, I said the word, and she said, 'That's not the kind of word we use at the dinner table, Helen,' so obviously I had to wait till all the guests had gone.<sup>115</sup>

The basic incongruity here is based on the idea that whilst masturbation may be mentioned in private, it is not a suitable subject for discussion at a dinner party. The joke is based on embarrassment. Lederer's embarrassed stage persona jokes about taking the word 'masturbation' through customs, as if it were an illegal substance, and the point of the joke is that because she has mentioned a forbidden word in the inappropriate context of a dinner party, she has caused embarrassment. Rather than manipulating the embarrassment caused by taboos, Mark Thomas has attacked sexual taboos more directly and openly:

I think we, we'll have got over all our sexual taboos, and sort of like inadequacies, when you go round to someone's house, and they say, 'Would you like to look at the photograph album,' and you go, 'Yeah, that'd be nice,' 'cos you're quite nice and loving... And you open the front page of the photo album, and there's a massive picture of their mum's cunt right on the front. And across the top, in pencil, it's got, 'My first home.'<sup>116</sup>

The joke here is based on extending the idea of the photograph album to the point of incongruity. The photograph album exists to hold a photographic record of somebody's life, with photographs of the person through childhood, adolescence and adulthood, and pictures of his or her relatives. Showing somebody a photograph album is something which is associated with formal friendly occasions like family visits, and this is at odds with the female sexual organ, which is surrounded by sexual taboos, and would be particularly unacceptable in a formal situation. Thomas' attitude towards this incongruity is clearly positive: he explicitly states that he considers it would be beneficial if we could achieve this breaking of taboo which seems so incongruous. Indeed, his taboo-breaking idea merely extends the basic concept of a photograph album, by including photographs of the period before birth.

As we have seen, stand-up comedy in Working Men's Clubs has discussed sexuality rather than just making covert mention of sexual matters, but it has tended to reinforce a dominant male-orientated conception of sexuality. Alternative Comedy's approach to sexuality has tended to challenge dominant conceptions of sexuality rather than enforcing them. For example, one of Jenny Lecoat's routines challenges a phallogentric notion of sexual intercourse, by describing the disappointment when the intercourse ends with the male orgasm:

The next thing you know he's on top of you- the great white whale-going at it. And what's the next you hear? 'Oh...sorry.' We all know what that means, don't we? That means, 'Thank you very much, love, it's the end of the show, we can all fuck off and have a cup of tea.' That's what 'sorry' means- there's no conception of fingers or tongues, or anything that might give us a good time. Oh no, 'Sorry, love, it's all over with my willy.'<sup>17</sup>

Mark Thomas' joke about the mother's vagina in the photograph album also challenges dominant conceptions of sexuality, in that it gives a photograph of a vagina, which would normally be associated only with pornography, an entirely new meaning: the implication of the joke is that it is to be used as a fond and proud reminder of the

mother's role in bringing a person into the world, rather than as an object for voyeuristic sexual stimulation.

Another respect in which Alternative Comedy's approach to sexuality is radically different from that of either Variety comedy or club comedy is its attitude to homosexuality. As we have seen, homosexuality was hardly mentioned in Variety comedy, and when it was, homosexuals were ridiculed. Club comedy has tended to subject homosexuals to savage ridicule, often portraying them as a threat to heterosexuals. Alternative Comedy has avoided such ridicule and has produced homosexual comedians like Simon Fanshawe, Claire Dowie, and Julian Clary, who have been confident of their sexuality in their comedy. This has involved a variety of approaches. Claire Dowie, who moved from the performance poetry circuit to the Alternative cabaret circuit in about 1982, uses material which is observational, making comic observations on aspects of a lesbian lifestyle. For example, she bemoans the limitations of the gay lifestyle:

You've got to be fit to be gay- 'cos all you've got is discos and marches- it's true- all this just to get laid! And the Gay Pride March- march- I mean, it's *walking*... I had to walk everywhere- with a banner... Aren't I persecuted enough? Why can't I sit in a pub and be proud?- occasionally march to the bar, perhaps...<sup>118</sup>

Ostensibly, such material is only addressed to the members of the audience who are homosexual, in that it observes the gay lifestyle, and the heterosexuals in the audience are unlikely to have direct experience of this. In order to appreciate the humour, the heterosexuals in the audience must take homosexuals as a reference group, and identify with Dowie's humorously-described dissatisfaction with her lifestyle. This humour is subversive, because it demands that members of the heterosexual majority are invited to identify with the experiences of the homosexual minority. It also implies considerable bravery on Dowie's part, as if there is a large element of the audience which is prejudiced against homosexuals and refuses to identify with them, this contingent will not appreciate the humour, and the comedian will fail to get laughs.

Julian Clary has taken a very different approach to his sexuality in his material, relying heavily on homosexual smut. For example, he jokes: 'I don't have my porridge till nine, and I'm not leaving the house without something hot inside me, not for anybody.'<sup>119</sup> Here, the phrase 'something hot inside me' is loaded with a double meaning. Ostensibly, it refers to the hot porridge which he has eaten, which is inside his stomach; but it also has a sexual meaning, implying a *hot penis inside* his anus. The use of gay smut is interesting, because in a sense, Alternative Comedy has made heterosexual smut redundant. As we have seen, there is a symbiotic relationship between smut and taboo, because the process of covert communication on which smut relies is unnecessary if the word, object, or action which it implies may be openly mentioned. Because Alternative comedians tend to discuss sexual matters openly, this means that there is no longer a need to refer to them covertly with smut. However, because homosexuals are a minority group, it may be more difficult to discuss sexual contact between members of the same sex quite so openly on stage, so the homosexual smut still has a purpose. Clary's act is interesting, because it hijacks the traditional Variety technique of covertly communicating about sexual matters in smutty jokes, and uses it to celebrate homosexuality rather than to ridicule it. It is also subversive, because it links smut with jokes which protest against the persecution of homosexuals. For example, in one routine, he dresses as a policeman, in a high-camp glittery version of a police uniform, and says: 'They said it could never be done- they said I could never be a bobby on the beat. But *quelle surprise*, I'm wearing Marigold gloves, and I've got a truncheon in my pocket.'<sup>120</sup> The 'Marigold gloves' are rubber gloves, and this is a reference to the fact that the Greater Manchester police force were issued with a special kit, including rubber gloves to be used when dealing with A.I.D.S. victims. This is particularly relevant to the gay community, which was badly affected by A.I.D.S. when it was first discovered, and has become strongly associated with it, thus becoming one of the groups on which paranoia surrounding the syndrome has focussed. The 'truncheon in my pocket' is another smutty joke, ostensibly referring to a real truncheon,

but also implying an erect penis. Therefore, the joke neatly combines a comment about police paranoia about A.I.D.S. with a smutty reference to penises.

Simon Fanshawe, who originally described himself as a 'radical gay comedian', no longer restricts himself to talking about sexuality in his act. He has taken a number of comic approaches to his sexuality, and these have sometimes involved simple comic ideas. For example, he has discussed the difficulties of explaining his homosexuality to his upper class relatives: 'I don't think they understood it so I had to use all the other words- nancy, poof, ponce, queer, bender...but they think I'm just talking about one of their friends...'Hello, my name's Nancy Poof-Ponce-Queer-Bender, do come in.''<sup>12</sup> This relies on simple wordplay, the relatives mistaking the list of slang words for homosexuals as a long quadruple-barreled name. Elsewhere, he has used material which is more analytical, for example, observing the behaviour of heterosexual men from his homosexual perspective:

And their language is so bizarre, I mean they're stand...all these straight men are standing there going, 'Cunt this, cunt that, cunt...', really weird from straight men, don't you think that's bizarre use of language, they're supposed to love women, they're going, 'Cunt this, cunt that, cunt...'...saw two of them after the gig, one's talking to the other, and he said something really odd, really strange. Said: 'You fucking made me look like a cunt.' I mean, what did he mean, black curly hair, two sets of lips, what?? 'Fuck', too, they go 'Fuck this, fuck that, fuck the glass, fuck the table, fuck the shoes, fuck the...', is there nothing they don't fuck?? Men, thank God!'<sup>122</sup>

Here, the language of a majority group, heterosexual men, is observed from the perspective of a minority group, homosexual men, and is made incongruous and funny as a result.

Overall, Alternative Comedy contrasts sharply with Variety and club comedy in terms of its sexual politics. Whereas Variety comedy enforced roles within the family in general and marriage in particular, and club comedy expressed misogynist antipathy towards

the wife and mother-in-law, Alternative Comedy has tended towards a feminist stance, questioning male dominance rather than reinforcing female subservience. In contrast with Variety's covert approach to sexuality in smutty jokes, Alternative Comedy has discussed sexuality openly, and specifically attacked taboos surrounding it; in contrast with club comedy's sexual conservatism, Alternative Comedy has tended to challenge dominant conceptions of sexuality. It has also been remarkable in presenting positive images of homosexuality, rather than using it as a subject of ridicule.

#### D. Race

As we have seen, a policy of no sexism and no racism has been seen as a definitive feature of Alternative Comedy, and one of the aspects of old-style stand-up comics which was satirized by the early Alternative comedians was their reliance on racist humour. Whereas a number of Variety comedians made jokes which relied on a passive acceptance of racist values, and most club comedians seem to use jokes which are based on racist hostility, Alternative comics have tended to avoid racism, and even satirize it. For example, Pauline Melville's naive stage character Edie, described an imaginary visit to Britain by two Afghanistani M.P.s: 'Mind you, of course, their skin's a bit darker than ours, so they actually got stopped at the airport, didn't they? They're actually in the detention compound at Heathrow. I think that's a shame, really because now they'll never know what our system's like.'<sup>123</sup> The point of the joke is that the M.P.s *will* know what our system is like, having suffered at the hands of racist immigration officials. Jim Barclay satirized the racism of certain working class communities in London:

I materialized myself in the Truncheon Arms, Plaistow, talent contest. A friendly pub- the sort of pub that comes alive on festive occasions like Hitler's birthday. Leaning up against the bar, there were two gentlemen discussing the repatriation of the Normans...'They come over here, reeking of garlic- half of them, all they' e got is a suit of chain mail and a horse...'<sup>124</sup>

Here, racist ideas and cliched racist arguments are exaggerated to the point of incongruity by applying them to a race which came to Britain hundreds of years ago, rather than to recent immigrants.

However, a development which is perhaps more important than this is the emergence of black comedians on the Alternative Comedy circuit, from the mid-1980s. As we have seen, club comedy produced a few black comedians, like Charlie Williams and Jos White, but they tended to adopt white racist values and to use material which deprecated their own race. The only other established black comedian before Alternative Comedy was Lenny Henry, who started his career using the same kind of self-deprecating material as Charlie Williams and Jos White, and only rejected this kind of approach after being exposed to Alternative Comedians like Alexei Sayle and French and Saunders at the Comic Strip. Alternative Comedy has produced a number of black comedians, notably Felix, Sheila Hyde, and Miles Crawford. In 1989, a new club was opened specifically as a showcase for black comedy talent, called the Black Comedy Club, and it has featured a number of more recent black comics, including Angie Le Mar, Curtis and Ishmael, Kevin Seisay and Mike Allain.<sup>125</sup> Black comedians working on the Alternative Comedy circuit differ from their predecessors in that they have been able to avoid self-deprecating humour, make comedy about a broad range of subjects rather than being restricted to subjects associated with their colour, and make comedy based on black experiences. They have also satirized racial bigotry; for example, Felix has joked about the way in which white people can passively accept racism:

When I was travelling down tonight, I noticed that there's a lot of grafitti all over the walls in London, it says things like: 'Wogs out. Coons out. Sambos out. Pakis out.' I said to the cabbie, 'It's a bit sad, that people need to go and write things like that on the walls.' He said to me, 'What's the matter, mate- you got a chip on your shoulder?'<sup>126</sup>

Another aspect of Alternative Comedy's attitude to race which contrasts sharply with that of club comedy is the lack of Irish

jokes. In addition to this, various Alternative comics have used political routines about The Troubles in Northern Ireland which have attempted to analyse the situation. An early example of this is provided by Andy de la Tour, who reversed the dominant view of the situation in Northern Ireland by portraying it as a war situation, rather than a series of isolated terrorist incidents:

If it had been generally acknowledged that there has been this war going on in Northern Ireland for the last ten years, think of the war film they could have made in that fine old tradition of the British war movies. Scene one- a battleship cruises down the Falls Road, Belfast. Sitting on top, Kenneth More in a duffle coat. He says quietly under his lips to Number One, 'Paddy's being damned quiet tonight.' Number One doesn't hear- he's dead. He's been dead for a week, but he doesn't fall over- he's British.<sup>127</sup>

Most of the humour of this routine arises from parodying British war films, but the political point made by the bisociation of such films with the situation in Northern Ireland implies a radical political position. This radicalism, combined with the fact that the routine ridicules the pomposity of the English rather than the supposed stupidity of the Irish, highlights the sharp contrast with club comedy, which simply reinforces stereotyped images of the Irish.

## VI. Alternative audiences

### A. The shock of the new

Alternative Comedy was entirely different from the two principal traditions of stand-up comedy which had preceded it. Whereas both Variety comedy and club comedy tended to restrict their stylistic subversiveness by working within well-established and often stale comic formulae, Alternative Comedy expanded the possibilities of stand-up: it satirized the stale old formulae; it redefined the relationship between the audience and the performer; it used language and discussed subjects which had previously been deemed unsuitable for stand-up; and it sometimes even questioned the most basic, definitive feature of stand-up comedy, by deliberately flirting with unfunniness. In addition to this, unlike Variety and

club comedians, Alternative comics were not ashamed to be open about the politics of their comedy, and the radicalism of their politics was totally new. In contrast with what had gone before, Alternative Comedy tended to challenge dominant ideas. It challenged sexism and racism, rather than relying on them for a bountiful supply of jokes. It directed hostility against the middle and upper classes and viewed the class system from a Left perspective. It challenged dominant ideas about sexuality, and promoted positive images of homosexuality rather than ridiculing it.

All of this meant that Alternative Comedy was radically different from any tradition of stand-up comedy which had preceded it in Britain. As a result, when it first began, audience responses were mixed. Keith Allen's anarchic approach to comedy once led to his being assaulted by a member of the audience whilst on stage, and knocked unconscious.<sup>128</sup> Alexei Sayle has recalled similarly violent responses:

A lot of the gigs I did before the Comedy Store would end in kind of fights and stuff, because people didn't actually have a perception of what it was I was attempting to do. There was quite an interesting thing that when me and Tony Allen went to the Edinburgh Festival in 1980, there was a review in a student paper that said, 'I don't know what these people are doing.'<sup>129</sup>

Tony Allen has recalled that in that same visit to Edinburgh, he had to perform first, because Sayle's aggressive style was 'scaring people away.'<sup>130</sup> Allen himself also received negative audience responses because of the newness of his approach. Whilst performing in Isleworth Working Men's Club in West London in 1979, his sexually explicit routines were greeted with total silence:

It was like talking to your mum and dad. I told them I was going to talk about sex so any children should be taken out. They were, and I went into my rap. The audience were totally silent- they weren't liking it, but they wouldn't shout about it. They just kept quiet.<sup>131</sup>

...

## B. Playing to the audience

The stylistic and political radicalism of Alternative Comedy did not always have this kind of effect on the audience. Although it was radically different from the forms of stand-up which had preceded it, its impact should not be overestimated, because in many cases, its audiences were likely to be sympathetic with it, and already shared the views which it promoted. Jim Barclay has pointed out that although Alternative Cabaret performed in unconventional venues like pubs, 'it's always been like Fringe theatre, in that you pay your money and you go in and you sit and you listen in another part of the pub, so I mean there is a certain amount of commitment on the part of the audience.'<sup>132</sup> By the end of 1979, Alternative Cabaret had decided to stick to venues which were likely to be sympathetic to what they were doing.<sup>133</sup>

Audiences for early Alternative Cabaret tended to be made up of members of specific social groups, and this often meant that they would be more likely to relate to new approaches to stand-up comedy. At the Comedy Store and the Comic Strip, the audiences were often very fashionable. Alexei Sayle has described the audiences in the early days of the Comedy Store: 'You got a lot of, you know, posh people, you got people from showbusiness, who were interested in a new sensation, Pamela Stephenson would come down, a lot of people like that, Americans, you know, David Bowie... Sensation seekers.'<sup>134</sup> Dawn French's description suggests that audiences at the Comic Strip were similar: 'It was the time when the "New Romantics" were around, and you'd look out on a sea of fluffy shirts; and it was full of minor London celebs and hip people who'd come to be seen there.'<sup>135</sup> Whilst the rowdiness of the Comedy Store made it a difficult venue, Alexei Sayle has argued that because the audiences tended to be fashionable, they were more open to the new style of comedy, because 'they were aware of American comedy.'<sup>136</sup>

Another group which was well-represented in early Alternative Comedy audiences was the middle class liberal London Left. Jenny Lecoat has

described this group: 'It tended to be very much P.L.U.s, you know, People Like Us, it was sort of people from about twenty to forty, pretty much middle class, lefty, pretty much of the same opinions, same sentiments.'<sup>137</sup> There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that the comedians tended to direct their material specifically at this type of audience. Cabaret critic Carol Sarler has recalled her first experience of Alternative Comedy:

I looked around the room, and there was these 100 or so people, all young, all white educated middle class liberals. And for the first time, they were being invited to laugh at themselves, to laugh at their lives, at their own experiences, their own prejudices, their own problems.<sup>138</sup>

There are several examples of jokes which were aimed specifically at a middle class liberal Left audience, and which would probably be incomprehensible to a more general audience. Pauline Melville's character Edie was supposed to be a rather conservative housewife who had become involved in mysticism and the Left culture, and much of the humour arose from *faux pas*. For example, in one routine, one of Edie's friends mistakes Clapham Common for Greenham Common:

Hello everybody. Did you go to Greenham before Christmas? I did. Has anyone seen Enid since we got back? No, the thing is, you see, we lost her. Actually, we lost her before we got on the coach. Well, we couldn't wait, you know how it is, we were all bundled into the coach, and we set off, and we were just passing Clapham Common, and somebody looked out of the window and said, 'Isn't that Enid?'...and there was Enid, standing all on her own in the middle of Clapham Common with a mirror and a candle.<sup>139</sup>

This routine refers explicitly to the activities of the women peace protestors outside the Greenham Common airbase, and makes their ritual protests incongruous by transferring them to the context of a Common without an airbase. The joke relies on the knowledge of the use of candles and mirrors in ritual protests at Greenham for it to be understood, so it is clearly aimed at a Left audience, which would have such knowledge. Another excerpt from one of her routines is even more obviously aimed at a Left audience:

I've made some terrible mistakes, you know, before I got, you know, 'well adjusted'. I'll never forget my first study group...it's imprinted on my collective unconscious- they were discussing whether the Albanian leadership had the correct political position in 1952 or not- well, some people said they did, some people said they didn't- I said, 'Look why don't you phone up The Daily Telegraph information bureau?''<sup>40</sup>

The main *faux pas* in this excerpt is based on the mismatch between the study group and The Daily Telegraph. The references to Albania suggest that it is a Stalinist communist study group, and The Daily Telegraph is well known for its political conservatism. For somebody to suggest referring to such a publication in such a context amounts to a *faux pas*, but it is the kind of *faux pas* which only a Left audience with first hand knowledge of such study groups would fully appreciate.

Tony Allen also directed some of his humour at a specific section of the audience, albeit a slightly different section from that played to by Melville. Some of Allen's jokes were clearly directed at the members of the hippy drug subculture, which he has described as 'the sort of bohemian anarchists of Ladbroke Grove.'<sup>41</sup> For example, in one routine he ridiculed the inability of the drug squad to successfully infiltrate the drug subculture:

There's one minority group that I *loathe*...the Metropolitan Police Force. And in particular the drug squad. You can always recognize the drug squad where I live, on Portobello Road, Saturday afternoon- they're the people in plain clothes...khaki anoraks, C&A denims, short but unfashionable hair, and sensible boots, right? They look like lapsed Mormons. And they're sidling up to Rastafarians saying things like, 'Hi, man- where can a cat score some, er, reefers?'...and they're offering 1965 prices as well.'<sup>42</sup>

The humour arises from the fact that the drug squad's attempts at imitating the fashions and slang of the drug culture are incongruously inaccurate. Only somebody involved in the culture would fully recognize this inaccuracy, and therefore fully appreciate the humour.

As well as directing their humour at specific social groups, Alternative comedians have always tended to include material in their acts which relates specifically to London, and which can only be fully appreciated by a London audience. The earliest examples of this were jokes about people from specific areas of London, particularly areas associated with the middle class liberals. Hampstead was one such area, and Hampstead-dwellers were joked about by comedians like Alexei Sayle, Pauline Melville, Arnold Brown, and Ben Elton; similarly, Jim Barclay joked about parties thrown by wealthy liberals in Islington.<sup>143</sup>

The fact that the early Alternative comedians tended to play to the same kind of audiences may mean that the impact of their groundbreaking humour was limited. They may have challenged established ways of seeing the world, and expressed minority viewpoints, but because the audiences tended to be dominated by the liberal Left, it seems likely that they would have tended to share these views anyway. However, accusations of preaching to the converted are not entirely valid, and there is evidence of Alternative comics seriously challenging the views of the audience. For example, Jim Barclay has recalled performing at Huddersfield Polytechnic during the Falklands War, in which the audience was divided between local Huddersfield people, who supported the war, and students who opposed it:

At the end of the show there was this debate, pockets of debate all over the audience- 'They shouldn't be allowed to say all those things'- and that evening did more in terms of polemic than all the 7:84 shows with bands and so on. We disappeared down the M1 and they were still arguing- we don't know what time they finished.<sup>144</sup>

## VII. Stagnation and backlash

### A. Stylistic stagnation

There is a distinct feeling among performers who worked on the Alternative Comedy circuit in its early years that as the circuit has expanded, some of the stylistic and political radicalism has

been lost. The word which is most frequently used to describe recent generations of Alternative comedians is 'bland'.<sup>145</sup> Jenny Lecoat has argued that comedians are now 'less likely to experiment'; in 1989, Jeremy Hardy argued that the kind of imaginative acts which worked on the circuit when his career began 'would be given a very hard time' if they tried to work on the contemporary circuit; Simon Fanshawe has argued that the circuit is 'less exciting' than when he first began; and Kit Hollerbach, an American comedian who began working on the London circuit in 1985, has argued that 'the circuit is just not experimental any more.'<sup>146</sup> However, this view is not universally accepted, and some have argued that whilst some of the experimental edge has been lost, the overall standard of performance has risen. This view has been supported by comedians like Simon Fanshawe and Jenny Lecoat.

It is difficult to assess the validity of accusations of a decline in experimentation, but there are signs that Alternative comedians have begun to adopt the kind of conventions which restricted artistic innovation in Variety and club comedy. Few comics working on the London circuit have adopted the rigid joke structures which dominated club comedy and 1930s Variety comedy, or cosy conventions like the catch-phrase. However, as with both Variety and club comedy, there is a tendency to make jokes about the same kinds of subjects. This tendency was present from the earliest days of Alternative Comedy, as we have seen, and Hampstead was one example of a standard joke target. In 1987, Carol Sarler identified the following standard joke subjects on the London circuit: 'Performers and audience begin with the premise that badness means the police/ Norman Tebbit/ The Sun newspaper/ God (or any similar authority)/ the Nolan Sisters/ cruise missiles/ Saatchi's/ heroin. Goodness means whales/ Socialist Worker/ guilt/ Diane Abbott/ UB40s/ Benefit concerts/ Ms./ cocaine.'<sup>147</sup> More recently, standard targets have included television advertisements, and certain aspects of the London Underground, particularly the Northern Line.<sup>148</sup> As we have seen, jokes based on standard targets tend to lead the audience to

anticipate the outcome, and so their potential subversiveness is decreased.

Something else which can lead the audience to know what kind of joke to expect is the use of comic persona, and there have been several recent Alternative comedians who have adopted very rigid stage personae. Hattie Hayridge and Michael Redmond are examples of this kind of comedian. Both have adopted an unvarying deadpan mode of delivery: Hayridge adopts a quiet and deliberately unconfident voice; Redmond speaks in a soft Irish accent, and uses conspicuously long pauses. Both use surreal jokes. For example, Hayridge remembers being an only child: 'I was so lonely, I invented six imaginary brothers and sisters. *Hated 'em!*'<sup>149</sup> The joke is that children invent idealized imaginary friends, so it is incongruous that Hayridge has invented imaginary brothers and sisters whom she dislikes. Michael Redmond's humour is also surreal. For example, he tells the following jokes which rearrange standard habits of shopping:

I like going into newsagent shops and saying, 'Excuse me, is that Mars Bar for sale?' When he says, 'Yes,' I say, 'O.K., I might be back later, I still have a few other ones to see.' I like ringing up bookshops, when they say, 'Yes, can I help you?' I say, 'No I'm O.K. thanks, I'm just browsing.'<sup>150</sup>

In the first of these jokes, Redmond treats the purchasing of the Mars Bar as if it were an expensive item, for which he wants to get the best possible deal; this behaviour is incongruous when buying an inexpensive item like a chocolate bar, which in any case is likely to cost the same in any shop. In the second joke, the incongruity is that browsing, the act of casually looking at books without a firm intention to buy, is something which is not possible outside of the context of the shop, so it cannot be done over the telephone.

With both Hayridge and Redmond, the surrealism of the humour is contained by the persona. In both cases, once the rather odd persona

has been established, it is rigidly adhered to. This means that as with the Variety comics who used established comic types like the northern simpleton, or the cockney spiv, the persona leads the audience to know what kind of jokes to expect, and thus their unexpectedness is decreased.

#### B. The backlash against liberalism

There is evidence to suggest that the kind of political radicalism of many of the early Alternative comedians has now become unfashionable on the London circuit. An article in The Observer newspaper written at around the time of the Comedy Store's tenth birthday in 1989 noted that, 'much of the political radicalism has...disappeared.'<sup>151</sup> Many who work on the current circuit support this view, and those who dispute it do so because they deny that the circuit was ever politically radical, rather than because they see it as being politically radical now.<sup>152</sup> In addition to this, whilst Alternative Comedy has frequently been associated with a policy of non-sexism and non-racism, the vast majority of performers are still male and white. In 1987, Maria Kempinska, who started one of London's biggest and most important Alternative Comedy venues, Jongleurs, estimated that only ten to fifteen percent of the performers who appeared there were women, and in 1990, Jenny Lecoat estimated that out of the 150-200 comedians on the circuit, there are probably only 20 women.<sup>153</sup> She also claims that whereas when she started to work on the circuit in the early 1980s, female performers were often favoured, there are now venues in which it is 'positively a disadvantage to be female.'<sup>154</sup> Similarly, there is still only a tiny number of black comedians on the circuit.

In addition to the fact that political comedy is no longer fashionable on the London circuit, and the scene is still dominated by white male comics, there has been a further change in the politics of Alternative Comedy, as a number of comedians have emerged who have sought to deliberately overturn liberal values. The comedian who is most responsible for this trend is Gerry Sadowitz,

who first started performing in Glasgow in 1985, making occasional trips down to London to play the Comedy Store, then moving down to London to get regular bookings.<sup>155</sup> Various aspects of Sadowitz's act have caused controversy, in particular his jokes about major disasters, his apparent hatred of feminists, and his jokes about Pakistanis. Many have defended his act against liberal criticism, using a number of different arguments. For example, it has been argued that in breaking taboos, he is liberating comedy from the stranglehold of liberal restrictions, stopping Alternative Comedy from becoming a liberal ghetto, and simply being honest. Carol Sarler has praised Sadowitz for massacring 'all the sacred cows to have been built up by the comedy Thought Police'<sup>156</sup>; cabaret promoter and compere Ivor Dembina has argued that, 'he is the only one who has challenged the safety of it all'<sup>157</sup>; and a journalist for the New Musical Express has argued that he 'strikes a more honest note than the party line liberalism of other comics.'<sup>158</sup> Another defence of Sadowitz's act has been that many of the jokes which appear to be reactionary are actually ironic. Sadowitz himself has put this argument forward, defending his more controversial jokes by claiming that, 'people ignored the context I'd put them in...That's because people only responded to the speed and aggressiveness of the act. They didn't pick up on any of the irony.'<sup>159</sup>

Some of these defences can be supported by reference to Sadowitz's material. It would certainly be simplistic to describe his comedy as Right Wing, as several of his jokes are aimed at Right Wing targets. There are attacks on Conservative politicians, and the Conservative Party in general, for example: 'What's the difference between Norman Tebbit and Adolf Hitler? One's dead...and the other one's German'; 'The only good thing about Scottish Tories is, er...there aren't any.'<sup>160</sup> Other targets include the Community Charge, popularly known as the Poll Tax, which has attracted widespread criticism particularly from the Left, because of the financial burden which it places on those on lower incomes<sup>161</sup>; The Sunday Sport, a populist Right Wing newspaper which places a heavy emphasis on pornographic

photographs'<sup>62</sup>; and an attack on wealthy Conservative voters which recalls the class hatred of some of Alexei Sayle's routines:

The worst thing if you get into an argument about politics with somebody is if they vote Tory, they always give the same fucking answers, they go, 'Well, I mean if the Labour Party did win the next election, I mean where's the money going to come from, I mean it's all very well saying we're going to create jobs, and industry, but where's the money going to come from...?' It's going to come from you, you bastard!! They haven't quite got it sussed, have they? 'Oh, I see, so you're going to tax the South of England, I see, that's your answer to everything, oh I see, yes...' No, just you!! Specifically you! We're coming round to your place. My K.Y. jelly, his jumpleads, your bollocks!'<sup>63</sup>

There is also evidence to suggest that some of his jokes work on more than one level, and are more than simple comic abuse. For example, he says that he is opposed to giving charity money to help starving Ethiopians because 'if you start giving them money for food, the next thing you know, they'll be wanting money for clothes.'<sup>64</sup> Here, Sadowitz seems to be suggesting that the Ethiopians will take advantage of charities, but the joke is that wanting money for clothes is perfectly reasonable, so his disapproval is ironic. Similarly, the jokes which he makes about major disasters are often more than simple sick jokes which replace the conventional response of mourning with gleeful gloating. For example, his routine about the fire in the King's Cross tube station in 1987 is principally a comic attack on the inefficiency of London Transport: 'It's really ironic that the escalator that took the passengers into the flames was actually fucking working.'<sup>65</sup>

However, many of the jokes do seem to constitute little more than comic abuse, often aimed at minority groups. There are jokes which ridicule disabled people. For example, whilst performing one of his magic tricks, he says, 'As you can see, this bag itself is absolutely normal- I'm not,' and does an impression of a spastic as an indication of his abnormality; and in another trick, he makes a flamboyant gesture with his arm, which we assume is a conventionalized way of signalling that the magic is happening, only

to be told, 'This isn't part of the trick by the way, I just suffer from a very rare form of epilepsy.'<sup>166</sup> Both of these jokes rely on imitations of disabled people, and as we have seen, in any form of comic imitation, the imitated object must be made to seem strange and incongruous so that it becomes funny. This means that by imitating them, Sadowitz is in some sense ridiculing disabled people. Another minority group which he has targeted is old people, and his routines about them amount to little more than comic abuse: he refers to them as 'old aged bastards'; mimes stuffing a cigarette down an old person's throat in response to being asked to stop smoking; and envisages a conversation in which an old person asks him for directions, and he replies, 'Aren't you dead yet?''<sup>167</sup>

In addition to this, Sadowitz uses jokes about women which bear a similarity to those made by club comedians. Jokes about incongruously large vaginas certainly feature in his act:

There was a young girl from Sri Lanka,  
Whose cunt was a big as a tanker,  
I went for a swim,  
In the depths of her quim,  
And found Lord Lucan, Cary Grant, and Shergar.<sup>168</sup>

This limerick works in exactly the same way as Johnny Wager's joke about the man putting both his hands in a woman's vagina, Bernard Manning's joke about the bus conductress with room for five standing inside, and the Janice York joke about the woman whose genitals could accommodate five pints of Guinness. As we have seen, our culture tends to link genital size with sexual power, so by ridiculing women with large genitals, the idea that women should be sexually passive is reinforced. Another similarity which Sadowitz shares with club comics is the way in which he sexually humiliates female members of the audience. For example, he singles out a woman in the audience and remarks, 'You're very nice looking- any chance of a fuck? [to rest of audience:] It's the only chance I get to meet the fuckers, you know, I've gotta take up the opportunity. [to

woman:] Any chance of a fuck? I suppose a blow job's out of the question, then?'<sup>169</sup> This is exactly the same kind of ritual humiliation as that inflicted by Bernard Manning with comments like, 'I wouldn't mind giving 'er one.' In addition to this kind of comic abuse aimed at women, Sadowitz has also made specific attacks on feminists. In one routine, after unsuccessfully trying to blow up a balloon in order to make balloon animals, he runs offstage, then runs back on with an inflatable sex doll, saying 'Here's one I did earlier.' The joke is that the phrase 'here's one I did earlier' is associated with a popular children's programme, Blue Peter, thus forging an incongruous link between the innocent *homeliness* of children's television, and the sordid sexuality of a sex doll. Once he has brought the sex doll on stage, he comments, 'By the way, in case there's any feminists in here tonight- [mimes having sex with the doll]. I bloody hate feminists. They hate men so much, how come they dress like them?'<sup>170</sup> The mimed copulation with the doll is clearly intended as a piece of gratuitous taboo-breaking, an attempt to goad the liberals in the audience, but the comment about feminist dress sense amounts to more than that. In ridiculing feminists for dressing in clothes which are normally associated with men, Sadowitz is effectively enforcing dominant ideas about dress, which deem certain clothes feminine and suitable for women to wear, and others masculine and suitable for men to wear. Therefore, in addition to ridiculing the ways of a minority group, the joke also enforces sexual stereotyping in clothing.

Perhaps the most controversial element of Sadowitz's act is his material about Pakistanis. In one routine, he performs a character called Raj, which is ostensibly a crude and derogatory racial impersonation. Wrapping a towel round his head to represent a turban, he barks his lines in a rough stereotype of a Pakistani accent:

'Hello, my name is Raj! And I specialize in short changing people that come into my shop! I wear my pyjamas all fucking day! A business suit in bed! I can't go to the toilet without taking my entire family with me...'<sup>171</sup>

Whilst this is apparently a simple piece of racist humour, the way in which Sadowitz introduces it allows a number of interpretations. He begins the routine by saying, 'I'm actually working on a new character at the moment for Friday Night Live, you know, 'cos you know, Harry Enfield's got a character called Stavros, and it's been very controversial', and after doing Raj, he asks, 'D'you think that's controversial? I don't know.' This framing means that the Raj character can be seen as a comment on Enfield's Stavros, a racial impersonation of a London Greek-Cypriot kebab shop owner: the Raj character is very obviously a racist stereotype, and by mentioning the Enfield character Stavros, Sadowitz could be seen as implying that it is a similarly racist creation. The feigned innocence with which the line 'D'you think that's controversial?' is delivered suggests another interpretation: the audience laughs at Sadowitz's crude racial stereotype not because they believe in it, but because he is using it to be as deliberately outrageous and shocking as possible.

However, this interpretation presupposes an exclusively liberal audience: for a non-liberal audience, for example an audience at a Working Men's Club, such racial stereotyping would be neither outrageous nor shocking, so this interpretation of the routine would not be valid. Another interpretation of the routine is that it operates as a piece of racist humour, implying that Pakistanis are dishonest, ridiculing their traditional dress by comparing it with pyjamas, and also ridiculing the close-knit extended family structure of traditionalist Pakistanis in the line about going to the toilet with the whole family. The routine allows a number of interpretations, but the fact that some members of the audience may read it as a comment on the work of another comedian, or as a piece of gratuitous taboo-breaking does not protect it from the charge of racism, as it seems likely that at least some members of the audience will interpret and enjoy the routine as a simple piece of racist humour. This argument is supported by the fact that Sadowitz makes other jokes about Pakistanis which do not involve the same possibility of different levels of interpretation. For example,

directly after the Raj routine, he tells the following joke: 'How do you get fifty Pakistanis in a mini? I've no idea, but they do it, don't they?'<sup>172</sup> Here, a metacomic joke-structure is used as a vehicle for observational comedy. The opening line suggests a standard riddle structure, leading the audience to expect an incongruous or whimsical answer; this expectation is overturned by the second line, which turns the question into a simple observation. In later shows, Sadowitz has used more observational material about the Glaswegian Pakistani community; for example, talking about how they keep business in the family, even if it means twelve-year-old children selling cigarettes in their shops, products they are too young to legally use. He exaggerates this trend, saying, 'So what happens next? You'll walk into a shop and you'll find a foetus behind the counter flogging fags.'<sup>173</sup> Sadowitz's justification for using such material is that his observations are accurate, so he is merely being truthful.<sup>174</sup> However, as we have seen, observational humour is never simply observational: in order to become humour, an object must be observed from a particular perspective, so that it seems incongruous and funny. Sadowitz uses exaggeration in his observations about Pakistanis: it would be very difficult to actually get twenty people into a mini, and of course, a foetus could not really sell cigarettes. However, it is the perspective from which he views the Pakistani community which allows us to ascertain the politics of the material. Sadowitz views Pakistanis from the perspective of the white majority, which sees the motoring habits and extended family structure of traditionalist Pakistanis as being incongruous and abnormal. Because it imposes the perspective of a majority group onto the ways of a minority group, the humour is reactionary; because the minority group in question is a racial minority group, it is also racist.

Sadowitz is not the only comedian working on the Alternative Comedy circuit who has reacted against its liberal/Left morality and reverted to basing comedy on reactionary values. Another is Jack Dee, whom Sadowitz has described as a subtler version of himself.<sup>175</sup> Dee's style is very different from that of Sadowitz: Dee is calm,

relaxed, and conversational where Sadowitz is loud, fast and manic; and whereas Sadowitz mixes stage magic with stand-up, Dee's act is purely verbal. Dee's basic comic technique is to talk about something, and then take the most unexpectedly cynical and selfish approach to it as possible. For example, when discussing an oil slick in Alaska, instead of commenting on the damage to the Alaskan environment, he complains that it will mean increased petrol prices<sup>176</sup>; and instead of praising Swedish people for being, 'friendly, kind, warm, and trusting,' he comments, 'makes shoplifting a piece of piss, really does.'<sup>177</sup> Dee differs from Sadowitz in that he does not take the same kind of provocative approach to women or racial minorities, but he does apply his incongruously selfish and cynical attitude to various forms of physical deviancy. For example, he ridicules fat people:

There's been a lot of American comedians in town recently, I've gone to see them all, and they all make jokes about fat people, I don't know if you've noticed this, but you know, they all make jokes about people who through no fault of their own are overweight, and I don't know about you, but personally I think it's extremely funny, and I wish I'd thought of it.<sup>178</sup>

The joke here is that the audience is led to expect Dee to express disapproval at the jokes about fat people, particularly by the phrase 'through no fault of their own', and it is the unexpectedness of the final line, which overturns this expectation, which causes their laughter. The routine continues with a sustained ridiculing of fat people. He also ridicules people with body odour:

Asked for non-smoking, got put next to a person with B.O., you can't win, can you? Just sitting there, stinking the place out, you know. Sort of bloke who knows where you can still buy nylon shirts, you know. Big marks on his jackets, both sides, looked like he'd been tie-dyed by a gang of hippies, absolutely disgusting.<sup>179</sup>

This kind of humorous expression of physical repulsion is reactionary, because it relates to dominant cultural standards of physical attractiveness and personal hygiene. Dominant ideas about normal physicality which dictate that people over a certain weight

are fat and therefore unattractive, and that certain bodily odours are undesirable, are largely enforced by the mass media, by magazines, films, television, and particularly advertizing. In ridiculing deviation from the norms established by these powerful cultural institutions, Dee is reinforcing ideas which are already dominant, so these jokes are reactionary. This is particularly true of the ridiculing of people with body odour, which relates to advertizing in a very direct way: the very concept of body odour is one which has been created by advertizers, in order to create and expand the market for soaps, deodorants, and washing powders. In ridiculing deviation from norms set up by advertizers, Dee is enforcing these norms, and therefore furthering their interests. In addition to this, Dee has also made jokes about people with more serious forms of physical deviance. For example, he has a routine about going to see The Elephant Man, a biopic about John Merrick, who was badly deformed by a rare disease. Dee's approach to this is that rather than sympathizing with the central character, he says that he merely wanted to see how badly deformed he was: 'I was twenty minutes into the film, "Oh, come on, take the bag off your head! Can't be that bad." Then he did, and it was! [laughing maliciously:] I thought, "Fucking hell!" Worth every penny I thought, didn't you?'<sup>180</sup> He then goes on to imagine Merrick in television advertisements: 'Oh, mind you, could you imagine it, you know, "The bank that likes to say- [imitation of Merrick wheezing]." "American Express?" "Get out, you freak. Don't come in here and ask for credit with a bag on your head, who do you think we are?"'<sup>181</sup> The humour here stems from the reversal of the expected response to the film, replacing the expected sympathy with a callous morbid fascination; and also from placing Merrick in the incongruous context of television advertisements, which normally only use actors who conform to the standards of physical attractiveness which they promote. The attitude taken towards Merrick in the jokes is clearly callous, and he is explicitly referred to as 'you freak'. In directing humorous hostility against people with physical deformities, this routine is clearly reactionary. Another example of Dee's humour has concrete victims. He claims to have read out the

names and addresses of people who used the incontinence pads which he used to deliver for a living.<sup>192</sup> The humour of this act stems from the fact that incontinence is a physical disorder which is usually kept secret, largely due to a fear of ridicule; because of this secrecy, it is incongruous to identify incontinent people in a public context like a comedy show. This joke has actual victims, the people whose privacy it destroys.

Another comedian whose humour works by reversing liberal values is Jo Brand, originally known as the Sea Monster. Brand's approach is very different from that of either Sadowitz or Dee, and the evolution of her style means that the interpretation of her material is complex. Brand's style of performance has undergone significant changes since she became a prominent figure in the Alternative Comedy scene in the late 1980s. Initially, she bore a similarity to comedians like Hattie Hayridge and Michael Redmond, in that she adopted a very rigid stage persona, which involved a monotonous and mannered style of delivery. Her facial expression was constantly bored and miserable, and she spoke slowly and used the same kind of deliberately predictable intonation as used by sports commentators whilst reading out football results, in which a phrase with an up-inflection is always followed by a phrase with a down-inflection. More recently, her performance style has become more cheerful, varied, conversational, and natural.

Brand's reversal of liberal values is fundamentally different from that of Sadowitz and Dee, in that instead of directing hostility against other groups, like Pakistanis, or people with body odour, Brand's humour is self-deprecating. The jokes which made her famous work by exaggerating her physical size to the point of absurdity, often in very imaginative ways. For example, she describes herself as being 'the size of a modest Barratt home'; having 'a stomach the size of K2'; taking fashion ideas from Japanese culture, specifically 'Kenzo's autumn sumo wrestler collection'; and being the child 'who always got picked to play Bethlehem in the school panto. And even then, Mary and Joseph used to keep mistaking me for

Greater Manchester.'<sup>183</sup> This kind of humour need not necessarily be self-deprecating, as such incongruous exaggeration could be celebratory. However, other lines in the act suggest self-deprecation. For example, she remembers a letter her boyfriend has sent after leaving her: "If you either inherit a great deal of money. Suddenly get very attractive. Or carve yourself out a career as a stand-up comic with an excessively stupid name. I might come back to you." Good evening, I'm the Sea Monster.'<sup>184</sup> There is an implication here that Brand is so physically unattractive that only becoming rich or making an unlikely career change would make her attractive to a man.

However, Brand's humour is open to more than one interpretation. At its most obvious level, it is self-deprecating, and it enforces dominant notions of physical attractiveness, which dictate that large women are unattractive, because Brand ridicules herself for deviating from these notions. However, there are elements of Brand's style which suggest a less obvious interpretation. Firstly, her stage costume suggests allegiance with the feminist or lesbian subculture, including baggy black trousers, tops and jackets, sometimes worn with monkey boots, large earrings, and very short hair. This means that part of the audience's laughter may not be simply laughter at a large woman ridiculing her size, but may be the laughter of surprise: it is surprising and incongruous that a feminist-looking woman should tell such self-deprecating jokes. The mannered delivery of her early career also had an alienating effect on the material, and combined with the fact that she looks like a feminist, this means that the jokes could be interpreted as being ironic, humorous comments on the kind of ridicule to which fat people are subjected, rather than examples of it.

However, in spite of the possibility of multiple interpretation, there were elements in Brand's early material which encouraged the most obvious interpretation, that her jokes were simply about laughing at fat women. For example, the fact that she dresses in a style which suggests feminism was contradicted by frequent

references to being desperate to find a man to marry; desperation to conform to the social institution of marriage is somewhat at odds with the broad aims of feminism. If Brand is not seen to be a feminist, then the laughter which greets her jokes about her size cannot be read as a sign of surprise that a feminist should make such jokes, or a sign that the jokes are being read as ironic comments. However, Brand's more recent material has tended to avoid the humour of self-deprecation, partly because she no longer relies so heavily on jokes about being fat, and the jokes about being fat are more about other people's attitude towards this than simple self-deprecating jokes; for example, she complains, 'I fall into that group of women euphemistically labelled by the fashion industry as "revolting obese lepers."<sup>185</sup> In addition to this, jokes about being desperate to marry, and conforming to the female role, have been replaced by jokes which reverse conventional ideas about the female role. For example, she adopts a macho attitude to violence: 'The reason I like Rottweilers is 'cos they're violent, and so am I. I have to say, I'm not averse to a good punch-up myself. Especially at the January sales. I don't actually buy anything, I just go round hitting people.'<sup>186</sup> Here, the reversal of expectation is quite complex. Brand begins by claiming a liking for casual violence, an attitude at odds with dominant ideas about feminine behaviour. She then puts this violence in the context of the January sales, which according to rather dated comic stereotypes is one context in which women do indulge in casual violence, fighting each other to get the best bargain buys. This expectation is then overturned, when she reveals that she does not fight over bargains, she just hits people for no apparent reason. She also uses more jokes which suggest a feminist stance, for example suggesting that the government should arm women with shotguns, so that they could shoot rapists, muggers, and 'anyone who got on our nerves, really.'<sup>187</sup>

Comedians like Gerry Sadowitz, Jack Dee, and Jo Brand have reversed the liberal values of Alternative Comedy in different ways. Sadowitz's reversal has been the most obvious, as groups which enjoy comparatively little social power, like women, old people, disabled

people and Pakistani people, are used as the targets of jokes which often express a good deal of hostility towards them. Dee's reversal has been more subtle, using physical deviance as a source of humour, and enforcing dominant ideas about physical normality by ridiculing deviation from these ideas. Brand's reversal has been more self-destructive, telling jokes which can be interpreted as ridiculing herself for her physical size, thus potentially legitimating jokes which ridicule fat women. The fact that in all of these cases, the jokes can be interpreted in different ways does not absolve them of the charge of reinforcing reactionary values: some members of the audience may read the jokes as ironic statements or gratuitous blows at liberal sensibilities, but this does not mean that others will not interpret them as simple reactionary jokes, and appreciate them as such. As long as any element of the audience enjoys the jokes on their simple reactionary level, they are succeeding in reinforcing reactionary ideas.

The reversal of liberal values in Alternative Comedy is not restricted to the three comedians considered above. There are a number of less established acts which have used similar approaches, for example, a double act called God and Jesus, who tell jokes about 'Blacks, Jews, Irish people, Catholics, death and women'<sup>188</sup>, arguing that the humour is directed against their stage personas rather than at the apparent targets, and that they are working against the 'appalling narrowing' of the possibilities of comedy.<sup>189</sup> There has also been a trickle-down effect, so that many of the current generation of acts who work on the London circuit may include anti-liberal material without necessarily making it the main focus of their acts. An article written in 1989 noted that radical politics had generally been replaced by jokes which break 'as many taboos as possible.'<sup>190</sup>

#### VIII. Factors which have altered Alternative Comedy

Clearly, Alternative Comedy has undergone significant changes since its birth in 1979. Initially, it was characterized by its stylistic

and political radicalism. It specifically satirized previous traditions of stand-up comedy, and refused to recognize the boundaries which had restricted these traditions. Unlike the majority of comedians from the Variety and Working Men's Club traditions, Alternative comedians were openly political, and the politics of much of the material was distinctly radical, challenging rather than enforcing dominant ideas, and directing hostility against majority groups rather than minority groups. More recently, whilst some of this stylistic and political radicalism has remained, it is no longer the major characteristic of the tradition. Whilst individual comedians continue to experiment with the possibilities of stand-up comedy, and deliver comedy with a radical political perspective, there is evidence of a general trend away from stylistic experimentation, and political comedy is no longer fashionable. In addition to this, even the liberal values of Alternative Comedy, and its commitment to a policy of non-sexism and non-racism have been challenged by comedians like Gerry Sadowitz, and those who have followed his example. This kind of change may be connected with the process of professionalization which has occurred in the Alternative Comedy scene.

#### A. Professionalization

In 1979, the Alternative Comedy circuit comprised the loose collection of pubs, arts centres, and colleges in which the Alternative Cabaret group performed. Initially, neither the performers, nor the people who ran the venue had much experience of running cabarets, and many of them were badly organized, with inappropriately-arranged seating and poor public address systems.<sup>191</sup> There was only a handful of performers, and audiences tended to be sparse. Jenny Lecoat has estimated that in 1982, when her career began, an average audience would be made up of about 50 to 60 people.<sup>192</sup> Since then, the circuit has undergone a massive process of professionalization, with a huge increase in the number of venues and performers, venues being run professionally, and the size of audiences increasing dramatically. An article in The Observer

written in 1989 described the current state of the London circuit: 'Every Friday and Saturday night more than 5,000 people in search of a laugh do the rounds of the cabaret circuit, and while none of the artists is willing to divulge nightly earnings, all agree that there is enough work to give a large number of acts a healthy living.'<sup>193</sup> The process of expansion and professionalization may have affected the scene in a number of ways.

#### B. Cabaret promoters and commercial interests

When Alternative Comedy was beginning, the performers controlled most of the elements of their shows: the Alternative Cabaret group created their own circuit, and arranged their own bookings, so there were no promoters involved in the process of organizing the shows. As the scene developed and expanded, promoters were needed to run the regular cabaret venues which were emerging. It seems likely that the first promoters to appear were not attracted to Alternative Comedy by the prospect of financial gain, but were genuinely interested in this new form of entertainment. Initially, audiences were small, so the chances of becoming rich as a cabaret promoter would have been slim. There is also evidence to suggest that the early promoters were genuinely interested in the form: Jim Barclay believes that those who became promoters were not 'people on the make, it was people who lived in, say, Crouch End or wherever, you know, and said, "Oh, I'd like to have something like that here," you know, and finding a pub and doing it, making it happen'<sup>194</sup>; and Andy Waring, a cabaret promoter who runs the Banana Cabarets, remembers becoming involved in promoting cabarets in the early 1980s because he was excited by the politics of the comedy, and the ability of some of the performers to include complex political ideas in comic routines.<sup>195</sup> Promoters also demonstrated a willingness to experiment. For example, Maria Kempinska, who opened Jongleurs at the beginning of 1983, remembers: I experimented- I wanted to see how modern dance would go down, and we had all sorts of bizarre things happening- there was a whole mixture.'<sup>196</sup>

As the London circuit has expanded and become more professional, power has moved from the hands of the performers to the hands of the promoters. This power is evident in the system which allows new performers to begin working on the circuit. New performers begin by performing for 5 to 10 minutes at a venue, without being paid, in what is known as an 'open mic. spot'. If the promoter considers the act to have gone down well with the audience, he or she may offer the act a half-spot, lasting 10 to 12 minutes, for which the performer will receive half the usual fee. If the act goes down well in a half-spot, he or she may be offered a full booking. This system places power in the hands of the promoter, because it is the promoter who assesses how good the audience's response to the act has been. The promoter is under no obligation at any stage of the process to book the act. Even if an act goes down well with an audience, the promoter may decide against booking it if he or she personally dislikes the act. There is also evidence of promoters abusing the open mic. system, allowing new acts to perform in their venues without payment, whilst having no intention of offering them paid bookings.<sup>197</sup> The power of the promoters places an enormous pressure on new acts, and this pressure may discourage artistic experimentation: as we have seen, experimentation always involves the risk of failure, so new acts may prefer to rely on tried and tested formulae which they have seen other performers use.

Another aspect of the expansion of the circuit is the fact that cabaret promotion has become profitable, so it seems likely that some of the current promoters are involved for commercial reasons, rather than artistic ones. Certainly, various promoters have been exploring and exploiting the commercial possibilities of Alternative Comedy. For example, John Davy has set up a promotion company as an offshoot of the Jongleurs venue, which has provided entertainment for companies like Saatchi and Saatchi, and for Thompson's holiday resorts.<sup>198</sup> Alternative Comedy has also attracted various commercial interests, particularly breweries. For example, Holsten Pils sponsored an international comedy festival in London in 1989, which was largely dedicated to Alternative Comedy.<sup>199</sup> Trophy have

sponsored various Alternative Comedy ventures, including televised acts at the Comedy Store, and the Fool's Paradise season in Sheffield.<sup>200</sup> Various breweries have sponsored specific venues, and named the venues after their products: for example, the Oranje Boom Boom in W1 was named after Oranje Boom lager; and there are 4X Cabarets in Birmingham and Bristol, named after Castlemaine 4X lager.<sup>201</sup>

The increased commercial viability of Alternative Comedy may be one of the factors which has led to the decrease of artistic experimentation and radical politics. It is in the interests of the promoter to attract a regular audience, and thus to ensure the venue's financial stability. Therefore, it is in the interests of the promoter to run as slick a show as possible. This means that acts which take artistic risks are less attractive than more predictable acts, from a commercial point of view. This places pressure on comedians to present a slick and sellable act, rather than to experiment, because experimentation always involves the risk of audience disapproval: as we have seen several of the early Alternative comedians caused strong adverse reactions from audiences which could not relate to the newness of their style, and this sometimes led to violent responses or puzzled silence. As adverse audience reactions can mean a loss of bookings, it is against the interests of the comedian to risk such responses by experimenting with style. Felix is one current comedian who has felt this pressure:

If you wanna be experimental, expand on a topic, talk about something without necessarily a big gag at the end of it, then it's slightly difficult...the first expectation in anyone who's running a club, and in terms of the audience is, you know, 'Get the audience laughing', and if you 'die' at a gig 'cos you're not doing that, you know, it's sort of like, 'Well...dunno if we can book him again, we need people coming through the door, man.'<sup>202</sup>

In addition to this, it may be against the commercial interests of promoters to book comedians who use radical political material, as comedy which expresses a strong political opinion inevitably runs

the risk of alienating members of the audience who disagree with that opinion. This kind of disagreement can have extreme effects: Dawn French has recalled an incident at the Comedy Store in which Andy de la Tour made a comment about a film about Auschwitz, which received a racist heckle in reply, thus sparking off a huge fight in the audience.<sup>203</sup> In other cases, the effect can be less serious. Andy de la Tour has recalled adverse responses to his material about Northern Ireland: 'Sometimes people would respond badly, simply on the grounds of its politics, no matter how funny other people in the audience had found it.'<sup>204</sup> Mark Steel has had similar experiences, and has described the effect which his more political material sometimes has: 'It just goes really flat, and you get people afterwards saying, "Oh, I didn't like some of the stuff you done about the police and fings."<sup>205</sup> As it is in the commercial interests of the promoters to ensure that the audience is not alienated by the comedian, it may be that more political comedians are considered more of a liability than comedians whose material is less likely to offend. Certainly, some promoters have expressed a preference for less political comedians. For example, Eugene Cheese who runs the Chuckle Club in Victoria has argued, 'Too much politics alienates too many people. Of course, it's got to be non-racist and non-sexist but there are ways to make people laugh other than politics.'<sup>206</sup> The presence of commercial interests like breweries may also have an effect on the politics of the material. Firstly, breweries may be less interested in promoting cabarets with an emphasis on radical politics than less political ventures; and secondly, an act by a radical political comedian will have its meaning subtly altered if it is performed under the shadow of a banner sporting the product name and corporate logo of a major capitalist concern like a brewery.

Whilst financial considerations tend to favour comedians who rely on tried and tested formulae rather than those who take artistic risks, and also tend to favour less political comedians, it would be inaccurate to assume that all promoters are motivated solely by these considerations, and many are still interested in the artistic

and political aspects of the entertainment. Another factor which may have affected the decreased experimentation and political content is a change in the attitude of the performers that has been brought about by the professionalization of the circuit.

### C. Professional Alternative comedians

As we have seen, most of the early Alternative comics emerged from the political wing of the Alternative Theatre movement. Part of their identity was that they were largely non-university educated, and they saw themselves as being in opposition to the tradition of the Oxbridge Mafia. However, this soon began to change, and three of the regulars at the Comic Strip, Rik Mayall, Ade Edmondson, and Nigel Planer were university-educated, in spite of the group's claim that, 'What we're doing is intelligent comedy by people who didn't go to university.'<sup>207</sup> Gradually, the circuit also began to attract performers who were part of the Oxbridge tradition which had been opposed by the first generation; Nick Revell, Nick Hancock, Neil Mullarkey, Sheila Hyde, Dave Baddiel, Patrick Marber, and God and Jesus are all examples of Alternative comedians who cut their performing teeth in the Cambridge Footlights and the Oxford Revue.<sup>208</sup>

In addition to attracting performers from different backgrounds, there is evidence that as Alternative Comedy expanded, the motivations of some of the comedians changed. Jim Barclay has argued that the original wave of Alternative comics was motivated by political considerations: 'When it started, it was actually fugitives from the political theatre who thought, "We're not getting anywhere through political theatre, maybe this is the way forward, to go through political comedy"'<sup>209</sup>; and Alexei Sayle has argued that they were not motivated by financial concerns: 'I don't think we went into it thinking of it as a career, you know, for the pension plan...I think obviously now there is more of a career structure.'<sup>210</sup> With the increased size and professionalization of

the circuit it is now possible for a comedian to make a healthy living on it, and it seems likely that some performers see it simply as a career, rather than as a chance to experiment with comedy, or make radical statements with it.<sup>211</sup> Comedians who take this approach will be much less likely to take risks by experimenting or using political material, which may damage their chances of future bookings. Mark Steel is one performer who believes that this kind of attitude is responsible for the change in Alternative Comedy:

Now people can think, 'Oo, I'll get meself a little act together, twenty minutes, get a twenty minute act together, go and do it round some of the clubs'...they can earn two or three hundred quid a week just going round them...Now, if you're going to carve yourself out a little niche, the last thing you're going to do is say something that might upset someone, or say something that might antagonize people, so they come up with the blandest bloody things possible.<sup>212</sup>

#### D. The influence of television

As we have seen, there is a long tradition of Alternative comedians moving into television, and many comics have argued that the attention of television is partly responsible for the change in Alternative Comedy.<sup>213</sup> For example, Felix has argued that, 'What prompted it, the whole comic movement, was that people were genuinely interested in performing differently, and making some kind of social comment. That's all gone now, and people's main concern is about getting on telly.'<sup>214</sup> The interest of television may have affected the development of Alternative Comedy because it is regulated by censorship, in a way which live stand-up comedy is not. This means that many of Alternative Comedy's more boundary-stretching moments could never have appeared on television. For example, Mike Bolland, the Deputy Controller of programmes for Channel 4 made the following comment about a night at the Comedy Store: 'It's filth...I've seen some things which would cause a fluttering in the hearts of Brompton Road, where the I.B.A. live.'<sup>215</sup> It seems likely that comedians who are motivated by a desire to move into television will tailor their material to make it as inoffensive as possible, in order to attract the attention of

television producers, who will be searching for material which is suitable for broadcasting.

#### E. Broader audiences

There is a consensus of opinion on the Alternative Comedy circuit that the audiences have broadened<sup>216</sup>, and some have attributed this to the television exposure which the form has received; for example, Jenny Lecoat has argued that, 'because it's been on television, and because people understand Ben Elton and Julian Clary, and they think, "Oh, we'll go and see that live," so you get a much broader spectrum of people.'<sup>217</sup> Certainly, it seems that whereas the early Alternative comics played to an audience which contained a large middle class liberal Left element, this is no longer the case. Kevin Day, who currently works on the circuit argues:

When you used to go to cabaret five or six years ago, 95% of the audience would be white, trendy, liberal with a small 'l', same, similar sorts of jobs, mainly graduates, all well into the material, all well into listening to people articulating things they spoke to each other about. Now, the audiences come from all walks of life, the audiences are not particularly interested in one political point of view.<sup>218</sup>

This broadening of audiences has two implications for political comedy: firstly, it means that accusations of preaching to the converted which may have been levelled at political comedians in the past are less valid; and secondly, it means that performers who express radical Left views in their comedy run more risk of alienating their audiences, and so risk damaging their chances of future bookings.

#### IX. Economics determines style

When Alternative Comedy began in 1979, it represented a challenge to all of the conventions which had previously restricted stand-up comedians. Whereas both Variety and club comics had been restricted

by rigid conventions born of difficult performance conditions, and Variety comics had to contend with the additional problem of strict censorship, the early Alternative comedians flew in the face of such restrictions. Indeed, the previous traditions of stand-up comedy provided a rich source of humour for Alternative comedians, with Variety and club comics being ridiculed, and the conventions they worked within being subverted and satirized. Alternative Comedy certainly extended the boundaries of what was possible in stand-up comedy. Comedians abused audiences, were deliberately boring, and sometimes even deliberately unfunny. The choice of subject matter was extended, as routines were built around subjects like parental death or atomic physics. Whereas both Variety and club comedy had tended strongly towards political conservatism, Alternative comedians often took politically radical stances, encompassing Marxism, anarchism, feminism, gay liberation, and anti-racism. However, the political impact of early Alternative Comedy should not be overestimated, as the audiences tended to be dominated by the middle class liberal Left, which was broadly sympathetic to the politics of the material. As Alternative Comedy has expanded and become professionalized, stylistic innovation and political radicalism have become less prominent, and this may be connected with the very process of professionalization. The radical approach to comedy taken by the early Alternative comedians involved risk, and as we have seen, they sometimes provoked extreme reactions in their audiences. As it has become possible to make a living by being a promoter or a comedian on the London circuit, so it has become more important to please audiences than to stretch the artistic and political boundaries of stand-up comedy, which always involves the risk of failure, particularly as audiences have become broader and less sympathetic. For the promoter, an audience must be pleased so as to ensure a regular audience; and for the comedian, an audience must be pleased to safeguard future bookings. As we have seen, the early Alternative comedians were opposed to the public subsidy which had supported the Alternative Theatre scene which they had abandoned, arguing that 'the economics should determine the style.'<sup>219</sup> As the Alternative Comedy scene has become

professionalized, the economics *has* determined the style, but this has meant a move away from the radical approach to stand-up comedy taken by ~~those who~~ originally created the scene.

## Chapter Six: Three Comedians

I. Individuals within the three traditions

II. Frankie Howerd

III. Les Dawson

IV. Ben Elton

V. Career shape and comic style

## **I. Individuals within the three traditions**

In the previous three chapters, the work of stand-up comedians has been examined in terms of style and social and political meaning, and in terms of how much these reflect the characteristics of the tradition of showbusiness which produced it. A problem posed by this type of analysis is that it tends to be reductive, playing down the role of the individual in the act of creation. The performance skills of individual comedians tend to be overlooked, and there is a tendency for the character of individual stand-up comedy acts to be overlooked, as only material which relates to a particular showbusiness tradition is quoted and analysed. For this reason, it may be useful to make a slightly more detailed analysis, in order to determine the extent to which comedians are influenced by the tradition of showbusiness which produced them, and to assess the importance of their own creative input. Therefore, the work of three comics will be examined, each representing one of the three major traditions of British stand-up comedy. These comedians are Frankie Howerd, from the Variety tradition; Les Dawson, a comic produced by the Working Men's Clubs; and Ben Elton, one of the earlier Alternative comedians. These three have been chosen because they are all still alive and still working as comedians; and also because they are all particularly successful. Their work will be examined in terms of the extent to which it typifies the traditions which produced them, and the extent to which their humour is atypical.

## **II. Frankie Howerd**

Frankie Howerd was born in York in 1921, and brought up in Eltham in London. He came from a comfortable upper working class background: his father was a regular soldier in the Royal Artillery, and his mother had worked in a sweet factory; his childhood was spent in a terraced house in a working class area of Eltham, and as a child, he visited Working Men's Clubs.<sup>1</sup> He began his career as a comedian in amateur concert parties before the Second World War after failing an audition for R.A.D.A. This period also saw several failed attempts

at breaking into the professional world of Variety, involving several trial turns in Variety theatres. During the war, Howerd failed an audition for E.N.S.A., but continued to organize amateur entertainments whilst serving as a soldier. After the war, he broke into professional Variety, touring with a show called For The Fun Of It, at the bottom of the bill, in a section dedicated to ex-services performers.<sup>2</sup> He shot to fame when he got a job as a resident comedian on a B.B.C. Radio Variety show, Variety Bandbox in the late 1940s.<sup>3</sup> This raised his status to that of a top of the bill Variety act. After the death of Variety, he continued to work as a stand-up comedian in variety clubs, Working Men's Clubs, and theatres, as well as on a series of radio and television shows.

As we have seen, Variety comedy was typified by a familiar relationship between the comedian and the audience, this relationship being forged by the use of recognizable stage personas, catch-phrases, a limited set of joke-subjects, and the re-cycling of jokes. Whilst it was rarely overtly political, it tended towards political conservatism, largely ignoring class issues; enforcing roles within marriage; dodging censorship by covertly communicating about sexual matters, but rarely challenging dominant ideas about sexuality; and occasionally using jokes which relied on racist assumptions. In many respects, Howerd is a typical Variety comedian, his work exhibiting many of these characteristics. Certainly, the politics of his act are largely typical of Variety comedy. As with most Variety comedians, his work is rarely overtly political. He is also typical in that he rarely jokes about social class, and when he does tell class-based jokes, they rely more on class rivalry than a socialist perspective. For example, in 'The Ten Guinea Cruise', a routine from an early 1960s radio show, he talks about a visit to the doctor's: 'I wasn't poorly actually, but you see, actually, I live next door to this doctor, and he had his car parked in front of our house, and I thought, "I'm sorry, he'll have to move it", you see, because we were expecting the dustcart.'<sup>4</sup> The laughter which greets this line is inexplicable without a notion of class differences: the doctor is seen as a respectable middle class

figure, and therefore it is incongruous to ask him to move his car to make way for a dustcart, which connotes lowliness and lack of respectability. The joke relies on the idea that Howerd is being cheeky in asking a respected figure like a doctor to move his car for this reason, because he is deviating from normal behaviour dictated by social class, which would demand deference to the doctor. In this sense, the joke is subversive, because it celebrates this deviation, but it is more an expression of class rivalry than an expression of politicized class struggle.

In many respects, the sexual politics of Howerd's work are typical of the Variety tradition, but his humour is unusual in that it tends to lack the domestic jokes on which many Variety comedians tended to rely. He has no overbearing wife figure in his act, and therefore there is also no monstrous mother-in-law looming over him in his comic routines. However, this does not mean that he does not use humour which enforces domestic roles. Whilst Howerd has no comic wife or mother-in-law to ridicule for deviating from roles within marriage, he often uses other female characters to fulfil this function. For example, just as Variety comics like Dick Henderson, Billy Russell, and Max Miller ridiculed their joke wives for failing to fulfil their roles as attractive sexual partners, so Howerd ridicules incidental female characters for the same reason. He lacks a fat wife or mother-in-law, but the figure of the comic fat woman appears in many of his routines. For example, in 'The Ten Guinea Cruise', he describes the woman behind the counter: 'Oo, poor soul, she was fat! Oo she was fat! Oo she was, oo *huge*, I mean every time she breathed everything quivered, you know.'

Whilst Howerd has no wife figure whom he can ridicule for not performing her housewifely duties properly, some of his jokes do enforce domestic roles, in subtle ways. For example, in 'The Ten Guinea Cruise', a woman answers the door in a kimono, and Howerd comments: 'Sloppy cat! Sloppy cat, it was the middle of the afternoon, there she was, dressed, in dr..these dressing gown and slippers.' The implication is that the woman is a 'sloppy cat'

because she is not up and about and cleaning the house, and therefore she is showing signs of sluttishness. Compared with the jokes about dreadful cooking hurled at the wife figure by Variety comics like Dick Henderson, Howerd's joking enforcement of the housewife ethic pales into insignificance, but it is there nonetheless.

Howerd occasionally uses racial humour, but he is typical of the Variety tradition in that his use of such humour is rare, and its racism is not aggressive. In the 'Ten Guinea Cruise' the destination of the cruise is Tokyo, and Howerd's antics in Tokyo rely on the kind of cultural stereotyping promoted by Hollywood portrayals of eastern lifestyles. The routine uses an obviously fantastic Japan, full of rickshaw drivers, geisha girls, samurai warriors, and ritual suicides, where the people are all 'inscrutable'; indeed, Tokyo is described as 'a sort of inscrutable Tunbridge Wells'. It also allows for a series of cultural jokes, which make Japanese customs absurd by applying Western values to them. The woman at the Tea House of the Seven Dragons is called a 'sloppy cat' because she answers the door wearing a kimono, which Howerd mistakes for a dressing gown. The room which he rents is 'a low three-piece suite- two rush mats and a cushion'. The phrase 'three-piece suite' denotes a sofa and two armchairs, and connotes a Western notion of comfort. According to this notion, two rush mats and a cushion would be very uncomfortable, so the joke works by setting something up and then debunking it: the idea that the room is comfortable is built up by the phrase 'three-piece suite', but this idea is defied when it turns out that it is only rush mats and a cushion. Therefore, the joke relies on reinforcing a Western idea of comfort over the Eastern idea of comfort. Such jokes are racist in that they reinforce the values of the culture, whilst making the values of another culture seem slightly odd and strange. However, this is the casual racism of Variety comedy, similar to Dan Leno's joke about Spanish people having olive-coloured skin because they are dirty, because whilst the basic assumption of the joke is racist, it is not a vehicle for aggressive racism. Certainly, it is very different

from the kind of racist humour employed by club comics, which enforces stereotypes more aggressively, relates to fears about immigration, and imagines death or mutilation being inflicted on members of certain racial groups.

In many ways, then, Howerd's attitude to class, gender, and race are typical of Variety comedy. Similarly, the style of Howerd's comedy bears many of the hallmarks of the tradition. Certainly, the familiar relationship which he strikes up with the audience is typical. There are several factors which contribute to this familiar relationship. Firstly, Howerd's basic comic style has hardly altered in a professional career which spans over forty years. Just as many Music Hall and Variety comedians only had one or two acts which they toured for a lifetime, Howerd is still using material in 1990 which he first used in his wartime amateur concert parties: his deaf pianist routine originated from a collaboration with Vera Roper ('Madame Vere-Roper, known to me as Ada') in the Co-Odments concert party, but he is still using it, and it appears in his 1990 tour, Frankie Howerd Bursts Into Your Theatre.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, like most Variety comedians, he cements his familiar relationship with the audience by the use of catch-phrases. His use of catch-phrases is notable, because he has had so many of them. His work on Variety Bandbox alone produced more catch-phrases than most comedians use in a lifetime: 'Ladies and gentle-men'; 'ludi-crouse'; 'I was amazed!'; 'Not on your Nellie!'; 'What a funny woman!'; 'Poor soul-she's past it'; 'And the best of (British) luck!'; 'There are those among us tonight whom I shall do-o-o-o'; and 'Dirty old devil!'<sup>6</sup> Later celebrated catch-phrases include 'Nay, nay, thrice nay', and perhaps his most famous, 'Now missus, shut your face!'.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, like many other Variety comics, he uses re-cycled jokes. This was particularly true in his early career, and he admits stealing jokes from Max Miller among others in this period.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the fact that he bases much of his humour on his clearly-defined stage persona also aids the familiar relationship with the audience, tending to allow them to know what types of joke to expect. An important element of Howerd's stage persona is that it frequently expresses

outrage. In many of his routines, Howerd recalls an unlikely series of misadventures, in which he is 'the innocent and misunderstood victim of *Them* (i.e. authority).'<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the series of routines which he has performed in which he describes the injustices he has suffered at the hands of the theatre manager, often referred to as 'Thing'. Howerd's outraged reactions to the orders given to him by the authority figures are overplayed to the point of incongruity, and this is the source of much of his humour. For example, a routine about lion-taming from Variety Bandbox, the ringmaster tells him how to prevent himself from being eaten by the lion: "'Let him taste you," he said, "that'll put him off." I was a-MAZED!!'<sup>10</sup> The main source of the humour here is not the ringmaster's insult, it is Howerd's strangulated cry of outrage.

Another element of his act which is typical of Variety comedy is the frequent use of smutty jokes. Indeed, in his work on Variety Bandbox in the late 1940s, there were *double entendres* which were so daring that it is doubtful that they were taken as such at all. For example, in the lion-taming routine, he is shown the lions, and declares: 'I love them, a nice bunch of pussies.' This line provokes audience laughter, so this suggests that there is some joke contained in it. The most obvious interpretation of this joke is that the word 'pussy' involves a double meaning, being both a slang word for cat, and a slang word for the female pudenda. However, in some respects, this interpretation seems unlikely. Censorship over material broadcast on the radio was very strict at this time: words like 'God' and 'bloody' were completely prohibited, and in one instance, Howerd was even prevented from saying 'psychiatrist', having to use the word 'professor' instead.'<sup>11</sup> Indeed, in such a climate, even to hint at the word 'belly' was still considered daring.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the idea that a joke which made a seemingly obvious covert reference to the female pudenda would be allowed to be used seems rather unlikely. Moreover, there is another possible interpretation of the joke which could explain the audience's laughter: the word 'pussy' is generally used of small cats or kittens, and tends to connote fluffy cuteness; to use this word to

describe large, ferocious animals like lions is incongruous, and this could be the incongruity which constitutes the joke. However, this does not prove that the sexual connotations of the word 'pussy' were not picked up by the audience. The fact that the joke got past the B.B.C.'s censors does not necessarily mean that the *double entendre* was not intended, or indeed that it was not noticed by the audience; it may simply have slipped through the net. Whether or not the *double entendre* was intentional, it seems likely that at least part of the audience would have picked up on it: the word 'pussy' has been used as a term for the female genitalia since the seventeenth century, and therefore would have been widely known<sup>13</sup>; and as we have seen, Variety audiences were very sensitive to any possibility of covert references to sexual matters.

Howerd has used such smutty jokes throughout his career. Some use fairly obvious joke-mechanisms. The 'pussy' joke considered above involves a simple double meaning. A joke from a recording made in 1976 involves a similar wordplay, this time the covert meaning being lavatorial rather than sexual: 'So I arrived at this hospital, the casualty department, and this man said, "You can't come in 'ere unless you've had an accident," you see, so I went outside, had an accident, and...' <sup>14</sup> The joke is based on a second meaning of the phrase 'to have an accident' which can be used to refer to an accidental urination or evacuation of the bowels. A joke from the television series Up Pompeii in 1970 used a slightly different technique: 'Our story today is taken from the book, The Odyssey, The Odyssey. Now, this is a book full of odds and...ends.' <sup>15</sup> This relies on the knowledge of two expressions, 'odds and ends' and 'odds and sods', both of which refer to a varied assortment of items. The pause which Howerd places before the word 'ends' suggests an alternative ending to the sentence, and the existence of the alternative expression leads the audience to deduce that the alternative ending would have been 'sods'; this causes laughter, because the word 'sod' is a mild expletive, a shortened form of 'sodomite'.

Elsewhere, Howerd's smutty jokes use joke-mechanisms which are much more elusive. In some, words make covert references to sexual matters even though there is no apparent link between the word and the sexual matter to which it refers. 'The Ten Guinea Cruise' provides an excellent example of this: 'So I said, "Excuse me," I said, "could I see your brochures?", so she said, "I beg your pardon?" I said, "Your brochures, your tours."' The question 'could I see your brochures?' is greeted with a burst of laughter, and when it is reiterated, 'youf brochures, your tours', there is a further burst of laughter. The laughter is caused by the fact that 'brochures' and 'tours' are taken to means 'breasts'. This is odd, because the words 'brochures' and 'tours' do not normally have sexual connotations, and are not widely-used slang words for 'breasts'. Something in Howerd's delivery signals the double meaning to the audience, but the technique which he uses to achieve this is not obvious: he does not overstress the words in an obvious way or use a particularly lascivious tone of voice as a less skilful comedian might, but a subtle quirk in the timing of the sentence is enough to let the audience know that he is making a covert reference to breasts. Similarly, in a routine from 1976, Howerd goes to the doctor's because he is covered with 'little red blotches': 'I could tell he wasn't taking me seriously, this doctor, so I showed him my big red blotch.'<sup>16</sup> Again, the audience takes a phrase to have a sexual meaning, even though that meaning is not normally signalled by that phrase; in this case 'big red blotch' is taken to mean 'penis'. Another joke from the same routine signals a sexual meaning in a more obscure manner: 'I came out in little red blotches, oo it was a shame, poor Francis, little red blotches all over, I say "all over", I don't mean "all over", I mean..well, no I mean "all over", because...' In most smutty jokes, a word or phrase which has both an innocent meaning and a sexual or lavatorial meaning is used in such a way as to ostensibly have the first meaning, but also to hint at the forbidden meaning. In the 'brochures' joke and the 'big red blotch' joke, innocent words or phrases are given covert sexual meanings, even though they do not normally have these connotations. In this joke, the signalling of a sexual meaning is even more well-

hidden, because it cannot be pinned down to any particular word or phrase in the sentence. When Howerd corrects himself, saying that the little red blotches are not 'all over' his body, but stops short of saying which parts are not affected, this suggests that the unaffected parts may be taboo areas of the body like the genitals, and perhaps the buttocks. Then when he re-corrects himself, saying 'well, no I mean "all over"', this suggestion is reinforced, and the audience laughs at the idea that Howerd's buttocks and genitals are covered with little red blotches.

The familiar relationship which Howerd forges with the audience, his use of catch-phrases, his use of a clearly-defined comic persona, and his reliance on smutty jokes are all typical of Variety comedy. However, there are also aspects of his comic style which are much more innovative and individualized. One of the most important of these is the sexual ambiguity of his stage persona. There are several aspects of this ambiguity. Firstly, his delivery is distinctly camp. However, this campness does not mean that Howerd's stage persona is a caricature of a homosexual, and he occasionally uses jokes which clearly suggest that his desires are heterosexual, for example: "Well," she said, "why not try a boat on the Broads?" I said, "I'd rather try some broads on a boat." ha ha!'<sup>17</sup> Even the campness of his delivery is offset by the natural depth and gruffness of his voice, and a coarseness which tends to reduce its effeminacy. Nevertheless, whilst Howerd's stage persona is not a caricature of a homosexual, there are occasional references to homosexuality: "The trouble with you," 'e said, umm. "You're so difficult to categorize," 'e said er..'e said er, "You see you don't fit in anywhere, you're neither one thing nor the other." I don't know what 'e meant by that! Sauce!'<sup>18</sup> Howerd takes exception to the phrase 'You're neither one thing nor the other' because he takes it as an innuendo about his sexuality, that he is *neither man nor woman*, that he is homosexual. In taking exception to the phrase 'neither one thing nor the other,' he reveals this meaning to the audience, who laugh in response.

Another aspect of his sexual ambiguity is the fact that he often portrays himself as the passive victim of other people's sexuality. In sexual jokes, he often takes the part normally taken by a woman. For example, in a routine from 1976, Howerd lies naked under a sheet on a table, and three women who he assumes are nurses but who are actually tea ladies peek under the sheet at his naked body.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in another routine, he imagines that a female member of the audience is ogling him: 'Look at her looking, look at her looking, it's inciting her, look!'<sup>20</sup> As we have seen, the Variety tradition tended to enforce established sexual roles, so it is unusual for a joke like this to place a man as the sexually passive victim. Moreover, if Howerd's passivity represents a deviation from standard sexual roles, this deviance is not ridiculed. The source of the humour is his outrage at being the passive victim of somebody else's sexuality, rather than the simple fact of his passivity. For example, when the tea ladies peep under the sheet, much of the laughter is caused by the way that he squeals in an outraged *falsetto*: 'This is a liberty! This is a liberty!' Similarly, in 'The Ten Guinea Cruise', he assumes that a Japanese woman is seeing him as a sexual victim, and his outrage is just as incongruously shrill: 'She said, "Take your clothes off." I said, "We hardly know each other!" I said. She said, "No, no," she said, "Me bath you." I says, [outraged *falsetto*:] "You're not my nanny!!!"'

Another aspect of the sexual ambiguity is the gossipiness of the comic persona. The role of the gossip is one which has traditionally been strongly associated with women, and Eric Midwinter has argued that Howerd's gossipiness places him 'very near the long line of female impersonators who have starred on the English stage.'<sup>21</sup> A very good example of the gossipiness of his style is his legendary appearance on the early 1960s satire programme, That Was The Week That Was. His performance is totally relaxed, and he makes long pauses for thought, delivering his material as if it had just crossed his mind. One particular moment in the routine highlights his comic skill. After mentioning the political commentator Robin Day, he comments 'And, umm...and...he's a strange man, isn't he?'

Funny man! [audience laughter] And er...and er...hasn't he, hasn't he got cruel glasses, have you noticed, cruel glasses. [audience laughter] Anyway, it's...peculiar man, anyway, and...[audience laughter]'<sup>22</sup> The laughter here is puzzling: on the written page, there are no apparent joke structures, yet Howerd achieves three considerable bursts of laughter from the audience. The humour lies in the delivery, which for no obvious reason makes Robin Day worthy of laughter. There are several possible explanations for this. Firstly, it is slightly incongruous to apply the confidential, gossipy delivery to discuss a serious, respected figure like a political commentator, and it tends to subvert the audience's respect for Day. Secondly, the idea of somebody having 'cruel glasses' is somewhat incongruous in itself, as cruelty is not normally a quality associated with inanimate objects like glasses. However, neither of these seem sufficient to have caused three hearty audience laughs. The real reason seems less tangible: something in Howerd's puzzled, confidential assertion that Day is a 'strange man' conjures up all kinds of images of strangeness in this respected political commentator, and this subtly-suggested incongruity is enough to make him laughable.

Whilst Howerd's persona is unusual because it presents a sexually ambiguous man without ridiculing him, another aspect of this ambiguity is an antipathy towards women, which is less unusual in the Variety tradition. As we have seen, much of the humour based on his sexual passivity stems from his outraged responses to the women whom he sees as sexual predators. Another aspect of his antipathy towards women stems from his gossipiness, which sometimes involves making insinuations about sexual promiscuity. For example, when the fat 'poor soul' from the travel agent's in 'The Ten Guinea Cruise' tells him that she has a friend who is the skipper of a trawler, he says, 'I thought, "Ohheeh yes!" I thought to meself, you know, I thought to meself, "There's one 'ere knows her way around the bay! And not home in time for tea, either!"' Here, Howerd is suggesting both that the woman is having a sexual relationship with the skipper, and that she is sexually promiscuous. Perhaps the most

famous routine to combine gossipiness with antipathy towards women is his deaf pianist routine. In it, he gossips outrageously about his elderly accompanist, but she cannot hear him because she is deaf:

Well, now I'm going to be accompanied for this particular performance on the piano-forte by Madame Blanchie Moore, known to Southend as 'Dockyard Dora'. Now, er...don't laugh- poor old soul...Now, er...funny woman...no don't...don't laugh- it might be one of your own.<sup>23</sup>

This routine could be seen as misogynistic, as it involves ridiculing an elderly woman at length, ostensibly behind her back. However, Howerd's antipathy towards women is different from the kind of misogyny on which most Variety comics relied, because it is always ambiguous. When he expresses outrage at being the passive victim of a woman's sexual desire, this can be interpreted as being a joke at his own expense: it could be that the point of the joke is that this desire is a figment of his imagination. Similarly, in the deaf pianist routine, the point of the joke could be that when he gossips about his accompanist, what he says is not to be taken at face value. In the extract above, the name 'Dockyard Dora' suggests that she is a dockside prostitute, but the fact that she is made up to look like a sweet and frail old lady makes this piece of gossip seem highly questionable. The routine could be seen as a joke about gossip, rather than a joke about the pianist. This kind of ambiguity is unusual, because in most Variety comedy, the attitude towards women is more plainly misogynistic.

Another unusual aspect of Howerd's comic style is the casual informality of his delivery. In the Second World War and the period leading up to it, before Howerd broke into the professional Variety circuit, most stand-up comedians adopted a formal style, and had a formal relationship with the audience. Character comics were outnumbered by comedians who delivered an unconnected series of jokes in a conventional style, wearing smart suits or evening dress. Any deviation from this style was seen as unprofessional; a manual

written by Lupino Lane in 1945 entitled How to be a Comedian included the following advice:

Any inclination to fidget and lack 'stage repose' should be immediately controlled. This can often cause great annoyance to the audience and result in a point being missed. Bad, too, is the continual use of phrases such as: 'You see?', 'You know!', 'Of course', etc. These things are most annoying to the listener.<sup>24</sup>

In such a climate, Howerd's approach was positively revolutionary. Instead of a smart suit, he wore a shabby brown one. Instead of making a formally stylised entrance, he would simply walk straight on and launch straight into his act, perhaps saying, 'Just get meself comfy. Oeuchh!!'<sup>25</sup> before he started. Instead of addressing the audience in a way which suggested formalized entertainment, by making it clear that he was a comedian telling jokes to the audience, he would create the impression that he was conducting a normal, everyday conversation with them, as if talking to friends across a pub table, or to a neighbour across the garden wall. This informal approach has continued throughout his career. He creates the impression of carrying out a normal conversation by making his delivery deliberately messy. He laces his texts with 'oo's, 'ahh's, 'oh's, 'er's and 'umm's, as well as with the 'you see's, 'you know's and 'of course's that Lupino Lane warned against. There are also repetitions, pauses for thought, and sentences which trail off without ending. He debates with himself exactly when an event occurred: 'It all started last Monday, was it Monday?, no Tuesday, that's right, Tuesday, ummm. [pause] No, it was Monday. [audience laughter]'<sup>26</sup> Here, the indecision is taken to the point of being a joke. Once he has decided that the event has happened on Tuesday, the audience expects him to resume the story after the pause; this expectation is defied when he continues to wonder about the day instead. Sometimes, his use of language is so chaotic that it almost entirely obscures meaning. A notable example of this is the introduction to 'The Ten Guinea Cruise':

Uhh...how are you, all right? I..no I don't feel..you know, I'm usually sort of..you know but...I don't know, I suppose it must

be..you know, I don't feel the...I don't know.. Mind you, no, I think it's thiss..don't you? Ummm. And of course, I mean...I...mind, you haven't come here to listen to my trouble, but I mean, all this..ah, tell you what, tell you how it started, now..no listen, no, no listen. No, you see, I went..I was..I went to the doctor's, what's today?

It is only after he has delivered the first eighty nine words of the routine that any sense begins to emerge, with the line 'I went to the doctor's'. In other routines, shorter bursts of nonsense are inserted: 'No, ahhh, no, well, oo- 'ere, what? [*falsetto*] Ooooo no!'<sup>27</sup> At this level, the messiness of the language is so exaggerated that it ceases to resemble normal, everyday speech, and turns into a highly individual heightened comic language. Another element in this comic language is the use of unusual and invented words. For example, he refers to a show as 'today's eisteddfod', and to the theatre as 'the crypt'; he uses archaic words like 'harken'; he distorts words, 'harken' becoming 'harr-ken' and 'harr-ever so ken', and 'casualty' becoming 'casu-ality'; and he uses invented words, for example saying that a group of lions was 'snarling and grorling and daddling and jostling.'<sup>28</sup>

The total effect of Howerd's confidential, informal approach was atypical of Variety comedy, to the extent that he was criticized for unprofessionalism at the beginning of his career. One contemporary critic wrote: 'This man wears no make-up, doesn't dress, doesn't even take a bow at the end.'<sup>29</sup> However, his style was not entirely new. Max Miller had used a very confidential rapport with the audience, standing on the footlights, and looking into the wings to make sure that an imaginary theatre manager was not about to intervene, before telling them a dirty joke. Howerd's inventive use of words also had a precedent, in the widespread use of wordplay in late Music Hall and early Variety, and it is arguably in the tradition of comics like R.G. Knowles and Stainless Stephen. Even the verbal anarchy of the introduction of 'The Ten Guinea Cruise' is not unprecedented, having an ancestor in the garbled verbal inventiveness of Oliver Wakefield. Nonetheless, whilst it is not

entirely unprecedented, his comic style is idiosyncratic and innovative, and it is certainly not typical of the Variety tradition.

Another unusual aspect of Howerd's comic style is his attitude to the audience's response to his jokes. For example, after a particularly weak or obvious pun extracts a groan from the audience, he remains stubbornly unapologetic, whilst acknowledging the poor quality of the joke: 'Well, I've paid for these jokes, I may as well use them.' In other cases, he reprimands the audience for failing to appreciate a joke: 'What d'you mean, "Ooooo"? Common as muck this lot, I knew it'<sup>30</sup> This technique is unusual for a Variety comedian. As we have seen, comedians working on the Variety circuit were under a good deal of pressure. In order to build a career, a comic would have to graduate from slots which could be as short as seven minutes, playing to audiences which could be difficult to please. In such an environment, with such a pressure to succeed, it seems likely that most comedians would ignore failed jokes, moving onto the next joke as soon as possible, so as to ~~distract~~ distract attention from the failure. To draw attention to the failure, and even to reprimand the audience for groaning, is therefore highly unusual, and rather daring. An even more unusual approach, which Howerd frequently employs, is to reprimand the audience for laughing:

Cease. And before I could argue...cease. And before I could...oh, you make me mad!! Now pull youselves together.<sup>31</sup>

No, give in now...as they...no, please, now...now, control please, control...now please, *control...con-ever-so-trol!*<sup>32</sup>

Please...too much tittering, naughty tittermongers.<sup>33</sup>

As it is the job of a stand-up comedian to make an audience laugh, it is fundamentally incongruous to try to prevent them from laughing. Whilst this is adventurous, and highly unusual in Variety comedy, it is not entirely unprecedented. George Robey had used a similar technique, telling the audience to 'desist!' when they laughed, or ordering them: 'Pray temper your hilarity!'<sup>34</sup>

The aspect of Howerd's career which is perhaps the least typical of the Variety tradition is his association with more radical traditions of comedy. This began when he was incorporated into the Satire Boom of the early 1960s. This came about as a result of a decline in his career in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which coincided with the demise of the Variety circuit. Whilst giving a speech at the Evening Standard Drama Awards in 1962, he was spotted by Peter Cook, the proprietor of The Establishment Club, who invited him to do a season there. Howerd agreed, and working with a script written by Johnny Speight enjoyed a highly successful season, which led to an equally successful appearance on That Was The Week That Was. In the 1980s, Howerd's association with more radical traditions of comedy continued with an appearance on Channel Four's Alternative Comedy showcase, Saturday Live. His association with 1960s satire and later with Alternative Comedy is highly unusual for a Variety comedian. However, it is interesting to note that in both his Establishment Club act, and his appearance on That Was The Week That Was, he played on the fact that as a Variety comedian, he was out of his normal context:

Before I start this little, er, lecture, I thought I ought really to explain, er...what I'm doing here in the first place because ahh as you perhaps know, I'm not er normally... I'm usually associated with er Variety, you know, I... Variety comedian, you know, Music Hall, and er I'm not normally associated with these sophisticated, er...wag, wags and wits, you know, these youngsters, and umm, you know, I'm more sort of Billy Cotton, me.<sup>35</sup>

This allowed him to send up the satirists who had taken him under their wing. On That Was The Week That Was, he commented on the rest of the programme: 'Still, I enjoyed bits of it. And I mean the bits I understood'; and 'No, that's what they call ad libbing, you never get that on *this* programme!'; he also ridiculed the hairstyle of the show's linkman, David Frost, describing him as 'the one who wears his hair back to front.'<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the most significant aspect of his association with the satirists was it led him to use material which was unusually radical for a Variety comic. His act at The Establishment Club included a section about the Second World War:

I shall never forget it. September the third, 1939. D'you know, when I think of it now, my stomach goes over, I can remember... Eleven o'clock in the morning, eleven a.m., there was a hush over the whole country. 'No such undertaking having been received, His Majesty's Government has had no alternative but do declare war on Germany.' Bloody stupid! Bloody stupid! There was only about three hundred in the government, including the speaker, now what chance did they have against Germany, will you tell me? So they had to drag us *all* in you see, yes! And like all wars, it could've been avoided, that's the sad part of it all, I mean all they had to do was surrender. Well all my family did, all my family did! Certainly! One minute past eleven, we all had our hands up. But of course, the war dragged on, so we all took them down eventually, naturally. Well, I mean its an uncomfortable posture, you can't you know.<sup>37</sup>

This routine reverses conventional ideas about war, which see good nation pitched against bad, with right and wrong clearly defined, and in which selfless heroic action on behalf of the nation is admired. Here, war is shown to be a result of irrational action on the part of governments, who rope in the people to fight on their behalf, and ideas of heroism are reversed, with cowardice being seen as a sensible course of action. Such a routine is subversive in any society which upholds a vision of war as being noble and heroic. It is subversive to the point of being extraordinary coming from a comic whose origins lie in the Music Hall and Variety tradition, which has had a record of ardent patriotism and support for the Empire. Compared with the songs of Music Hall stars like Vesta Tilley and Sir Harry Lauder, who acted as unofficial recruiting sergeants in the First World War, this routine constitutes a piece of radical pacifism.

In many ways then, Frankie Howerd is far from being a typical Variety comedian. In general, the politics of his act are fairly typical, as are the consistency of his style throughout his career, and his reliance on smutty humour; but the sexual ambiguity of his persona, the informality and inventiveness of his style, and his association with the '60s satirists all mark him out as being exceptional. However, it would be simplistic to argue that this collage of the typical and the atypical is a result of a simple conflict, the influence and conventions of the Variety tradition

versus Howerd's own individual creativity. There are specific reasons which explain some of the unusual elements of Howerd's work aside from his individual powers of creativity. Perhaps the most important of these is the breadth of his career, which extends beyond the Variety circuit, and beyond stand-up comedy: he has enjoyed a very successful career in broadcasting, having had a number of radio and television programmes; he has also had a long cinema career; and he has had a successful stage career, his most notable role being that of Bottom in a production of A Midsummer Night's Dream at the Old Vic in 1958. It seems likely that this breadth of experience has allowed Howerd to develop as a performer in ways which would be difficult, if not impossible, within the restrictive confines of the Variety circuit. This is certainly true of his work in broadcasting, which has meant that from the late 1940s onwards, he has worked with very highly respected scriptwriters. The first of these was Eric Sykes, who wrote much of the material which he performed on Variety Bandbox; later, his scriptwriters included Galton and Simpson (who were also responsible for Hancock's Half Hour and Steptoe and Son), Johnny Speight (writer of Till Death Us Do Part), Marty Feldman, Barry Took, and Denis Norden.<sup>32</sup> One of the reasons for the predictability of much Variety comedy was the fact that Variety comics tended to use the same joke books as a source of material, or even stole material from other people's acts. Having scripts provided by professional writers avoided this, and so provided a greater possibility of originality. A clear example of the responsibility of the scriptwriter for the unusual aspects of Howerd's work is the act which he performed at The Establishment Club, which was written by Johnny Speight. Speight is a working class writer whose influences include Marx and Engels, as well as George Bernard Shaw and John Steinbeck.<sup>33</sup> Bearing this in mind, the uncharacteristically subversive section about the outbreak of the Second World War is somewhat less surprising.

In addition to this, the specific demands of working in radio also helped to shape Howerd's style. Before working on Variety Bandbox, his act had contained a large visual element. Realizing that funny

gestures and facial expressions might amuse the studio audience but would do nothing for the listeners at home, Howerd began to experiment with language, distorting words and inventing new ones, using the full range of his voice including an outraged *falsetto*, as well as building up his repertoire of catch-phrases.<sup>40</sup>

### III. Les Dawson

Les Dawson was born in Collyhurst, Manchester in 1931. He was brought up in a poor working class household, his father being a building labourer.<sup>41</sup> His first performing work was as a pub pianist and singer, and he was taken on by Max Wall's agency, but this association came to nothing as Wall fell from public favour. During a week's engagement in Hull, Dawson decided to switch from a musical act to a stand-up act, and began to perform regularly on the Working Men's Club Circuit, particularly in Manchester.<sup>42</sup> In the early 1960s, he began to get occasional work in television and radio, notably a successful appearance on A.B.C. Television's Opportunity Knocks in 1963.<sup>43</sup> The late 1960s saw Dawson being given his own television programme, Sez Les, which led to his becoming one of the most famous comedians to have emerged from the club circuit.

In many respects Dawson typifies the popular image of the modern club comic as a fat dinner-jacketed northerner who tells a string of one-liners of ancient ancestry about a monstrous mother-in-law. Certainly, there are aspects of his style which are typical of club comedy. He relies heavily on packaged jokes, which are strung together with little or no connection between them. He also tends to use the same joke structures again and again. For example, he has used many jokes which use the following formula:

[Name of town or county, usually where he is performing], that's a sort of [name of another town] with [feature which would be incongruous in the second town]

This formula has produced a string of jokes for Dawson, for example: 'Yorkshire, that's a sort of Cumberland with a sneer'; 'Filey, that's a sort of borstal with sand'; 'I love Blackpool, it's sort of Bournemouth with chips'; 'Good evening, what a thrill to be in Hong Kong, which is a sort of Isle of Man with rice.'<sup>44</sup> Another formula on which he has frequently relied is:

I'm not saying [subject of the joke] is [negative attribute], but [something which suggests that the subject of the joke *does* have the negative attribute]

Examples of jokes written to this formula include: 'I'm not saying our council house is far from the city centre, but our rent man's a Norwegian'; 'I'm not saying it's rough, but last night I got mugged by a nun'; 'I'm not saying the place is dirty, but you have to spray the kitchen with D.D.T. before the flies will come in.'<sup>45</sup>

Not only does he use the same joke formulae to create many different jokes, he also uses the same jokes over and over again. For example, in the Royal Variety Show in 1973, he used a joke about knowing that the person knocking at the door was the wife's mother, because the mice started throwing themselves on the traps; the same joke appeared on B.B.C. 1's The Les Dawson Show in 1984, and again in 1989.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, he used the following joke in his appearance on Opportunity Knocks in 1963: 'Mother used to sit me on her knee, and I'd whisper: "Mummy, Mummy, sing me a lullabye do," she'd say, "Certainly, my angel, my wee bundle of happiness, hold my beer while I fetch me banjo."<sup>47</sup> The same joke made a reappearance on The Les Dawson Show in 1989.<sup>48</sup>

Like the popular image of the club comic, he also uses the mother-in-law as a major source of material, and the sexual politics of his material are typical of club comedy. The wife and the mother-in-law are the principal targets of Dawson's humour. Many of his jokes enforce sexual roles by ridiculing deviation from them. Deviation from dominant conceptions of feminine beauty is a major source of

jokes. Some jokes ridicule ugliness in a very general way; for example, Dawson says of his wife: 'I'm not saying she's ugly, but I keep her photograph over the mantelpiece, it keeps the kids away from the fire.'<sup>49</sup> Other jokes define the ugliness more specifically, describing the wife in terms which paint a picture of incongruous ugliness; for example, he says that she snores 'with all the refinement of a bronchial wart-hog', making a noise like 'the death rattle of a moose with piles.'<sup>50</sup> The idea that women should conform to a certain body shape is enforced by ridiculing women who are considered too fat or too thin. He says of his mother-in-law: 'she's so fat, she doesn't have elastic in her knickers...it's Swish Rail.'<sup>51</sup> In another routine, a thin woman is ridiculed:

She was so thin that when she swallowed an orange pip, the doctor sent her for an advance pregnancy test. She 'ad a notice on 'er chest, 'In case of love, this way up'. Her husband was a bricklayer, and when she drank tomato juice, he used her as a spirit level.<sup>52</sup>

Women who are deemed to be unfeminine are also a major source of humour. The dominant mother-in-law is portrayed as being particularly unfeminine: 'The wife's mother has things that many men desire...muscles and a duelling scar'<sup>53</sup>; 'My wife's mother tells people that I'm effeminate. I don't mind, because compared to her, I am.'<sup>54</sup> The second of these jokes has added impact coming from Dawson, whose gruff manner and large physique make the idea that he could be considered effeminate particularly incongruous, therefore implying that his wife's mother is even more incongruously masculine. His wife is also ridiculed for being unfeminine: 'Things didn't used to be so bad, but alas, the wife lost her job, she got rheumatism in her arm and couldn't throw the harpoon properly.'<sup>55</sup> The implication here is that the wife works on a whaling fleet, a tough job incompatible with dominant ideas about femininity. Whilst women are ridiculed for being masculine, there are also occasional jokes which ridicule men for being feminine. For example, Dawson has said of his producer, 'He's the one with the red handbag'<sup>56</sup>, a handbag being an item almost exclusively associated with women. On another occasion, he made a similar joke about a different producer:

'It gives me great pleasure to introduce Bill Cotton...he's over there, sat with a sailor.'<sup>57</sup> Here, the implication is not only that Bill Cotton is effeminate, but also that he is homosexual.

Dominant ideas about female sexual attractiveness are reinforced in a very direct way in the following jokes, which make comparisons between the wife and women who are considered to be sex symbols:

The wife said, 'What's Raquel Welch got that I haven't got?' I said, 'Nothing...it's just fresher.'<sup>58</sup>

Last night, I drifted into a fitful slumber, and I...I kept having this hideous re-occurrent nightmare that Raquel Welch, Joan Collins, and Jane Fonda and the wife were fighting over me. And the wife won.<sup>59</sup>

In both cases, the wife is derogated by comparison with women who are considered to be paragons of sexual attractiveness. This type of joke enforces cultural conceptions of physical beauty, because it relies on the assumption that media sex symbols are the the ultimate in physical attractiveness, and that women who do not look like them are undesirable.

As well as ridiculing women who do not conform to conventional ideas of beauty, Dawson also ridicules women who do not carry out their wifely duties adequately. His wife is ridiculed for being a bad cook:

The wife said, 'What would you like for your breakfast?'- I said, 'I'll have beans on toast.' She came back ten minutes after, out of the kitchen- she said, 'You can't have that.' I said, 'Why?'- she said, 'The beans have clogged the toaster.' What a rotten cook- last year I bought her a pressure cooker- I don't know what she did but she put a sprout in orbit. I must have the only kids in the country who want to go to bed without supper.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, he ridicules his mother for sluttishly neglecting him as a baby: 'As a baby, I never had a plastic duck to play with in the bath. All I had was a handful of greasy plates'; 'I only ever 'ad

one change o' nappy. After twelve months, the horses were following me round with a bucket.'<sup>61</sup> In all of these jokes, the wife and the mother are ridiculed for their incompetence or negligence in carrying out domestic tasks. They rely on and reinforce the housewife ethic by ridiculing deviation from it.

In telling jokes which reinforce women's roles in this way, Dawson is more similar to Variety comedians like Dick Henderson, and the older generation of club comedians like Bobby Thompson than the club comedians of the 1970s and beyond, whose wife and mother-in-law jokes tend to veer more towards simple antipathy. However, Dawson does also use jokes of a more straightforwardly misogynistic variety, thus showing similarities with later club comics. He says of his mother-in-law: 'I'm not saying she's horrible, but she was sacked from the Gestapo for cruelty'<sup>62</sup>; and he wishes death on her: 'The wife said, "How would you like to speak to Mummy?"- I said, "Through a spiritualist."<sup>63</sup> He also makes jokes which imagine physical violence against the wife and the mother-in-law: 'My wife, bless 'er, for instance, lost two stones swimming recently. I can't understand it, they were tied round her neck tight enough'<sup>64</sup>; 'The wife's mother's out in the car, I would have brought her in, but I've lost the key to the boot.'<sup>65</sup>

In several respects, then, Dawson is a typical Working Men's Club comedian. He uses a joke-based style, in which the same joke-formulae, and even the same jokes are used again and again; and he shows a traditional antipathy towards his wife and mother-in-law. However, in many other respects he is not a typical club comic. Firstly, whilst he uses a joke-based style, he is far from being a simple joke-teller. Unlike comics like Bernard Manning or George Roper whose humour stems almost exclusively from standard packaged jokes, Dawson has a distinctive comic persona, which is an important part of his comic style. He uses a deadpan delivery, and structures his packaged jokes so that they represent a list of woes, to create a miserable and cynical persona, which has led to his being described as a 'sad sack' and 'the doom-laden dumpling'.<sup>66</sup> This

miserable persona enhances the series of unconnected jokes which constitutes his act by putting them into a larger framework: these are not jokes, but a list of wrongs inflicted on him. When he jokes about his wife and mother-in-law, this is because he sees them as another of the burdens he has to bear. He moans: 'Nothing goes bloody right for me, we had North Sea Gas put in, now we can only light the stove when the tide's in.'<sup>67</sup> This joke is based on the incongruous idea that because the gas comes from the sea, it is subject to ~~the~~ same tidal forces as the sea. It could be told by itself as a simple whimsical joke, or used as a satirical attack on modern technological developments, but Dawson uses it as an example of one of his own personal woes. He is also miserable and cynical about himself, and often makes self-deprecating jokes about his abilities as a performer: 'Hi, my name's Les Dawson and frankly, I'm about as well known as the mating habits of the Polynesian hermit crab...In fact, I'm the only one on this bill I've never heard of'; 'I'm not saying that my act is boring, but last night a man in the front row was firing off a distress signal'<sup>68</sup>; 'I'm not saying my act is bad, but the night Variety died, they held my script for questioning.'<sup>69</sup> His comic persona is an important part of his act, but it is interesting to note that whilst it acts as a framework for jokes, it is not a source of humour in itself. Frankie Howerd's intimate comic persona can make an audience laugh without any apparent joke-structures, for example by talking about getting 'comfy' before he starts, or inserting a meaningless string of 'ooh's and 'ahh's into a sentence. Les Dawson's persona tends to rely on more obvious joke structures. He may use his series of one-liners and short jokes as a list of woes, but they are still packaged jokes, which would work outside of this framework.

Another aspect of Dawson's style which is atypical of the club comedy tradition is his imaginative use of language. Many club comics seem to use words merely as the necessary building bricks of jokes, and do not bother to add any embellishments. Dawson's approach is markedly different; in an interview given in 1975, he described his interest in the comic possibilities of language:

I do this routine on stage now, about the search for the tincture of life in Lhasa. 'I was vouchsafed this message from the gin-sodden lips of a pock-marked Lascar in the arms of a frump in a Huddersfield bordello.' Nobody ever says 'frump' any more, do they? And 'bordello' is an outrageous, effete word. Words are much funnier than gags.<sup>70</sup>

The words used in the build up to a joke are chosen lovingly, rather than being seen as merely a means to an end; he does not say his wife was snoring 'horribly', he says she was snoring 'with all the refinement of a bronchial warthog'; he does not say he 'fell asleep', he says he 'drifted into a fitful slumber'; *he does not say* that he was 'playing a tune in bed', he says he was 'playing a Hebridean lament on [his] euphonium.'<sup>71</sup> The openings of two of his acts, one from an A.B.C. Television show in 1966, the other from The Royal Variety Show in 1973 use similarly elaborate language for adventurous jokes:

The ashen-faced mourners hunched closer together as the cold grey fog embraced them in its clammy shroud. The wind howled like a lost soul in dire torment, and behind the bleak rain sodden hills a demented dwarf strangled his pet racoon...1,2,3. Sing together, 'On A Wonderful Day Like Today'.<sup>72</sup>

In 1645, Prince Rupert's mercenaries smashed Cromwell's left flank at Naseby, and in 1871, the Franco-Prussian War took a serious turn at the siege of Rouen, and in 1952 from the Kyles of Bute came the first report of an outbreak of sporrán rash... None of this has anything at all to do with the act tonight, but it just shows how your mind wanders when you're worried.<sup>73</sup>

In both of these cases, the actual joke is fairly obvious. Both build up tension in the audience, by building up puzzling scenarios, then release that tension by resolving the puzzlement. In the first, a bleak depressing picture is built up, which Dawson punctures by joking that this is the introduction to a jolly song; this helps to establish his doom-laden persona, and also offers a humorous reversal of conventional showbusiness jollity. In the second, a series of unconnected statements are explained as a symptom of how stage fright can make the mind wander. However, whilst both of these jokes are fairly simple, both rely on a well-crafted build up, in

order to create the tension which is punctured by the punchlines. The use of pseudo-poetic phrases like 'the wind howled like a soul in dire torment' in the first, and the use of unusual and foreign place names like 'Naseby', 'Rouen', and 'the Kyles of Bute' in the second help to serve this end. In other cases, the language itself becomes the source of the humour, rather than being a necessary part of the build-up of a joke. A major theme of Dawson's jokes is the conflict between the noble and the base; for example, something as out of place in club comedy as a quote from Shakespeare is used as the build up to a self-deprecating joke: "'Music hath charm to soothe the savage beast," so Shakespeare said. I played the piano once in a pub and turned a hamster into a killer.'<sup>74</sup> Here, the High Culture of Shakespeare is incongruously juxtaposed with the low culture of the public house pianist. Many of the jokes based on this theme which he uses rely on language: pseudo-poetic language is used to build up a noble image, which is then destroyed by language which connotes an everyday common crudeness. At the beginning of Dawson's 1963 appearance on Opportunity Knocks, he joked: 'I toyed with the idea of playing Ravel's "Pavane Pour Un Infant Defunct" [sic], but can't remember if it is a tune or a Latin prescription for piles.'<sup>75</sup> Here, the respect for the high culture of Ravel is totally annihilated by the irreverent suggestion that the foreign name is a prescription for an anal disorder. The joke is intrinsically linguistic, because it relies on the exotic-sounding phrase 'Pavane Pour Un Infant Defunct' to build up the feeling of nobility which is punctured by the reference to piles. The joke in which Dawson, as a child, asks his mother to play him a lullaby, to which she replies 'Certainly, my angel, my wee bundle of happiness, hold my beer while I fetch me banjo', works in a similar way. The mother's use of the phrases 'my angel', and 'my wee bundle of happiness' conjure up an image of her as an idealized and rather twee mother figure; however, this image is destroyed by the phrase, 'hold me beer while I fetch me banjo', because both beer and banjos are at odds with traditional conceptions of maternal femininity. A routine called 'The Barnsley Dracula' from a 1975 radio series called Listen to Les<sup>76</sup> also works in a similar way, making jokes out of the clash between the poetic

language of a horror story, and the ordinary everyday crudeness of its Barnsley setting. The routine begins:

Last Walpurgis Eve, the night when demons walk abroad, as the moon rose forlornly across a cloud-flecked sky...it cast a pool of jaundiced illumination onto a weed-choked mound of damp earth that had been for many years the last resting place of Albert Shovelbottom, the last of the Barnsley Draculas.

The name 'Albert Shovelbottom' gets a laugh, because it is incongruous coming after the pseudo-poetic introduction. Vampires are usually given exotic names like 'Count Dracula'. 'Albert Shovelbottom' is far from being exotic: 'Albert' is a fairly old-fashioned christian name, and 'Shovelbottom' is a compound of two words, joining the name of a work implement with a slang word meaning buttocks. Similarly, instead of coming from somewhere exotic like Transylvania, this vampire comes from Barnsley, a northern town which connotes industrial grey drabness. The theme of the mismatch between the exotic feeling of a horror story, and the northern industrial setting continues throughout the routine, with the vampire looking for victims on the Doncaster bypass, and being killed by 'silver-tipped tripe'.

Dawson's distinctive comic persona, and his imaginative use of language are far from being typical of the club comedy tradition. In some respects, the politics of his humour are also atypical of club comedy. Whilst the sexual politics of his humour are typically reactionary, many of his jokes relying on animosity towards the wife and the mother-in-law, he shows few signs of the racism which characterizes so many of the later club comics. Very occasionally, he has made jokes which rely on racial stereotyping; for example, whilst performing in Hong Kong, he commented: 'Amazing place this, four million Chinese and I still can't find a decent laundry.'<sup>77</sup> However, in terms of frequency, and of hostility, such jokes fade into insignificance when compared with jokes used by more typical contemporary club comedians, which not only aggressively reinforce stereotyping, but also reinforce fears about immigration, and

imagine death and mutilation being inflicted on members of certain racial groups. Dawson emerged from the club circuit to become a television star in the late 1960s, only a few years before The Comedians, which featured performers who relied heavily on jokes about Pakistanis and Afro-Caribbeans. Bearing this in mind, the almost total lack of racism in his work is conspicuous.

Whilst jokes about race seldom appear in his routines, there are occasional jokes about social class and poverty. For example, he jokes about being incongruously poor:

I don't do this for a living, oh no...just for the luxuries in life...bread and shoes. I'm so far behind with the rent the arrears are ticked off in the Domesday Book...I used to sell furniture for a living, the trouble was it was my own. The suit I've got on is my only one, I bought it on H.P. from a tailor. It's called a kangaroo suit, two payments and you hop it.<sup>78</sup>

This poverty line humour, with references to selling possessions to make ends meet, and buying on credit, is more similar to that of early club comics like Bobby Thompson than it is to contemporary club comedy. Other jokes express class rivalry by ridiculing middle class values:

I'm staying in Lytham St Anne's. It's posh there...They don't have rats, just mice. It's the only place I know where they have grapes on the table and nobody ill... The woman I'm staying with thinks sex is something you put coal in. She said, 'When my cat does anything in the garden he fills the hole in straight away.' I said, 'All cats do that,' she said, 'What, with a shovel?'<sup>79</sup>

Here, middle class values are made to appear incongruous, by being exaggerated and viewed from a working class perspective: buying grapes regularly is seen as an incongruous luxury, and middle class accents which pronounce 'sacks' as 'sex' are ridiculed. Such jokes relate more to class rivalry than to a politicized notion of class struggle; but they are unusually subversive when compared with jokes about social class told by more typical modern Club comics, which ridicule sections of the working class which are held to be lazy,

like dockers and Liverpudlians, and satirize working class radicalism.

Dawson's comic style involves elements which are both typical and atypical of the Club comedy tradition. His re-cycling of jokes and reliance on standard joke formulae are typical of the packaged joke-based style of contemporary club comedy, but other aspects of his style are unusual, particularly his clearly defined comic persona and his adventurous use of comic language. Similarly, the politics of his comedy involve elements which are both typical and unusual. His joking antipathy towards the wife and mother-in-law is not unusual, but his comparative lack of racism, and his use of old-fashioned jokes about class and poverty are. As with Frankie Howerd, it would be simplistic to argue that the mixture of typical and unusual elements is the result of a conflict between the influence of tradition and his own individual creativity. As with Howerd, the unusual elements in Dawson's work may be partly explained by the breadth of his career. He has worked in television and radio since the 1960s, in situation comedies as well as variety-format shows, although he has not achieved huge success in situation comedies: only Holiday With Strings, a single show rather than a series, achieved any great critical and public acclaim; but some of his other sitcoms were bravely experimental, particularly a trilogy by Alan Plater, called The Loner.<sup>80</sup> In addition to his work in television and radio, he has also had a small amount of contact with Alternative Comedy, having appeared in the early days of the Comedy Store; unlike others from a similar club background, notably Lennie Bennett, his performance was well-received.<sup>81</sup> He has also written a number of comedy books and novels.

The breadth of Dawson's career certainly seems to have allowed him to develop his comic style. Firstly, as with Howerd, it allowed him to work with top-class professional scriptwriters, like Barry Cryer and David Nobbs.<sup>82</sup> Secondly, it has allowed him to work outside of a straightforward stand-up format. His television work has allowed him to create a number of comic characters, notably Cosmo Smallpiece, a

sex maniac, and Ada Sidebottom, a character based on a sketch by the Variety comic Norman Evans called 'Over The Garden Wall'.<sup>83</sup> Both of these characters exploit the comic possibilities of Dawson's face, his chin being pulled almost up to his nose, and puckering his lips into a grotesque pout. Another string to his comic bow which he has developed in his television shows is his ability to play the piano, hitting exquisitely-placed wrong notes to great comic effect. Working on television has also allowed him to use material in his stand-up act which would be difficult, if not impossible, to perform in the context of a Working Men's Club. For example, in the beginning of the act from Blackpool Night Out in 1966, which describes 'ashen-faced mourners' and the 'demented dwarf' strangling his pet racoon, requires rapt audience attention, in order to build up the tension which is punctured by the punchline. It is doubtful whether it would be possible to make such a joke work in a Working Men's Club, in which audiences tend to talk through the first few minutes of the comic's act.

However, not all of the unusual features of Dawson's act can be attributed to the breadth of his career. Whilst his work in television and radio has allowed him to work with scriptwriters, he has not relied on them as much as Howerd has, often writing his own material. In addition to this, some of the unusual features of Dawson's work are clearly attributable to his individual creativity. For example, the unusual language which he uses is a legacy from his childhood and early youth, when he had cherished the ambition of becoming an essayist, and wrote in a rather pompous, flowery style. Later, he began to consciously parody this style in his act in order to get laughs.<sup>84</sup> There is even evidence to suggest that as well as allowing him to expand the possibilities of his comedy, working on television may also have restricted him. In an interview in 1975, he expressed a desire to experiment, and break out of the restrictive club comic style, commenting, 'I'm not going to stand on a stage, or in front of a camera, for the next thirty years telling caustic gags about a mythical mother-in-law.'<sup>85</sup> He also spoke of people resenting his attempts at experimentation, and not wanting him to change, and

argued that 'television companies who rely on tried and tested formula are holding the art of comedy back.' In spite of his expressed desire to avoid getting stuck with a particular comic style, his 1989 series included the same caustic comments about a mythical mother-in-law which he said he was trying to shed fourteen years before.

#### IV. Ben Elton

Ben Elton was born in London in 1959. His background was middle class, his father being a university lecturer, his mother a teacher. He studied drama at Manchester University, where he wrote comic plays, and then moved to London in 1980. In 1981, he began to perform at the Comedy Store, and became a regular compere there until it closed in 1982. In 1984, he moved out of the Alternative Comedy circuit, to tour nationally with Rik Mayall. He began to work in television in 1982, on a B.B.C. 2 series called The Oxford Roadshow, but it was his work on L.W.T.'s Saturday Live and Friday Night Live, firstly as resident comedian, and later as the compere, which brought him more widespread public recognition. His first solo series, Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie was broadcast on B.B.C.1 in 1990.<sup>ee</sup>

In a sense, it is difficult to say whether Elton, or any comic, is a typical Alternative comedian, as the term 'Alternative Comedy' has been used to cover a wide variety of styles and performers. Indeed, it is possible to argue that Alternative Comedy has produced a greater range of comic styles in its first eleven years than Variety and Working Men's Clubs have, even though their origins date as far back as the last century. However, there are several features of Elton's work which are typical of early Alternative Comedy, in that they show a similarity in basic comic approach to the work of other early Alternative comedians. There are certainly stylistic similarities. Firstly, in common with early Alternative comics like

Tony Allen, Alexei Sayle, and Twentieth Century Coyote, he pours satirical scorn on old-fashioned comedians and old-fashioned comic techniques. For example, he has satirized the phenomenon of the packaged joke:

I tell lies. That's my job, only bit of truth is I tell lies, we're like politicians, stand-up comedians tell lies, it's our job. I mean imagine what it'd be like if stand-up comics started telling the truth, what a true joke would be like: 'A bloke goes into a pub...orders a pint...drinks it...fucks off again', brilliant, eh?! I mean it wouldn't work, would it, he's gotta have a crocodile up 'is arse or something. Turn it into a joke.<sup>27</sup>

Here, comic cliché is comically exposed. Many packaged jokes are set in public houses, and involve events which are incongruous in such a setting. Elton points out the staleness of this format by describing a visit to the pub as it is experienced, without the incongruous events which could be expected in the context of a packaged joke. In another of his routines, Elton makes a more political attack on clichéd comic style, satirizing the British tradition of smutty humour. A hypothetical situation comedy is described, which contains a number of covert references to breasts. Elton deconstructs these jokes, and adds ironic laughter:

I saw this sitcom, working title: 'Can You Show Me the Way to Oldham?', that was the first laugh, Oldham sounds a bit like 'hold 'em' doesn't it, very very funny, well done B.B.C., well worth sixty five quid a year license money I don't think, I watched 'em all, Benny Hill, laugh, I nearly did, fantastic. And in this sitcom, there was Gloria, behind the bar, she's a big woman, bring in the camera, steam up the lens, everybody loves it, big tits, best gag in the world, that's the one for the British punter. In comes Tom, 'e's an amicable northern stereotype, 'e says, 'By 'eck, you don't get many of those to the pound', 'e gets a laaauuuugh!! Nice one Tom, 'cos she's got big tits, oh ho ho ho ho! 'E says, 'By 'eck, I wish I were *her* doctor', yes Tom, second laugh, same pair o' tits, I couldn't believe it, it's happening in front of me. 'e says, 'By 'eck, no wonder they built the extension,' go on Tom, you're winning, 'e says, 'By 'eck, that's the loveliest pair of...eyes I ever saw!' oh amazing Tom, we thought he was gonna say 'tits', didn't we, fantastic.<sup>28</sup>

After ridiculing the simplicity of the joke-structures of breast innuendo humour, Elton then tackles the root of the problem. Jokes which make covert references to breasts rely on the idea that breasts are rude, naughty objects of desire, which cannot be overtly mentioned. Elton destroys this conception, by reincorporating the jokes from his hypothetical situation comedy in the context of a woman's getting dressed in the morning. This robs the breasts of their naughty connotations, restoring their status as ordinary physiological features, and thus making the jokes laughably unfunny:

Come on girls, how do you get dressed of a morning, dear me ladies, you must die!! Bathroom mirror, up with the nightie, there's my tits! Fuckin' 'ell, these are funny!! I'll 'ave a good laugh at my tits while I'm brushing my teeth! Ooh, I wish I were *my* doctor, ho ho ho ho ho!! I'm glad I built the extension, tee hee. These are the loveliest pair of...eyes I ever saw, fuck me, I nearly said I 'ad big tits.<sup>89</sup>

Another aspect of Elton's work which is typical of early Alternative Comedy is that like Alexei Sayle and Keith Allen, he redefines the relationship of the comic to the audience, by taking a deliberately aggressive attitude towards them. This aggressiveness is partly manifested in a hostile attitude to certain sections of the audience. A particularly loud cheerer is referred to as 'screamy wanker over there'<sup>90</sup>, and a group of academics is ridiculed in a far from friendly manner:

Oo, we got a few students in, 'ave we? Yeah, oo, very proud of yourselves, obviously done your essays! I was lookin' through the crack in the door before, I'm certain I saw two lecturers sittin' at the back...the bald couple, I think I saw. Sittin' in a pair, laughin' in rotation, 'You laugh, I'll think about it, swap at the interval.' There isn't a fuckin' interval, you're wasting your money, bastards!!<sup>91</sup>

This aggressiveness is heightened by the breakneck speed of his delivery. One particularly speedy routine illustrates the difficulty of achieving simple tasks when drunk by imagining an Olympic competition in which contestants have to make toast after drinking eighteen pints of lager. In the routine, he imitates a sports

commentator, and delivers two hundred and two words in just forty eight seconds, averaging just over four words per second.<sup>92</sup> Another example of his aggressiveness is a routine about discotheques in which he spits across the stage.<sup>93</sup> This owes more to the late 1970s youth cult punk rock than to the traditional image of the comedian as a jolly entertainer.

Elton's willingness to delve into obscenity is also typical of early Alternative Comedy. The language he uses is laced with obscenities, particularly 'fucking', which he has even placed between the two syllables of a word, turning the expression 'surprise surprise' into 'surprise sur-fucking-prise'.<sup>94</sup> He has drawn attention to the use of such language in his act, satirically imitating those who are offended by it:

It's not funny, it's not smart to say 'fark', why does he have to say 'fark'? He's quite a clever young man, he's been educated, why does he have to say 'fark', it's not necessary. I can say 'fark', I'll say 'fark', farking fark fark fark. Farking fark fark fark fark fark, I'll say it, it's not...it's not clever, and after a while it loses its meaning. He...he should understand language better than that, it means nothing to say 'fark'. [normal voice:] In which case, you won't mind if I tell you to 'fark' off, will ya?<sup>95</sup>

On television, the use of such language is almost entirely prohibited, but his use of milder obscenities has proved controversial. On the last episode of his B.B.C. series Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, he recalled the problems he had encountered in a routine from an earlier programme about contraception, in which he had used the word 'fanny':

Unfortunately, the word 'fanny' is deemed by the B.B.C. to be a shocking word. Oo, I can see they were right, yes. Oo, I can see that many of you are a bit shocked by that, you're close to fainting, aren't you, yes! You won't be able to sleep tonight, will you, in the middle of the night, you'll wake up, 'Aaarrgh!!', cold sweat, staring eyes, 'I just 'ad this awful nightmare where Ben said 'fanny' on the telly.'<sup>96</sup>

In addition to using taboo language, he also addresses taboo subjects. As we have seen, whereas *Variety* comics only made covert references to sexual and lavatorial matters, Alternative comedians discuss them openly. Rather than using *doubles entendres* or suspended rhymes, Elton approaches taboo subjects openly, often using highly graphic and almost poetic language in his descriptions: a nude sunbather's penis is described as 'the little crimson acorn nestling in the gingery pubes'; a lump of excrement floating in a toilet bowl is described as being 'fucking enormous...and perfectly formed. Like a chocolate swiss roll'; the sound of another lump of excrement dropping into the toilet is described as being 'like banging a dead fish on the surface of a stagnant pond'; and a squelchy sound made during sexual intercourse is described as 'a great, joyous, life-enhancing, gusset-shattering raspberry that sends her lover's willy twanging like a jew's harp.'<sup>97</sup> Elton frequently addresses taboo subjects, including menstruation, contraception, nude sunbathing, and sex and sexuality. Lavatories have also provided him with a rich source of inspiration, and his nine-minute routine about the horrors of using public toilets is arguably the most exhaustive approach to the subject in the history of British comedy.<sup>98</sup>

As we have seen, Alternative Comedy tends to challenge prevailing attitudes towards taboo subjects, and this is the approach which Elton takes. In one routine, he specifically attacks taboos surrounding sex, and bemoans the fact that 'so much is left unsaid' about sexual matters: 'Sex is abused and brutalized because people are scared of it, they wanna have less sex education in schools, they are fools, how can they have less than what we had, we had fuck-all, I learned what I know from behind the bike sheds.'<sup>99</sup> His routines discuss the nature of the taboos which they attack, and humorously criticize conservative attitudes towards sexuality. For example, his routine about menstruation ridicules the twee euphemisms of tampons advertisements on the television: 'And over the voice-over comes: "Ladies- do you have a secret?" Aarrgh!!! Half the population of the world does it every month, what's so

fuckin' secret about that???' In the same routine, he links the taboos surrounding menstruation with male dominance, by imagining a world in which men menstruate:

I'll tell yer, we'd 'ave a lot less of this po-faced 'Let's not talk about it, let's keep it in the closet, let's make it embarrassing for young girls when it first 'appens to them' if it was *men* what 'ad periods. Oh yeah! Then it'd be a subject for after dinner conversation! 'It was a marvellous sunny afternoon, I'd just strolled out to bat, and would you believe it, my period started!' Yeah. All us lads. Us lads, we'll be 'avin' a laugh about it, won't we, because we laugh about everything else us lads, we laugh about pissin', see 'ow high we can piss, 'ave a laugh about 'Gandhi's revenge', 'Fuck me, I 'ad a curry, shouldn't 'ave gone in the bog after me, know what I mean, ha ha ha ha!!' We'll be 'avin' a laugh about our periods: 'Jesus, it was funny, we was in the pub, me and Barry, 'avin' a laugh, started menstruating, we've always menstruated simultaneously since we were kids, so funny, went in the bog, tampon machine's broken, ha ha ha, had to go 'ome with a beer mat in our knickers!!' '100

The fact that this routine focusses on the anxieties which the taboos surrounding menstruation can provoke is significant, because Elton frequently examines this kind of anxiety when approaching taboo subjects. For example, a routine from The Man From Auntie discusses the mismatch between idealized images of sex in erotic films, and the reality of everyday experiences of sex, and argues that, 'The media sex conspiracy makes us believe that superhuman sexual powers are the norm, and we personally are the only little farties who can't do it very well.' '101 A good deal of the humour arises from pointing out the potentially embarrassing moments during sexual intercourse, which idealized media images fail to mention, for example, squelching noises:

Let's face it, the first time a toot-toot toots, it's a shock, of course it is. Nobody's warned you. Not your mum...not the movies, not sex education. I mean, everything's nice, it's going nicely, and then THPPP! 'What was that? What was that?' 'I don't know,' 'Well it wasn't me,' 'Well it wasn't *me*...Arrgh, there's a burglar in the room!!!' '102

The routine also provides incongruous explanations as to why the characters in erotic films never seem to experience problems with the mechanics of sexual intercourse: 'If you make love...it's gonna come out at some point, right? Never happens in the movies. Never happens to Tom Cruise. I'll tell you why. 'Cos Tom Cruise's nob's got Velcro on the end.'<sup>103</sup> Similarly, a major focus of the mammoth routine, about public lavatories is the anxieties which the everyday bodily function of defecation can cause.

Another feature of Elton's work which is typical of Alternative Comedy is the overtly political nature of his comedy. His political position is made very clear in *many* of his routines, some even resorting to slogans; for example, the routine about old-fashioned breast innuendo jokes ends with the statement: 'Sexism in comedy, sexism everywhere, we've got to get together, beat it together.'<sup>104</sup> As with many of the early Alternative comedians, he attacks Margaret Thatcher and her government with his comedy. For example, in one routine he ridicules her decision to have an operation in a private hospital, using this to question her pledges to safeguard the National Health Service:

Mrs Thatch is a strong woman. And she keeps her word. Every general election, she swears she will not touch the National Health Service, and she keeps her word, when she has an operation, she does it in a private hospital. Now I respect that. The single most glorious institution this country will ever produce, and the Prime Minister won't touch it.

The routine ends with a much less rational point, a gratuitous insult in which Elton suggests that Thatcher is the devil:

Do you remember Mrs Thatcher's hand, ohhh! She had a sore hand, ohhhhhh! The tendons...in 'er 'and...were constricting..and drawing in the fingers..to form..a clawwwwww!! And the doctors tried to reverse this! You cannot undo what god is doing! First the claw, then the horns, then the forked tail!<sup>105</sup>

His political stance is also visible in routines which address specific issues associated with the Left. For example, he makes a

scathing satirical attack on the British press, in which he recalls Dante's Inferno, arguing that Dante was wrong, and that beneath Judas Iscariot at the bottom of the pit of Hell lies the editor of The Sun, a popular Right Wing tabloid.<sup>106</sup> Another Left cause with which he has associated himself is sexual equality, many of his routines attacking manifestations of sexism in our culture. For example, his routine about menstruation attacks the taboos surrounding the subject because he argues that they cause women unnecessary anxiety; his discussion of the word 'fanny' on his B.B.C. show was inspired by his disgust with the fact that the B.B.C. believed that there is 'a greater set of taboos surrounding the female biology than the male'; and his routine about breast innuendos makes an ironic link between the humorous associations of breasts and the poorer employment prospects faced by women: 'I know why lots of women don't make it in the world- you're all sat at home laughing at your tits, aren't you?' He adopts the non-sexist language of the Left, which shuns gender-specific words, replacing 'he' with 'he or she', and '-man' with '-person', thus replacing the word 'chairman' with 'chairperson'. In one routine, Elton alters the name on a well-known brand of personal stereo from 'Sony Walkman' to 'Sony Walkperson'.<sup>107</sup> In live shows, he even relates the subject of sexism to the architecture of the theatre in which he is performing, asking why there are never enough toilet facilities for women.

Overall then, there are several similarities in approach between Elton and other early Alternative comedians. His satirical attacks on old-fashioned styles of comedy like packaged jokes, and innuendo humour, the speed and aggressiveness of his performance style, his use of obscene language, his willingness to approach taboo subjects directly, and the overtness and Left orientation of his politics are all typical. However, as with both Howard and Dawson, there are also aspects of his comedy which are not typical of the tradition of entertainment which produced him. Indeed, Elton has attempted to disassociate himself from Alternative Comedy, arguing that the term itself has become irrelevant:

There is no Alternative and non-Alternative comedy. There is only good and bad comedy. I have a particular favourite amongst comedy double acts, in which the partners used to slap each other about the face and then get into bed and spend the night together, which sounds like a very Alternative act indeed. The people involved were, of course, Morcambe and Wise.<sup>108</sup>

This argument is rather naive: whilst Morcambe and Wise may have broken certain boundaries, they fell a long way short of telling jokes about tampon advertisements, placing the word 'fucking' between the two syllables of a word, or doing a nine-minute routine about using public lavatories. However, Elton's attempts to dissociate himself from the tradition which produced him have been bolstered by the widespread criticism which he has attracted from other Alternative comedians. He has been criticized by Alexei Sayle, who accuses him of preaching; by Tony Allen, who has argued that his approach is too safe and unchallenging; by Jeremy Hardy, who dismisses him as a Right Winger; by Mark Steel, who calls him, 'a complete imbecile onstage and offstage'; and by Gerry Sadowitz, who has accused him of closing up the possibilities of comedy.<sup>109</sup>

Whilst this dissociation may be somewhat misleading, there are certainly elements of Elton's work which are not typical of Alternative Comedy. Firstly, his delivery is very individual. He delivers lines in a fairly limited number of styles, which can make his style seem rather mannered. Some lines are delivered in a fast babble, without observing normal sentence structures. Words are stressed by being stretched out in a deep, menacing growl. Lines are spoken in a weepy, tearful voice. Sometimes a posh voice or a cartoonish northern accent are used. Sometimes shouts or screams are used. What makes all of these modes of delivery unusual is that whenever they appear, they are exactly the same as last time they were used. This makes Elton an easy target for impressionists. Unlike most Alternative comedians, Elton actually has catch-phrases of sorts, but they are not used in a traditional way. He uses the phrase 'yes indeed' and variations on the sentence 'My name's Ben Elton, thank you, and goodnight' frequently enough for them to be

recognizable as catch-phrases, and to be picked up by impressionists, but they are not used as part of the body of the act or as jokes, they are merely ritualized ways of starting and finishing the act.

Secondly, as with both Howerd and Dawson, Elton's use of language is distinctive. In addition to the obscene words with which he peppers many of his routines, he also uses a lot of slang: words like 'wally', 'prat', 'posey', and 'rubber johnny' crop up frequently.<sup>110</sup> He also invents his own versions of words and names. 'Sophisticated' is reduced to 'sophist', and 'nude' is lengthened to 'nudie'. 'Mrs Thatcher' is reduced to 'Mrs Thatch', and 'Norman Tebbit' is transformed into 'Normo Tebbs'. New words are invented, like 'farty', a word derived from 'fart', meaning unsophisticated.<sup>111</sup>

Thirdly, his obsession with consumerism is unusual. His approach to modern consumer culture is consistently political. For example, a routine called 'Photosynthesis', which humorously observes the phenomenon of junk mail, links the idea that most people do not want to receive free mailshots, with the fact that the production of the paper on which they are printed contributes to deforestation.<sup>112</sup> Similarly, the humour in a routine about fast food is largely based on comic observation of the experience of eating in a fast food restaurant, but between the bun of this observational humour, there is a burger of hard political comment. Firstly, the move from manufacturing to service industries under the Thatcher Government is criticized: 'This is the new industrial revolution! Marvellous, innit? What a future for the kids, we don't dig coal any more, we don't make steel, we stuff American hamburgers down each other's faces, fa-antastic!' Secondly, fast food is criticized because it is seen as a manifestation of American cultural imperialism:

They teach 'em marketing techniques. American marketing techniques because they're not content, Americans, they're not content to colonize our stomachs, they gotta colonize our minds! So they teach these kids how to be like Americans. They have to say, 'Hello, my name is Sidney, enjoy your meal, how may I help you, have a nice day, my name is Sidney, enjoy your meal, have a nice day, how may I

help you?' They don't realise it don't sound so good in Barnsley. [joke Yorkshire accent:] 'Hello, my name's Sidney, enjoy your meal, have a nice day.' Or anywhere else, Wales, or London, or Scotland, it don't matter, we got our *own* culture! We don't need a hypocritical American culture, we got our own, it worked for years, what was wrong with it: 'Whaddya want, there you are, fuck off,' it worked!!

Thirdly, it is argued that the large multinational corporations which own fast food chains are exploiters of the Third World: 'Mums, rot your children's teeth, and teach them about the friendly face of international conglomerates that fuck up the Third World.'<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps the most distinctive and important manifestation of Elton's obsession with consumerism are his routines about television advertisements; his national tours in 1986, 1987, and 1989 all included lengthy routines on this subject. Routines about advertizing are not unusual in Alternative Comedy, and at one point, this type of material became so common that it became something of a stock subject. However, Elton's advertizing routines are distinctive and unusual, because of his approach to the subject. Even in his earliest routines about advertisements, he examined the values on which they were based, rather than simply ridiculing them. More recently, he has developed a theoretical approach to advertizing which is remarkably complex in the context of a stand-up comedy act. Much of the comedy in his 1989 tour, and on The Man From Auntie was based on his concept of 'The Reality Gap', which he defines as: 'The chasmic distance between what is real and what is perceived, the difference between what we experience, and how the media interpret those experiences.'<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, this definition is remarkably close to certain versions of the Incongruity Theory, in particular that of Schopenhauer: 'The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity.'<sup>15</sup> The similarity is clear: both Elton and Schopenhauer stress the difference between the ideal (which Elton calls 'what is perceived' and Schopenhauer calls 'a concept'), and the real. Elton's concept

of the Reality Gap leads him to adopt a new political analysis with which to approach advertizing. Instead of seeing society as being divided into oppressor and oppressed along traditional lines of class, gender, or race, his analysis identifies the oppressor as the beautiful inhabitants of the idealized world shown in adverts, and the oppressed as 'real' people, the general public. In one early routine about adverts, he talks about 'the contrast between Us and Them', between 'the marvellous world of the product, and the shitty world of the consumer', and talks about the celebrities who inhabit the world as 'the Gods they worship'.<sup>116</sup> In a later routine, he returns to the theme, and terms the oppressed of his analysis 'farties': 'We're the farties. We're not the male models, the beautiful girls, we're not wearing the Levi 501s, or if we were, they'd still look like Woolworth's jeans on us.'<sup>117</sup> Levi 501s are a highly fashionable type of jeans, and are used to represent the idealized world of the advert; Woolworths is an old-fashioned chainstore which connotes cheap shoddiness, and is used to represent the consumer. The new analysis allows him to point out that the idealized images presented in adverts provoke anxiety and feelings of inadequacy, because they are impossible to live up to. For example, in one routine, he describes an advertisement for Tennant's L.A. Lager in which a man takes his shirt off in a train, and analyses its effect:

Our own sexuality- that's being twisted. We're all wishing we were that good-looking, that confident. I mean, you know, it takes most people all their courage to ask someone out, but he's just..strips his shirt off, [macho voice:] 'There you are, look at the body love, d'you want some o' that?' right.<sup>118</sup>

However, this new analysis does not mean that a more traditional Left approach is disregarded. In some cases, when Elton discusses advertisements in terms of Them and Us, 'Them' refers to the Ruling Class rather than the idealized advert people, and 'Us' refers to the Working Class rather than the farties. This is apparent in a routine from 1987:

Have you noticed, how in the last three years, for some inexplicable reason, they have started advertizing multinational companies. What are they advertizing for, there is no reason, they've got all the money, they're just sitting there, on the telly saying, 'Fuck off, we're really rich, we've got all your money, fuck off, we're really rich, we've got all your money.' What are they trying to tell us, that's all they can possibly trying to tell. 'The Hanson Trust. A company from over here doing rather well over there.' *WE DON'T...FUCKING...CARE!!!* I mean, they're not going to give us any of the money, are they?''<sup>3</sup>

The particular advertisement mentioned in this excerpt featured Glenda Jackson and George Segal, reprising their roles from a film called A Touch of Class, in which a British dress designer has a tempestuous love affair with an American businessman. It was promoting the idea that the Hanson Trust, a British multinational, was 'doing rather well' in the American market. In doing so, it attempted to make the audience for the advertisement proud of the achievements of the Hanson Trust, and thus promoted the very ethos of capitalism. Elton imposes a socialist perspective on the advertisement, seeing the fortunes of big business as irrelevant to the lives of the majority of people. In this analysis, 'they' is big business, the Ruling Class, and 'we' is the Working Class, who do not own the means of production, and therefore do not benefit from the successes of big business. By imposing this division of class interests, the advertisement is made to seem like little more than arrogant corporate chest-beating, and whilst Elton's approach may seem a little polemical, the audience shows considerable approval of his analysis, responding to the line '*WE DON'T FUCKING CARE!!!*' with a six-second burst of laughter, applause and whistles.

In another routine, an advertisement for Barclays Bank business loans is satirized in a similar manner, by imposing a class-based analysis on it. Elton subverts the advertisement by highlighting the difference in social class between the wealthy model businesswoman in the advertisement and the average television viewer in a lower income bracket. The businesswoman is portrayed as a condescending snob: '[Haughty voice:] "Actually...I'm opening my second kiln.

Ye-es." [waves two fingers at the audience].' In contrast with this, Elton suggests that what the advertisement is offering is beyond the reach of the average television viewer, who could not afford to start up a business:

Let's all try it, shall we? There's millions of people watching this programme, let's all pop down to our local Barclays tomorrow and say, 'Ello. We'd all like to start up a small pottery business. We were assured it would be easy.' They'd say, 'Oh sorry, you need a hundred grand start-up capital, didn't we make that clear?'<sup>120</sup>

Elton's comic approach to advertizing is unusual, because of its depth. In addition to using complex ideas like the Reality Gap, and proposing new analyses like the farties versus the advert people, he also examines the politics and the psychological impact of advertisements. Their promotion of capitalist ideology is criticized, as are the feelings of inadequacy which their idealized images can promote. As with Howerd and Dawson, Elton's work involves elements which are both typical and atypical of the tradition of entertainment which produced him. His satirical attacks on the conventions of previous traditions of comedy, his aggressive performance style, his use of obscene language, his use of taboo subjects as a source of comedy, and his overt Left stance are all typical; and his style of delivery, his inventive use of language, his obsession with consumer culture, and the complexity of his routines on advertizing are all atypical. In a sense, it is unnecessary to find explanations for the unusual elements in Elton's work, because as we have seen, Alternative Comedy has encompassed a wide range of styles and approaches. This diversity means that the very concept of a typical Alternative comedian is questionable. However, there are aspects of Elton's career which may explain the unusual features of his comedy. As with both Howerd and Dawson, his career has been diverse: in addition to his stand-up work, he has also written a series of successful situation comedies, including The Young Ones, Happy Families, Blackadder, and Filthy Rich and Catflap. He has also written a West End play, Gaspig; a best-selling novel, Stark; and a regular column in the Daily Mirror.<sup>121</sup>

However, it is not so much the diversity of his career which explains the unusual elements in his comedy, as the extent of his work as a stand-up comedian. Whereas the average Alternative comic working on the London circuit needs little more than twenty minutes of material, Elton's stand-up career has demanded huge amounts. The first series of Saturday Live, in which he performed a regular six-minute spot, used up all of the material he had produced at that point.<sup>122</sup> Later series, which he compered, demanded 210 minutes of material for the full ten weeks.<sup>123</sup> His national tours have involved shows lasting two to three hours, each tour using almost entirely new material. There is evidence to suggest that this demand for material has improved his skills as a comic writer. For example, in 1983, when Elton went to the Edinburgh Festival, he was terrified by the prospect of writing ten minutes of new material to expand his act to a thirty-minute set<sup>124</sup>, but by the time he was compering Saturday Live, he could write a whole routine in half a day.<sup>125</sup> It seems likely that it was this kind of improvement through experience which produced the kind of comic skill which allows him to use such complex ideas as the Reality Gap in his act.

#### V. Career shape and comic style

A detailed study of Howerd, Dawson, and Elton clearly shows that their work cannot be understood merely in terms of the general trends of the traditions of showbusiness which produced them. There are aspects of the comic style of all three which are unusual, and do not conform to the general trends. With all three, some of these unusual aspects are explained by specific aspects of their careers. For example, working in media like radio and television can allow the possibility of working with professional scriptwriters, a tailoring of the style to fit the new medium, or an incentive to produce a large amount of new material. All of these can affect the basic comic style. Bearing this in mind, the extent to which their work *does* conform to the general trends is striking. In each case, a good proportion of their career has been spent in the mainstream,

away from the tradition which produced them. Howerd had only toured once in Variety before he was propelled to fame via Variety Bandbox, and although he continued to tour the Variety theatres after he had entered the mainstream by becoming a major radio star, after 1960 there was no Variety circuit to speak of; this means that he was directly connected with Variety only fourteen of his forty four years as a professional comedian. Dawson's move from Working Men's Clubs to the mainstream was slower. His career as a stand-up comedian began in 1956, and although he had begun to work on radio and television by the early 1960s, his own series, Sez Les did not begin until 1968, and even then he continued to perform in variety clubs. However, even in his case, it can be said that he has spent at least half of his career in the mainstream, separated from the tradition which produced him. Even Elton, whose career as a professional stand-up did not begin until 1981, moved out of the Alternative circuit in the mid-1980s, and so has spent half of his career in the mainstream. Bearing in mind that all three of these comics have spent as much time separated from the tradition that produced them as they spent directly connected with it, it is extraordinary how strongly the influence of the tradition remains.

## Conclusion

One point which immediately arises from the study of British stand-up comedy is that it highlights the fact that humour is intrinsically linked with its cultural context. Many of the extracts from comedy acts which have been quoted will almost certainly seem entirely devoid of humour to the modern reader. This is not entirely due to the fact that the transfer from the spoken word to the written page robs the material of the often exquisite subtleties of the comic's delivery. There are jokes which will not work for the modern reader because they rely on knowledge which is no longer widespread. For example, George Formby Senior's boast that he is frequently mistaken for George Lashwood loses its comic meaning without knowledge of both Formby's scruffy and unsophisticated stage character, and Lashwood's stylish dandy stage persona. Similarly, Alexei Sayle's joke about foreigners being told that a traditional English greeting for a policeman is, 'Hello, I am from Operation Countryman and I claim my five pounds' loses its point for anybody who cannot remember that Operation Countryman was an investigation of corruption in the Metropolitan police, a fact which was current when Sayle used the joke in the early 1980s. In both of these cases, the jokes are tied to their cultural contexts by specific knowledge: the first requires the knowledge of stage personas, the second requires knowledge of a particular current event. In other cases, jokes are linked with much broader aspects of culture. For example, the five seconds of slightly outraged laughter which Bobby Thompson could elicit from an audience by imitating his wife saying, 'Tell us what th'wants for th'supper before the fish shop shuts' may seem incomprehensible to the modern reader, because the joke relies on social values which have changed. The joke is about deviation from role, the wife deviates from her role as provider of meals in relying on a fish and chip shop, rather than cooking the meal herself. Now that the wife's role of provider of meals is less strictly upheld, the joke no longer has the same comic power. It is only by acknowledging the fact that comedy is often based on social values like this, which are inevitably subject to change, that we can understand the popularity of great comedians of the past. Max Miller had a reputation of being one of the funniest and most

obscene comedians of his day, yet recordings of his performances may well seem neither funny nor obscene to a listener in 1990. The only satisfactory explanation for this is that Miller's humour relied on hinting at obscenity, and society's judgement as to what constitutes obscenity has changed. For example, in 1957, he could elicit nineteen seconds of laughter from his audience with his song about the fan dancer breaking her fan, because it hinted at the word 'fanny', which was then considered highly obscene. In 1990, the word no longer has the same power. Indeed, as we have seen, Ben Elton openly discussed the use of the word 'fanny' on his 1990 television series The Man From Auntie. As comedians may now openly use the word on mainstream television, to merely hint at it no longer requires the same level of daring as it did for Miller, and as a consequence, the joke loses much of its power.

Another point which arises is that whilst humour is subversive, because its deviation from the normal and the expected tends to promote new ways of seeing the world, this subversiveness is often curbed by various forms of control. Perhaps the most obvious form of social control applied to British stand-up comedy was the system of regulation and censorship applied to Music Hall and Variety comedy by local government, Music Hall management, and various commercial interests. The chief aim of this regulation was to discourage obscenity, but it seems likely that it also served to discourage political radicalism. However, the subversiveness of stand-up comedy has also been curbed in more subtle ways. In all three major traditions of British stand-up, professionalization has tended to decrease the stylistic and political radicalism of the comedy. Once being a comedian becomes a professional career, there is an enormous pressure to succeed. The livelihood of the comedian relies on his or her ability to make the audience laugh, and this tends to discourage both artistic experimentation and political radicalism. This is because comic experimentation always involves the risk of failure, and using politically radical comic material involves the risk of alienating the audience. Failing to make the audience laugh, or worse still alienating them, will make the comedian a less

attractive proposition to bookers, and therefore may damage his or her career. In addition to discouraging innovation, the professionalization of stand-up comedy has also tended to positively encourage certain stylistic qualities which blunt the humour's subversiveness. For example, comedians from all three of the major traditions have tended to decrease the unexpectedness of the humour, by using the same old jokes, by restricting their jokes to a given set of subjects, by relying on comic stereotypes, and by using devices like bill matter and catch-phrases to establish a familiar relationship with the audience, thus allowing them to know what jokes to expect. In both the Variety and club comedy traditions, framing devices which neatly separate the humour from normal discourse have been widely used. In Variety comedy, this framing was linked with the rigid demarcation of the acts, and the use of obviously artificial stage characters; and in Working Men's Clubs, it is linked with the language of standard packaged jokes. In club comedy, there is a tendency to see the unconventional thinking which humour involves as error, to show it to be the result of lunacy, hallucinogenic drugs, or the mental deficiency which is associated with being Irish.

There are specific reasons why these stylistic tendencies should have developed. For example, Variety comedians tended to build up a familiar relationship with the audience, with catch-phrases, bill matter, and clearly defined stage personas because they had little time to establish themselves with the audience, and needed such devices to create a rapport, and make themselves memorable in the few minutes which they had to perform in; and club comics tend to rely on standard packaged jokes, because they best suit an audience which may not be paying full attention to what is going on on the stage. However, there is also a more basic question as to why it is that professionalization should encourage a toning down of the essential subversiveness of humour. It has been argued here that once being a comedian becomes a job of work, there is a pressure on the performer to please the audience, because his or her career depends on it. However, the reasons why aiming to please the

audience should encourage a toning-down of the essential subversiveness of humour have not been fully examined. It has been noted that the pressure to please discourages innovation, because this always involves the risk of failure. However, there is also a more basic reason why comedy in which the subversiveness is toned down should be more likely to please audiences. As we have seen, humour's subversiveness stems from its incongruity. Humorous incongruity sometimes involves putting words, ideas or emotions together in unusual and unexpected ways; and sometimes involves seeing the usual and the everyday from a new perspective, casting a new light on it so as to make it seem strange and unusual. This kind of unconventional thought tends to challenge our conceptualization of the world, and so it is subversive; but this kind of challenge need not necessarily be pleasant. To have one's perception of the world challenged may be disturbing or bewildering rather than funny. Professionalized stand-up comedy is a form of light entertainment, an arena in which phenomena like challenge and bewilderment are somewhat alien. Certainly, it seems likely that an audience which has paid to see a formalized comedy show will expect a performance which will make them laugh rather than making them disturbed or bewildered. The value of toning down the challenging, subversive element which is inherent in humour's unconventional thinking is that it reduces the risk of causing bewilderment rather than laughter. Using obvious framing devices, which clearly separate humour from normal discourse, helps to make the challenge of humorous thinking less threatening: as long as it is kept separate from normal discourse, it can be seen as a temporary suspension of the rules rather than a real challenge, it can be seen as *only* a joke. Similarly, familiarity can also make humorous thinking less threatening: if a joke is old, if the subject dealt with is a well-established subject for joking, or if the audience is in some way allowed to know what kind of jokes to expect, then the outcome of the joke is less unexpected, so it is less challenging, and so it is less threatening. Audiences in Variety theatres would know exactly what kind of humorous incongruities to expect of jokes about wives or mothers-in-law, and similarly, audiences in Working Men's Clubs

know exactly what to expect of jokes about Pakistanis; in both cases, the audience knows that it will get through the joke with its value system intact, and so feels safe to laugh. The tendency in jokes told by club comics to show the humorous incongruity to be error, connected with lunacy, drugs, or Irish nationality, is even more reassuring: rather than challenging the audience's perception of the world, these jokes reinforce it, by implying that deviation from it is simply erroneous.

The arrival of Alternative Comedy was remarkable because it returned to the essential subversiveness of humour, rejecting and indeed openly satirizing the stylistically conservative techniques of both previous traditions of British stand-up. It refused to be bound in, approaching subjects which had previously been thought unfit for humorous treatment, and making jokes from genuinely unconventional perspectives. The idea that the unconventional thinking, which unblunted humour involves, risks responses other than laughter is certainly born out by the experiences of the early Alternative comedians. As we have seen, in addition to making audiences laugh, the first generation of Alternative comics also succeeded in making them go silent, leave, break into fights, or even hit the performer. Cynics may attribute these responses to a sheer lack of skill on the part of the performer, whose job it is to produce laughter rather than silence or physical violence. However, this response would be simplistic. As we have seen, when Alexei Sayle and Tony Allen first performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the reviewer complained not of a lack of skill, but of not knowing what they were trying to do. This clearly indicates bewilderment rather than dissatisfaction with performing ability.

Another point which arises from the study of British stand-up comedy is the extent to which the form has failed to act as an outlet for individual self-expression. This is remarkable, considering the dynamics of the form. Stand-up involves a single performer, communicating directly with the audience. In contrast with other types of performer, the stand-up comedian can be almost entirely

self-sufficient: he or she can act as the writer and the performer, and there is no need for other performers, directors, costumes, musicians, or scenery. In addition to this, the directness of the communication between performer and audience in stand-up comedy suggests that it should be a form of self-expression for the comic. The stand-up comedian talks *directly* to the audience, the mode of speech often resembling ordinary conversation. Participants in conversation speak to express themselves, and as stand-up comedy often resembles a one-way conversation (or, with hecklers, a two-way conversation), it could be assumed that the comic's act is a piece of self-expression. In addition to this, there is evidence to suggest that it is often assumed that stand-up comedy is a form of self-expression. For example, in 1987, Morwenna Banks and Amanda Swift defined stand-up as follows: 'In stand-up you are centre stage and you are the only protagonist; there is no play, no set, no character. You do not have the shield of a theatrical character; you are, in theory, presenting yourself.'<sup>2</sup> However, stand-up comedy has tended not to act as a form of self-expression, for several reasons. Firstly, Banks and Swift's definition of the form is limited because it does not take into account the fact that the earliest stand-ups *did* use theatrical characters, and as we have seen, stand-up comedy actually evolved out of Music Hall songs, which would usually be sung in character. A second reason why the work of stand-up comedians has failed to constitute a form of self-expression is that the words which they have used to directly address the audience with have often not been their own. As we have seen, the early stand-ups of the late Music Hall era tended to rely on middle-class scriptwriters, rather than providing their own material. Later, in the Variety era, comics often relied on standard joke books as a source of material, or simply lifted jokes from other people's acts. Club comics tend to use standard packaged jokes which are stolen from each other and recycled, or bought in standard packs from scriptwriters. The fact that a good proportion of the performers who have been part of the history of British stand-up comedy have tended to use other people's jokes rather than their own, whether these have been provided by professional scriptwriters, stolen from other

acts, taken from joke books, or simply lifted from the comic folklore's supply of standard packaged jokes, suggests that they have been expressing themselves on stage as little as the actor who interprets the text of the playwright. A final reason to question the idea that stand-up comedy acts as a form of self-expression is the importance of the influence of its three major traditions in shaping the style of the performer. As we have seen, each tradition has exhibited marked stylistic and political trends. It seems likely that individual comedians working within these traditions would have been restricted by these trends, and would have found it necessary to stick to the styles, standard joke subjects and comic stereotypes, and political perspectives of the tradition. This argument is supported by Max Beerbohm's claim that in the Music Halls, 'a new kind of humour, however obvious and violent, might take the public unawares, and be received in silence.' It is also supported by the very uniformity of style within traditions. The fact that the vast majority of contemporary club comedians have been little more than professional joke-tellers, telling a series of unconnected packaged joke suggests that it is difficult to be anything other than a joke-teller in the club tradition. Even in Alternative Comedy, which has allowed for more variety between individual comedians, certain stylistic and political trends have grown up, which could be seen as restricting the comedian's creative choices. The importance of tradition in determining the nature of the individual comic's act is highlighted by the fact that comedians like Frankie Howerd, Les Dawson, and Ben Elton all exhibit many of the general characteristics of Variety, club and Alternative comedy respectively, even though all of them have spent at least half of their careers in the mainstream, away from the traditions which produced them. The fact that decisions as to the style of the comedy, and the choice of subject matter are, to an extent, determined by the particular tradition of entertainment rather than the individual comedian further detracts from the argument that stand-up comedy is a form of self-expression.

Humour has an essentially subversive quality, and stand-up comedy has a potential to act as a form of self-expression, a chance for the individual performer to communicate his or her comic view of the world directly to an audience. In practice, British stand-up comedy has tended to be neither subversive, nor an expression of the self. However, there have been various comedians who have thrown off the restrictions of tradition, and of professionalization, and who have succeeded in being innovative, subversive, and entertaining. Those with the will and the skill to achieve this, to fulfill the enormous potential of stand-up comedy, should not only be laughed at, but also applauded.

## Footnotes

## Chapter One: Existing Theories of Humour

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4. 'The relationship between arousal potential and funniness of jokes', in Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee (eds.), The Psychology of Humour, New York and London, 1972, p.150
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11. Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (The Pelican Freud Library, No. 6), Harmondsworth, 1976, p.146
12. On Aggression, London, 1967, pp.152-53; pp.252-56
13. The Act of Creation (Danube Edition), London, 1970, p.63
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Nancy Levi Arnez and Clara B. Anthony, 'Contemporary negro humour as social satire', Phylon, Vol. 29, 1968, pp.339-46

17. 'Racist acts and racist humour', Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 14, 1984, p.88

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19. 'Conflict and control functions of humour', American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 56, 1951, pp.567-74

20. 'Ethnic jokes, moral values and social boundaries', British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 33, 1982, pp.383-403

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23. Leviathan, Oxford, 1957, p.36; Nichomachean Ethics (Transl. F.H. Peters), London, 1909, p.17

24. 'When is it wrong to laugh?', John Morreall (ed.), The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour, Albany, 1987, pp.226-49; p.242

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27. 'Laughter and ludicrous composition', p.318; 'Of wit and humour', p.44

28. The Act of Creation, pp.32-51
29. 'Reflections upon laughter', pp.34-35
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31. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Oxford, 1975, p.157; 'Of wit and humour', p.43
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34. The Psychology of Laughter, London, 1933, pp.128-29
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36. 'Jokes', in Implicit Meanings, London and Boston, 1975, pp.90-114; p.103
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39. The Sense of Humour, New York, 1936, p.47
40. 'Jokes and their relation to social reality', Social Research, Vol. 35, 1968, pp.286-311; p.302
41. 'Jokes and their relation to social reality', p.311
42. Critique on Judgement (Transl. J.H. Bernard), London, 1914, p.223
43. Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, pp.140-46
44. Critique on Judgement, pp.225-26
45. 'On the physiology of laughter', Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects, London and Toronto, 1911, pp.298-306
46. The Act of Creation, pp.63-64
47. The Act of Creation, p.60
48. 'On wit and humour', p.7
49. Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, pp.174-77

## Chapter Two: Establishing a New Theoretical Perspective

1. Psychologists such as Luther L. Bernard have argued that instinct has little bearing on human behaviour: 'Instinct...is a diminishing if not disappearing category in higher animal forms, especially in the human.' (Quoted in Erich Fromm, The Fear of Freedom, London and Henley, 1985, p.26) Similarly: 'The human instincts are concerned primarily with the vegetative or strictly vital processes, rather than with the wider adjustments of the organism to its environment. The latter, and especially those adjustments which we call cultural, are mediated by acquired behaviour patterns.' (Robert C. Birney and Richard C. Teevan (eds.), Instinct, New Jersey, New York, London and Toronto, 1961, p.19)
2. James Boyd Christensen, 'Utani: joking, sexual license and social obligation amongst the Luguru', American Anthropologist, Vol. 65, 1963, pp.1314-27, esp. pp.1317-18; William O. Beeman, 'Why do they laugh? An interactional approach to humour in traditional Iranian Theatre', Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 94, 1981, pp.506-26, esp. p.515; James Howe and Joel Scherzer, 'Friend Hairyfish and Friend Rattlesnake: or, keeping anthropologists in their place', Man, Vol. 21, 1986, pp. 680-96, esp. p. 686; A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, 'On joking relationships', Africa, Vol. 13, 1940, pp.195-210, esp. p.202; Mary Douglas, 'Joking', in Implicit Meanings, London and Boston, 1975, pp.90-114, esp. p.97
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7. Terence Hawkes, Structuralism and Semiotics, London, 1977, p.13
8. Quoted in Structuralism and Semiotics, p.31
9. Hans Andersen, His Classic Fairy Tales (Transl. Erik Haugaard), London, 1988, pp.119-124. This parallel has previously been drawn by Anton C. Zijderfeld, in 'Jokes and their relation to social reality', Social Research, Vol. 35, 1968, pp.286-311, p.302
10. Janus: A Summing Up, London, Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland, Wellington and Johannesburg, 1978, p.128

### Chapter Three: Stand-Up Comedy in Music Hall and Variety

1. David Cheshire, Music Hall in Britain, Newton Abbot, 1974
2. Maurice Willson Disher, Winkles and Champagne, London, 1938, p.1
3. John Earl, 'Building the Halls', Peter Bailey (ed.), Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure, Milton Keynes and Philadelphia, 1986, pp.1-32; pp.2-9
4. Roger Wilmut, Kindly Leave the Stage!, London, 1985, p.13
5. 'The Composition of Music Hall Audiences, 1850-1900', Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure, pp.73-92; p.86
6. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.16
7. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.18
8. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.15, p.23
9. Kindly Leave the Stage!, pp.24-25 (Stanley Holloway); p.27 (Sir George Robey)pp.42-43 (Robb Wilton); pp.78-81 (Gracie Fields and George Formby); p.117 (Tommy Handley); p.154 (Bandwaggon touring show); 'I Like the Girls who do', 40 Minutes, B.B.C. 2, 10th February 1989 (Max Miller); Bill Ellis, Seaside Entertainment, Chorley, 1985, p.21 (Jack Warner, Cyril Fletcher); p.26 G.H. Elliot
10. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.156
11. Kindly Leave the Stage!, pp.138-39; pp.159-60; pp.215-16
12. Kindly Leave the Stage!, pp.216-18
13. Winkles and Champagne, p.3
14. John Taylor, From Self Help to Glamour, History Workshop Pamphlet No. 7, Oxford, 1972, p.65
15. Winkles and Champagne, p.12
16. Winkles and Champagne, p.33
17. Winkles and Champagne, p.23
18. 'Building the Halls', p.4, p.7
19. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.15
20. Penelope Summerfield, 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire: Deliberate Selection in the Evolution of Music Hall in London', Eileen and Stephen Yeo (eds.), Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590-1914, Sussex, 1981, pp.209-240; p.226

21. Playing the Halls, E.M.I. Records, SH 350, 1979, Side 2
22. Your Own...Your Very Own..., A.S.V./ Living Era Records, AJA 5004, 1981, side 1
23. Play Another Before You Go, Topic Records, 12TMH781, 1984, side 2
24. Playing the Halls, side 2
25. Your Own...Your Very Own..., side 2
26. Your Own...Your Very Own..., side 1
27. Your Own...Your Very Own..., side 2
28. Play Another Before You Go, side 1
29. A Good Blowout for Fourpence, Topic Records, 12TMH782, 1988, side 2
30. Playing the Halls, side 1
31. Playing the Halls, side 1
32. Playing the Halls, side 1
33. Playing the Halls, side 2
34. 'We forget that he was a comedian who *joked* like any other about mothers-in-law, lodgers...[etc]' [my emphasis] Winkles and Champagne, p.24.
35. J.S. Bratton, 'Jenny Hill: Sex and Sexism in the Victorian Music Hall', J.S. Bratton (ed.), Music Hall: Performance and Style, Milton Keynes and Philadelphia, 1986, pp.93-110; p.93
36. J. Hickory Wood, Dan Leno, London, 1905, p.98
37. Dan Leno, pp.115-16
38. Colin McInnes, Sweet Saturday Night, London, 1967, pp.73-74
39. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.16
40. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.118
41. Kindly Leave the Stage!, pp.116-17
42. Playing the Halls, sleeve notes
43. Winkles and Champagne, p.129
44. Playing the Halls, side 1

45. Sweet Saturday Night, p.74
46. Billy Bennett, Almost a Gentleman, Topic Records, 12T387 MONO, 1978, side 1
47. Geoff J. Mellor, They Made Us Laugh, Littleborough, 1982, p.92
48. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.116
49. Archibald Haddon, The Story of Music Hall, London, 1935, p.163
50. Aspects of Max Wall, Part 5, Radio 2, 2nd August 1990
51. 'I was booked as a dancer and I was not allowed to speak. And I put a joke in one night, and he [the theatre manager] came whizzing round, and 'e says, "What was that you said, you said something there?" "Well mister", I said, "I've tried one joke out." He said, "You can't," he said, "we've got people here on the bill," he says, "that tell jokes," he says, "the top of the bill this week." He says, "You're a dumb act."' Max Wall, Aspects of Max Wall Part 4, Radio 2, 26th July 1990
52. Winkles and Champagne, p.122
53. Winkles and Champagne, illustration number 102
54. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.187
55. Leslie Halliwell, Double Take and Fade Away, London, 1987, p.308
56. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.35
57. For example: 'One night this old maid, she started screaming and bawling and banging on her door. Kicking up a terrible noise. And the bursar came along, he said, "What's going on in here?" She said there are two men in my room." He said, "Well, what do you want me to do?" She said, "Sling one of them out." [audience laughter] So he slung me out- 'ere listen!!' (In the Theatre, ONE UP/ E.M.I. Records, OU2075, no date (recorded 1938), side one)
58. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.33
59. John Fisher, Funny Way to be a Hero, London, 1973, p.203
60. Funny Way to be a Hero, p.203
61. Play Another Before You Go, side 2
62. Winkles and Champagne, p.110, and Sweet Saturday Night, p.62
63. Sleeve notes to Playing the Halls
64. Sweet Saturday Night, p.63

65. Max Miller, In The Theatre, side 1
66. Max Miller, That's Nice, Maxie, Marble Arch Records, MAL597, 1966, side 1
67. Winkles and Champagne, p.24
68. Max Beerbohm, 'The Humour of the Public', The Bodley Head Max Beerbohm, London, Sydney and Toronto, 1970, pp.209-218; p.214 .
69. 'The Humour of the Public', pp.215-16
70. A joke and a poem about an old maid can be heard on Max Miller, In The Theatre, side 1. A joke about two old dames appeared in a radio obituary of Max Wall, The World at One, Radio 4, 22nd May 1990. The R.G. Knowles track on Playing the Halls contains the line 'old maids want matrimony'. Nellie Wallace's stage character is an archetypal old maid
71. 'I Like The Girls Who Do', Forty Minutes, B.B.C. 2, 16th February 1989
72. Almost a Gentleman, side 2
73. As Roger Wilmut has pointed out, Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.118
74. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.118
75. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.220
76. Sweet Saturday Night, p.84, and Double Take and Fade Away, p.316
77. Funny Way to be a Hero, p.216
78. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.218, p.176; Music Hall to Variety (Volume Three- Second House), World Record Club/E.M.I. SH150, no date, side 1
79. Music Hall to Variety (Volume Three- Second House), side 1
80. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.165
81. For example: coming into money: Dan Leno, 'My Wife's Relations', Playing the Halls, side 2; Tom Leamore, 'I Used To Be Poor Meself', Playing the Halls, side 1. Going on holiday to Brighton: Mark Sheridan, 'By The Sea', Your Own...Your Very Own..., side 2. Comradeship in the army: Mark Sheridan, 'One Of The Bhoys', Play Another Before You Go, side 1
82. Playing the Halls, side 1
83. Playing the Halls, side 2
84. Aspects of Max Wall, Part 1, Radio 2, 5th July 1990

85. They Played the Empire, Decca Records, RFLD 23, 1982, side 2
86. They Played the Empire, side 2
87. They Played the Empire, side 2
88. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.166
89. Laurence Senelick, 'Politics as Entertainment: Victorian Music Hall Songs', Victorian Studies, Vol. 19 no. 2, December 1975, pp.149-80; pp.186-87
90. Eric Midwinter, Make 'Em Laugh, London, 1979, p.27
91. 'Politics as Entertainment', p.162
92. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.120
93. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.120
94. Sweet Saturday Night, p.73
95. Sweet Saturday Night, p.70
96. J. Hickory Wood, Dan Leno, p.185
97. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.170
98. 'The Green Tie On The Little Yellow Dog', Almost a Gentleman, side 2
99. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.34. This joke is based on the expression 'Walking into [something] with your eyes shut', which means doing something without first considering the consequences. In Bennett's joke, the phrase is unexpectedly given a different meaning, the idea being that the wife's father and brother forced him to marry without considering the consequences
100. Playing the Halls, side 2
101. You Can't Help Liking Him, Hallmark Records, HMA 240, 1962, side 1
102. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.35. There are two jokes here. In the first, the expectation is built up that the wife is kind, because she brings him a cup of tea every morning. This is overturned by the punchline, which reveals that she drinks it herself. The second is based on the incongruous idea of taking gravy from a boiled egg. Gravy is produced by boiling meat, not boiling eggs, and it would be incongruous to give somebody the 'gravy' from a boiled egg, as it would be little more than hot water
103. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.35. In this joke, the phrase 'a religious cook' suggests that her cooking is being praised. This

expectation is overturned by the punchline, which involves wordplay. 'Sacrifice' and 'burnt offering' both have religious meanings, but here they are used to criticize the cooking: the meal is either 'a sacrifice' because the wife resents the effort she has put into making it, or a 'burnt offering' because she has burnt it

104. In The Theatre, side 1
105. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.35
106. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.121
107. That's Nice, Maxie, side 1
108. A Good Blowout for Fourpence, side 2. This joke is based on the expression 'to put one's foot down', which means 'to put assert one's self with somebody'. Here, Leamore restores its literal physical meaning, saying that he cannot put his foot down, as he is too weak to pick it up in the first place
109. Playing the Halls, side 1
110. Music Hall to Variety (Volume Three- Second House), side 2
111. Music Hall to Variety (Volume Three- Second House), side 2
112. In The Theatre, side 1
113. In on the Act, Y.T.V., 14th April 1988
114. In The Theatre, side 1
115. That's Nice, Maxie, side 1
116. In The Theatre, side 1
117. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.170
118. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.27
119. That's Nice, Maxie, side 1
120. In on the Act, Y.T.V. 14th April 1988
121. A Good Blowout for Fourpence, side 2
122. Playing the Halls, side 1
123. Your Own...Your Very Own..., side 1
124. The World at One, Radio 4, 22nd May 1990
125. In The Theatre, side 1. The last line is an innuendo: Miller foreshortens the line, which would be 'So what's the good of giving

it to her?', so that it would rhyme with 'Don't think a favour you'd do her.' 'Giving it to her' means 'having sex with her.'

126. Winkles and Champagne, p.120

127. Winkles and Champagne, p.84

128. Almost a Gentleman, side 1. The joke is based on the fact that 'poll' (as in 'polling station') and 'Pole' (as in 'North Pole' or 'South Pole') are homonymous. Thus, Bennett appears to be supporting Women's Suffrage, but this is overturned, when 'poll' is changed to 'Pole', and it becomes apparent that he is actually advocating sending all women to the North or South Pole

129. You Can't Help Liking Him, side 1

130. Max Miller, Max at the Met, Marble Arch Records, MAL 740, 1967, side 1

131. The Story of Music Hall, p.18

132. In The Theatre, side 2

133. Max at the Met, side 2

134. You Can't Help Liking Him, side 2

135. Eric Partridge, A Dictionary of Historical Slang, (abr. Jacqueline Simpson), Harmondsworth, 1972, p.306

136. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.162

137. They Played the Empire, side 2

138. Almost a Gentleman, side 1

139. Max at the Met, side 1

140. Playing the Halls, side 1

141. Max at the Met, side 1, for example

142. Music Hall to Variety (Volume Three- Second House), side 2

143. In The Theatre, side 2

144. Patrick Pilton, Every Night at the London Palladium, London, 1976, p.41

145. 'The Club Raid', Almost a Gentleman, side 2

146. That's Nice, Maxie, side 2

147. 'I Like the Girls Who Do'

148. In The Theatre, side 2
149. 'Politics as Entertainment', p.169
150. Music Hall in Britain, p.77
151. Music Hall in Britain, p.55
152. G.J. Mellor, The Northern Music Hall, Newcastle, 1970, p.143
153. The 'dusky sons of Hindostan' appear in G.W. Hunt's 'If England To Herself Be True', quoted in 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', p.235; the Native American is the hero of Leo Dryden's 'Great White Mother', quoted in Winkles and Champagne, plate number 70
154. 'White Skin, Black Masks: "Nigger" Minstrelsy in Victorian England', Music Hall: Performance and Style, pp.70-91
155. 'White Skin, Black Masks', p.85
156. 'White Skin, Black Masks', p.86
157. They Played the Empire, side 2
158. Almost a Gentleman, side 1
159. The three brass balls were the sign that hung outside a pawnbrokers
160. Your Own...Your Very Own..., side 2
161. That's Nice, Maxie, side 1
162. Dan Leno, p.184
163. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.171
164. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.118. In the first of these jokes, the Scotsman takes 'vanishing cream' to mean 'cream which vanishes' rather than 'cream which makes wrinkles vanish', so he stays up all night to make sure that it does not vanish and decrease his profits. In the second, he takes the idea of letting the mind wander literally, so he can just imagine going on holiday, rather than going to the expense of paying for a real holiday. In the third, he walks ten miles rather than going to the expense of using public transport, and thus becomes too tired to climb over the fence and avoid paying to get in, so his own meanness rebounds on him
165. 'Family Secrets', Almost a Gentleman, side 2
166. 'Politics as Entertainment', p.176
167. You Can't Help Liking Him, side 2

168. 'My Yiddishe Momme', Music Hall Favourites, Ditto/ Pickwick, DTD 10210, 1985, cassette 2, side 1
169. Kindly Leave the Stage!, pp.31-33
170. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.167
171. Quoted in Aspects of Max Wall, Part 1, 5th July 1990
172. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.167
173. Quoted in Aspects of Max Wall, Part 1, 5th July 1990
174. Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, (The Pelican Freud Library, n. 6), Harmondsworth, 1976, p.157
175. Eddie Buble, interviewed on 'I Like the Girls Who do'
176. Photograph of Variety poster, Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.83
177. Music Hall Favourites, cassette 2, side 1
178. 'Politics as Entertainment', p.152
179. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', p.232
180. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', p.232
181. Kindly Leave the Stage!, pp.83-84
182. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.134
183. Winkles and Champagne, p.12
184. From an L.C.C. inspector's report, Susan Pennybacker, "'It was not what she said, but the way in which she said it": The London County Council and the Music Halls', Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure, pp.118-27; p.129
185. For the difficulties posed by Variety audiences, see Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.134. Secombe quote, Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.163
186. Kindly Leave the Stage!, pp.84-86
187. Hunter Davies, The Grades, London, 1981, p.70
188. Lois Rutherford, 'Managers in a Small Way: the Professionalization of Variety Artistes, 1860-1914', Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure, pp.93-111; p.104
189. Music Hall in Britain, p.76

190. 'It was not what she said, but the way in which she said it', p.118
191. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', pp.210-16
192. 'It was not what she said, but the way in which she said it', p.124
193. 'It was not what she said, but the way in which she said it', p.126
194. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', p.223
195. Kindly Leave the Stage!, pp.84-86
196. Peter Bailey, 'A Community of Friends: Business and Good Fellowship in London Music Hall Management c.1860-1885', Music Hall The Business of Pleasure, pp.33-49; p.34
197. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', pp.222-23
198. 'Managers in a Small Way', p.102
199. 'A Community of Friends', p.46
200. 'A Community of Friends', p.34
201. 'A Community of Friends', p.40
202. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', p.224
203. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', pp.224-25
204. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', p.227
205. The Northern Music Hall, p.186
206. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.87
207. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.96
208. In The Theatre, side 1
209. Kindly Leave the Stage!, pp.153-54
210. Kindly Leave the Stage!, pp.96-97
211. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', p.219
212. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', p.220
213. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', pp.227-31
214. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', p.225

215. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.84
216. The Grades, p.99
217. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', p.231
218. Winkles and Champagne, p.24, and 'Politics as Entertainment', p.171
219. 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire', p.213
220. 'A Community of Friends', p.37
221. 'Politics as Entertainment', p.164
222. 'My Wife's Relations', Playing the Halls, side 2. 'Having a drop of something' is a euphemism for 'drinking something alcoholic', and therefore this is fundamentally at odds with going to a teetotal meeting
223. 'No Power On Earth', Almost a Gentleman, side 1
224. 'It was not what she said, but the way in which she said it', p.124
225. 'It was not what she said, but the way in which she said it', p.125
226. Every Night at the London Palladium, p.39
227. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.191

#### Chapter Four: Stand-Up Comedy in Working Men's Clubs

1. Stephen McClarence, 'Goes down great', article in The Star (Sheffield), 12th August 1982; and George Tremlett, Clubmen, London, 1987, appendices
2. History Workshop pamphlet No. 5, Oxford, 1971, p.22
3. John Taylor, From Self Help to Glamour, History Workshop pamphlet No. 7, Oxford, 1972, p.2, pp.3-5
4. From Self Help to Glamour, pp.5-13
5. B.T. Hall, quoted in From Self Help to Glamour, p.1
6. From Self Help to Glamour, pp.2-3
7. From Self Help to Glamour, p.59, p.49; Clubmen, pp.71-72
8. See T.G. Ashplant, 'London Working Men's Clubs', in Eileen and

Stephen Yeo (eds.), Popular Culture and Class Conflict, 1590-1914, Sussex, 1981, pp.241-270

9. Clubmen, p.213

10. 'Club to re-open', The Star (Sheffield), 14th June 1983

11. 'Brewery rapped for club axe', The Star (Sheffield), 16th December 1985; 'Clubs in plea for rates cut', Morning Telegraph (Sheffield), 22nd January 1983; The Star (Sheffield), 27th January 1984

12. From Self Help to Glamour, p.29

13. From Self Help to Glamour, p.34, p.38; 'London Working Men's Clubs', p.242

14. From Self Help to Glamour, pp.32-33, pp.64-65; 'London Working Men's Clubs', pp.243-44, p.250

15. From Self Help to Glamour, p.79

16. London, 1974, p.37

17. On the Way I Lost It, London, 1976, pp.245-46

18. From Self Help to Glamour, pp.76-77

19. 'Keeping the old traditions alive', Our Clubs, 25th May 1988

20. From Self Help to Glamour, p.67

21. From Self Help to Glamour, pp.70-71

22. Geoff J. Mellor, They Made Us Laugh, Littleborough, 1982, pp.70-71, pp.16-17, pp.36-37; author's interview with Ron Delta, 6th July, 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)

23. Author's interview with Eric Thomas, 16th May 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)

24. Author's interview with Eric Thomas, 27th June 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)

25. Author's interview with Eric Thomas, 16th May 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)

26. Author's interview with Frank Eames, 19th May 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)

27. Author's interview with Ron Delta, 6th July 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)

28. Author's interview with Eric Thomas, 27th June 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)
29. The Bobby Thompson Laugh In, Rubber Records, RUB 038, 1979, side 1. 'Committee men's wives' are the wives of the men who are on the Working Men's Club committee
30. Bobby Thompson: The Little Waster, Channel 4, 6th April 1988
31. The Bobby Thompson Laugh In, side 1. This line translates as: 'Are you all right? How's your debt?'
32. The Bobby Thompson Laugh In, side 1
33. Bobby Thompson: The Little Waster
34. The Bobby Thompson Laugh In, side 2. The joke here is that a cross indicates a vote, so by crossing out the Conservative's name, she would have been voting for him
35. The Bobby Thompson Laugh In, side 1
36. The Bobby Thompson Laugh In, side one. 'Housie' means bingo
37. Bobby Thompson: The Little Waster
38. Bobby Thompson: The Little Waster
39. Bobby Thompson: The Little Waster
40. Bobby Thompson: The Little Waster
41. Wot'cheor Bobby, Radio 2, 12th October 1988
42. The Bobby Thompson Laugh In, side 1
43. The Bobby Thompson Laugh In, side 1
44. The Bobby Thompson Laugh In, side 1
45. Bobby Thompson: The Little Waster
46. Author's interview with Eric Thomas, 16th May 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)
47. Author's interview with Mike Tunningley, 31st August 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)
48. 'Postbag lament', Our Clubs, 17th August 1988
49. The Bobby Thompson Laugh In, side 2. The joke is that when Thompson says, 'Check me tyres', he means check the air pressure and tread of the tyres, not how many there are

50. Les Dawson, A Clown Too Many, Glasgow, 1986, p.109, pp.113-15, pp.166-68
51. Author's interview with Eric Thomas, 27th June 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)
52. Examples of jokes beginning with 'Did you hear about...?' can be found on Laugh With The Comedians, Granada Television Records, MONO GTV 1002, 1971, side 1 tracks 1, 3 and 4
53. Laugh With The Comedians, side 1, track 4
54. Laugh With The Comedians, side 2 track 4
55. Laugh With The Comedians, side 2 track 5
56. Laugh With The Comedians, side 2 track 3. Crompton is satirizing the type of joke which begins with a list of characters of different nationalities, for example: 'There was an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman...' These jokes nearly always feature an Irishman, and as this one doesn't, he comments: 'The Irishman was ill.'
57. On Laugh With The Comedians, Mike Burton tells a joke about a hyena and a monkey (side 1 track 4); Steve Faye tells a joke about monkeys making toast (side 2 track 4); Duggie Brown tells a joke about a parrot, and a joke about a man buying mongooses (side 2 track 6); and Bernard Manning tells a joke about a parrot and a magician (side 1 track 1). On Laugh With The Comedians Granada Video/ Vestron Video International, GRA 16797, 1987, Jerry Harris tells a joke about an elephant in the jungle. On the L.P. Live at the Embassy Club, President Records, PRX1, 1977, Bernard Manning tells a joke about an escaped lion
58. On Screw You: Johnny Wager Live, a tape sold at his performances in Working Men's Clubs by comedian Johnny Wager, he tells a joke about Red Riding Hood, and a joke about the Three Bears; on Laugh With The Comedians, Mike Burton tells a joke about Roy Rogers (side 1 track 4), and Steve Faye tells a joke about The Lone Ranger. On Laugh With The Comedians (video), Bernard Manning tells a joke about Sherlock Holmes, and a joke about the Pony Express, and Frank Carson tells a joke about Red Indian smoke signals; on Live at the Embassy Club, Bernard Manning tells a joke about the Three Bears, and a joke about Old MacDonald
59. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 4
60. Live at the Embassy Club, side 2
61. Author's interview with Eric Thomas, 27th June 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)
62. Bernard Manning: 'I tell you what, there's not many Pakistanis knocking about since the Chinese have found out that they taste like chicken, have you noticed that?' (Live at the Embassy Club, side 1)

Johnny Wager: 'Plenty of Pakis, i'n't there? Mind you, there's not so many of 'em now, since the Chinese found out they taste like chicken.' (Screw You)

63. Frank Carson: 'Your brother Sammy, who has two wooden legs, was fire-watching last night, when the building went on fire. The brigade came out and saved the building, but Sammy was burnt to the ground. The insurance company wouldn't pay out, as it said he hadn't a leg to stand on.' (Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 1)

1) Bernard Manning: 'Now listen. This feller...e 'ad two wooden legs, 'is 'ouse caught fire, they saved the 'ouse, but 'e was burned to the ground. And the insurers wouldn't pay out, they said he hadn't got a leg to stand on.' (Live at the Embassy Club, side 1)

64. Stu Francis: 'I was in a club the other night, all Irish, and they were playing bingo. And there's two fellers at the side o' me, playin' away, there's the caller "All the t'rees, t'irty t'ree," 'e said, "You've got dat one, Pat- cross it off." "One and t'ree, t'irteen," said, "Pat, you've got dat one- cross it off." "Five oh, bullseye, five fifty," he said, "Pat, you've got dat one, cross it off." He said, "I know I've got dat one. Why don't you mind your own business and mark your own card?" He said, "I would do, but it's full up."' (Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2, track 5)

Bernard Manning: 'Two Irishmen playing bingo. He shouts, "Seven and seven, seventy seven." He says, "Patrick, you've got that, mark it off, look at that." "Two and two, twenty two." He says, "You've got that, look at that, mark it off," "Two and eight, twenty eight." He says, "Look at that, you've got that as well." He says, "Why haven't you marked your own card?" He says, "Mine's full up."' (The Comedians, Granada Television, 26th June 1971)

65. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1 track 2

66. Live at the Embassy Club, side 1

67. Author's interview with Johnny Wager, 2nd July, 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)

68. Author's interview with Mike Tunningley, 31st August 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)

69. '1 Liners' cost £9.95 in 1990, and is produced by The Mercury Group, a company in Oldham. '100 Good Strong Club Gags' cost £2.00 in 1990, and is produced by Stan and Ken Warby Scripts, a company in Blackpool.

70. On Laugh With The Comedians (video), Jackie Hamilton tells a joke about a lunatic who thinks he is an orange; Bernard Manning tells a joke about a lunatic who wants to be a teapot, and a joke about a man ringing up a lunatic asylum which is not on the telephone; and George Roper tells a joke about mad scientists. On Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), Bernard Manning tells a joke about lunatics fishing (side 1 track 1); and Mike Burton tells a joke about a man going to the psychiatrist

71. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1 track 1
72. Laugh With The Comedians (video)
73. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1, track 5
74. Laugh With The Comedians (video)
75. Laugh With The Comedians (video)
76. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1 track 5
77. Laugh With The Comedians (video)
78. 'Mirth Peddlers', Our Clubs, 29th March 1989
79. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1 track 5
80. The Comedians, Granada Television, 26th June 1971
81. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1 track 1
82. The Comedians, Granada Television, 26th June 1971
83. Janice York at Firth Park Working Men's Club in Sheffield, 13th July, 1988, taped by the author. The joke about vindaloo relies on the popular idea that hot curries cause diarrhoea, and therefore to sew somebody's anus up after giving her a vindaloo would be an incongruously appalling torture. The joke about Ian McGregor going for a circumcision is based on a double meaning of the phrase 'there's no end to that prick [penis, stupid person].' In the first meaning, 'there's no end' has a physical meaning, and 'prick' means 'penis'; McGregor's penis literally has no end, and so he cannot be circumcized. In the second meaning, 'there's no end' means 'there's no getting rid of', and 'that prick' means 'that idiot', an insulting reference to McGregor himself, in other words: 'There's no getting rid of that idiot'. Margaret Thatcher was the Conservative British Prime Minister from 1979-90, who brought in radical monetarist policies leading to great social upheavals, notably the mass unemployment, which was a particular problem in the early 1980s. Ian McGregor is an American industrialist, who employed a policy of pit closure as head of the National Coal Board, which led to the Miner's Strike of 1984-85
84. Screw You. The joke about Bangkok is based on the first syllable, 'Ban-' being homonymous with 'bang', a word like 'fuck', which can either mean 'copulate with', or 'mess up'. Here, it has the latter meaning, so the line 'she's banged every other bloody thing' means; 'she's messed everything up'. The joke about the doctor plays on the phrase 'second opinion'. In the context of medicine, a 'second opinion is when the patient is dissatisfied with the diagnosis of a doctor, and so asks for another doctor to make a diagnosis. Here, the doctor thinks she wants a second opinion from him: the first opinion he has given is that she has rheumatism, the second is that

she is 'an ugly cow'. The joke about Thatcher having 'bollocks' [testicles] is based on the popular comic idea that she is secretly a man

85. Live at the Embassy Club, side 1
86. Laugh With The Comedians (video)
87. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1 track 3. The tortoise is famous for its slowness, so for it to have been following the docker around implies that the docker was walking extraordinarily slowly, a symptom of his laziness
88. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 4
89. Janice York at Firth Park W.M.C., 13th July 1988. The same joke was also told by Bernard Manning: 'Nobody gets A.I.D.S. in Liverpool because none of them are off their arse long enough, idle fuckers.' (Quoted in John Sweeney, 'The sickest joke in town', News on Sunday, 3rd May 1987, p.21). The joke is based on the phrase 'sitting on your arse', which means 'sitting around doing nothing'. It also relies on the popular misconception that A.I.D.S. (Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome) is only spread through anal sex, a myth which was created around the prevalence of A.I.D.S. in the gay community. The joke uses the word arse as in 'sitting on your arse', and literally, to refer to the part of the body: Liverpudlians cannot get A.I.D.S., because they are always sitting around doing nothing, and therefore cannot have anal sex
90. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1 track 1
91. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), sleeve notes
92. Live at the Embassy Club, side 1
93. Charlie Williams, Ee, I've Had Some Laughs, London, 1973, p.61
94. Janice York at Firth Park W.M.C., 13th July 1988
95. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1 track 4
96. Ee, I've Had Some Laughs, p.60
97. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1 track 1
98. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 1
99. Live at the Embassy Club
100. Live at the Embassy Club
101. Screw You
102. Live at the Embassy Club, side 1

103. Screw You. The joke is that the business of putting the hands inside the vagina implies that it is very large, but the punchline reveals that the woman considers it to be very tight
104. Live at the Embassy Club, side 1. The joke relies on wordplay. 'Room for one on top' and 'room for five standing inside' are phrases used by bus conductors, indicating the amount of space available in the bus. In the context of this joke, the phrases are given a sexual meaning: 'room for one on top?' is an invitation for the man to mount the woman; and 'room for five standing inside' means that the woman's vagina is large enough to fit five people inside it
105. Janice York at Firth Park W.M.C., 13th July 1988
106. Screw You
107. Laugh With The Comedians (video)
108. Laugh With The Comedians (video)
109. Screw You
110. Live at the Embassy Club, side 2. The reference to Belfast is a reference to The Troubles in Northern Ireland, in which rubber bullets have been used in crowd control
111. Screw You
112. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1, track 3
113. Screw You
114. The Comedians, Granada Television, 12th June 1971
115. Live at the Embassy Club, side 1
116. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 1
117. Live at the Embassy Club, side 2
118. Live at the Embassy Club, side 1
119. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 1: 'Irishman and a Scotsman...and the Englishman caught by the cannibals. The cannibal chief said to the Scotsman...There was always an Irishman with an Englishman and a Scotsman- the Welsh can never get in there. He says...he says to the Scotsman, "Where do you come from?" He says, "Glasgow." He says, "Stick him in the pot." He said to the second feller, "Where do you come from?" He said, "I come from London." He said, "Stick him in the pot." He says to the Irishman, "Where do you come from?" He said, "Dublin." He said, "Let him go." So the cannibal says to the chief, "Why are you gonna to let..." [referring to Carson's own Irish accent:] He was an Irish cannibal

as well [laughs]. He says, "Why are you gonna let that feller go?" He said, "Well the last feller we had from Dublin in the pot, he ate all the bloody potatoes."

120. Screw You
121. Live at the Embassy Club, side 2
122. Live at the Embassy Club, side 2
123. The Comedians, Granada Television, 12th June 1971
124. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 3
125. Re, I've Had Some Laughs, p.107
126. Stand Up Jim Davidson, Y.T.V., 12th March 1990. This joke relies on a double meaning of the word 'roots', firstly meaning family roots or origin; and secondly, in its literal sense, meaning the roots of a plant, presumably with some sort of stimulating property
127. Stand Up Jim Davidson, Y.T.V., 12th March 1990
128. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 5
129. Christie Davies, 'Have you heard the one about...?' The Times, 15th July 1986, p.16
130. Quoted in Liz Curtis, Nothing But the Same Old Story, London, 1984, p.90
131. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.) side 1 track 1
132. Re, I've Had Some Laughs, p.107
133. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 4
134. Screw You
135. Janice York at Firth Park W.M.C., 13th July 1988
136. Live at the Embassy Club, side 1
137. Screw You. The accent used in the delivery of the phrase 'You sure am, baby', signifies that the woman in black
138. Janice York at Firth Park W.M.C., 13th July 1988
139. Live at the Embassy Club, side 1
140. Screw You
141. Janice York at Firth Park W.M.C., 13th July 1988

142. Rubber bullets are notorious for being used in crowd control in Northern Ireland, therefore to refer to them is to refer to the Troubles. I.R.A. reference: 'The I.R.A. was sent to bomb this club, it'd already been done, you know.' Live at the Embassy Club, side 1.
143. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 2
144. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.) side 1 track 1
145. The Comedians, Granada Television, 12th June 1971
146. Screw You. The British television programmes and names and words associated with black people are as follows: 1. programme- Andy Pandey, name- [Mahatma] 'Gandhi'; 2. programme- Watch With Mother, name- 'Buddha'; 3. programme- Nationwide, word- 'Asian'; 4. programme- Jackanory, word- 'Pak', i.e. Pakistani; 5. programme- Coronation Street, word- 'curried' and 'Asian'; 6. programme- Hancock's Half Hour, name- 'Bankok'; 7. programme- Opportunity Knocks, word- 'coon', a derogatory slang word for an Afro-Caribbean person; 8. programme- Magpie, word- 'Pak'
147. The Comedians, 26th June 1971
148. Screw You
149. Screw You. 'Nigger' is a derogatory slang word for an Afro-Caribbean person
150. Jack Waterman, 'Laughing on the black side', The Listener, 6th April 1978, pp.433-34
151. Ee, I've Had Some Laughs, p.100
152. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1 track 2
153. Laugh With the Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 2. Enoch Powell became a prominent opponent of immigration, his views on the subject becoming well-known after a speech he made on 20th April 1968, which led to his being dropped from Edward Heath's Shadow Cabinet. In the speech, he warned of what he saw as the violent consequences of immigration, saying, 'Like the Roman, I seem to see the River Tiber foaming with much blood.' 'Powell out of Shadow Cabinet', and 'Mr Powell filled with foreboding on immigrants', The Times, 22nd April 1968, pp.1-2
154. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1 track 2
155. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 2
156. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.) side 2 track 2
157. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 1 track 2
158. Laugh With The Comedians (L.P.), side 2 track 2

159. Fe. I've Had Some Laughs, p.7
160. Fe. I've Had Some Laughs, p.94
161. Author's interview with Eric Thomas, 27th June 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)
162. Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy, Harmondsworth, 1958, p.122
163. From Self Help to Glamour, p.73
164. Information on artists' fees, from 'The winds of change', Our Clubs, 4th October 1989 (1962 fees); 'Stage revelations', Our Clubs, 30th May 1990 (1956 fees)
165. Quoted in The Star (Sheffield), 4th March 1968
166. 'Club to defy union ban on artists', Morning Telegraph (Sheffield), 13th August 1968
167. Lindsay Leonard, 'Club move on acts "a turn for worse"', Morning Telegraph (Sheffield), 2nd June 1982
168. From Self Help to Glamour, p.18
169. The United Radical Club, for example. 'London Working Men's Clubs', p.252
170. Our Clubs, 2nd May 1990
171. Author's interview with Frank Eames, 19th May 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)
172. Advertizement in Our Clubs, 14th September 1988
173. Author's interview with Mike Tunningley, 31st August 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)
174. Author' interview with Ron Delta, 6th July 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)
175. Jimmy Jewel, Three Times Lucky, London, 1982, p.169
176. 'I walked through the park the other night when I was taking a girl home. I put my hand on the grass to see if it was wet. I said, "Some DEW!.....She said, "Yes and some DON'T....GOODNIGHT!"' -'100 Good Strong Club Gags' (Number 4 Edition), Stan and Ken Warby Scripts. 'I was going home the other morning at daybreak- daybreak- I wouldn't venture out at night. I was going along a country road and I saw a young lady. She was coming towards me. When she got right up near me I looked at her and I said, 'Can I see you home?' She said, 'No, I'm going the other way.' I said, 'I can turn round.'

So I turned round, and we started to walk in the middle of the road. I said, 'Let's get up on the path.' So we got up on the path, and there was all grass on the path, all grass, so I bent down and felt the grass and I said, 'Some dew!' And she said, 'Some don't. Good morning!' -The Max Miller Blue Book, London, 1981

177. Author's interview with Mike Tunningley, 31st August 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)

178. Author's interviews with Eric Thomas, 31st August 1988, and 26th September 1988 (See Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs)

179. Clubmen, p.154, p.1

180. 'C.I.U. decision leaves women out of the clubs', The Stage and Television Today, 12th April 1990, p.3

181. Clubmen, pp.241-43; 'Race row at social club continues', The Stage and Television Today, 12th July 1990, p.3

182. 'Have you heard the one about the Englishman...?', Open Space, B.B.C. 2, 9th July 1990

183. Janice York at Firth Park W.M.C., 13th July 1988

184. Live at the Embassy Club, side 2

185. Live at the Embassy Club, side 1

186. Janice York at Firth Park W.M.C., 13th July 1988

187. This speech is referred to in a previous footnote. It was made on 20th April 1968, and it led to Powell's being dropped from Heath's Shadow Cabinet. In it, he expressed his fears on immigration, saying, 'Like the Roman, I seem to see the River Tiber, foaming with much blood.' 'Powell out of Shadow Cabinet', and 'Mr Powell filled with forboding on immigrants', The Times, 22nd April 1968

## Chapter Five: Alternative Comedy

1. For example, Keith Allen, one of the original group of Alternative comics refused to join the Alternative Cabaret group, on the strength of the name: 'It was just against all my arguments, which were you're not an alternative, you just are, you're it,' quoted in Roger Wilmut and Peter Rosengard, Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, London, 1989, p.38

2. For example, Roger Wilmut defined Alternative Comedy as, 'An alternative to the bland prolefeed of the situation comedies which form the staple diet of television entertainment...a rejection of the easy techniques of racist or sexist jokes on which so many

television and club comics rely' (Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.xiii); Lisa Appignanesi argued that Alternative comedians, 'differentiate themselves from conventional stand-up comedians with their repertoire of handbook jokes about the Irish, Pakistanis or West Indians, nagging mother-in-laws and wives' (Cabaret, London, 1984, p. 183); and Morwenna Banks and Amanda Swift argued that Alternative comedians, 'rejected mainstream humour because they felt it reinforced stereotypes and encapsulated reactionary politics' (The Joke's On Us, London, 1987, p.25)

3. For example, Simon Fanshawe has argued: 'I would no longer say that we're 'Alternative', I mean I seriously think if Ben Elton's doing Wogan, if Alexei [Sayle]'s got a top-running series on the B.B.C., Ruby Wax has got one, Dawn and Jennifer's got one [French and Saunders], if That's Life think I'm the right kind of thing for them, then I think we've moved in now, and I think there's a change in comedy over all.' (Author's interview with Simon Fanshawe, 20th January 1990 [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians])

4. See John McGrath, A Good Night Out, London, 1981, pp.73-75

5. C.A.S.T., Confessions of a Socialist, London, 1979

6. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.22, p.27, p.32, p. 38, p.42; John Connor, 'Laughs in Store', City Limits, 4th-11th May 1989, pp.16-17; David Brazil, 'How to Talk Dirty and Get Arrested', The Leveller, no.33, December 1979, p.14

7. Tony Allen has stated that one of the reasons why he moved out of Alternative Theatre was that 'the grant situation was bad.' (Author's interview with Tony Allen, 30th September 1988 [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians])

8. Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution, London, 1980, pp.19-20

9. 'How to Talk Dirty and Get Arrested'

10. For example, 7:84's name, inspired by the fact that 7% of the population of Great Britain owned 84% of the wealth when the company was founded, but Jim Barclay has recalled that this was 'changed by Alternative comedians to mean that 7% of the theatre companies got 84% of the Arts Council grants'; and Alexei Sayle had a routine about Left Wing bingo, which included the call 'over-subsidized theatre group, 7:84.' (Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.27; The Comic Strip, Springtime Records, HAHA 6001, 1981, side 2)

11. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.27

12. 'How to Talk Dirty and Get Arrested'

13. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.22 (Sayle); p.42 (Melville); p.32 (K. Allen); p.27 (Barclay); p.38 (de la Tour); p.29 (T.Allen)
14. The Comedy Store's tenth birthday in May 1989 saw the publication of a series of articles about Alternative Comedy, which implied or openly stated that the opening of this venue was the birth of Alternative Comedy. For example, John Connor began his article 'Laughs in Store' by declaring, 'On May 19th 1979, the Comedy Store opened its doors and Alternative Comedy was born.'
15. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, pp.1-12, esp. pp.2-3, p.11
16. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.30, p.1
17. Tony Allen has recalled some of the early acts at the Comedy Store: 'People were doing really racist and sexist sort of stuff and the rest of the acts were what we called mother-in-law comedians.' (Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.30)
18. 'Laughs in Store.' The gong which Cornes refers to was used to signal to the acts that it was time to leave the stage. If the audience disliked the act, they could shout at the compere, telling him to use the gong
19. Author's interview with Tony Allen, 30th September 1988 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
20. Author's interview with Tony Allen, 30th September 1988 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
21. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.38
22. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.46
23. Author's interview with Tony Allen, 30th September 1988 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
24. 'How to Talk Dirty and Get Arrested'
25. The Joke's On Us, p.25
26. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.70
27. Cabaret, p.185; Jay Rayner, 'Cracks in the Cabaret Clubs', The Observer ('Section 5- Observer in London'), 16th April 1989, pp.18-19
28. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, pp.68-69; p.77
29. Cabaret listings in Time Out, 19th-26th September 1990, pp.69-73
30. See Appendix I: My experiences of the Alternative Comedy circuit

31. Cabaret, pp.153-59 describes the work of the conferenciers; Jim Barclay is one early Alternative comic who has expressed admiration for such performers (see Author's interview with Jim Barclay, 1st February 1990 [Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians])

32. Cabaret, pp.173-78 describes the work of the sickniks; Lenny Bruce has been cited as an influence by Alternative comedians as diverse as Tony Allen, Arnold Brown, John Dowie, and Ben Elton. In addition to this, some of them have joked about him in their acts. For example, Tony Allen joked, 'Lenny Bruce finished his career out of his head on drugs, hassled by the police, and dying in a toilet. That's how I started off'; and Alexei Sayle joked, 'Lenny Bruce was a great Alternative comedian. I'm very much like Lenny Bruce actually- I'm dead.' (See Author's interview with Tony Allen, 30th September 1988 [Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians]; Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.71; Malcolm Hay, 'Funny Peculiar', Time Out, 17th-24th August 1988, p.14; booklet presented with Ben Elton, Motormouth, Phonogram Records, 1987, BENLP 1; Performance by Tony Allen at the Madhouse in Rotherham, 30th September 1988; Alexei Sayle, 'Introduction', Fundamental Frolics, B.B.C. Records, London, 1981, REB 435 STEREO, side 1)

33. Tony Allen has claimed that he wanted to be 'the Southern Billy Connolly' when he started his career. Connolly has also been praised by other Alternative comics as varied as Ben Elton, Jeremy Hardy, and Ivor Dembina. (See author's interview with Tony Allen, 30th September 1988 [Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians]; booklet presented with Ben Elton, Motormouth; Tim Palmer, 'Money for Old Rope', Scotland on Sunday (Fringe Supplement), 27th August 1989; author's interview with Ivor Dembina, 7th July 1988 [Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians])

34. The Long and the Short of It, Dave Allen tour programme, 1988 tour

35. Alexei Sayle was brought up by working class communist parents in Liverpool, and went to art school after being expelled from grammar school; Jim Barclay went to a South London comprehensive before attending the New College of Speech and Drama; Tony Allen did badly at school, and got involved in gambling before becoming a hippy in Ladbroke Grove; Keith Allen attended a comprehensive, then won a scholarship to a public school from which he was expelled, going on to take 'O'-levels in borstal, then training at the Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff; Pauline Melville was brought up by her Londoner mother and West Indian father, and went straight into theatre after leaving school; and only Andy de la Tour had attended university, reading English at Sussex (See Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.21, p.24, p.28, p.32, p.38, p.42)

36. When the Comic Strip toured Britain in 1981, Peter Richardson described their style as 'intelligent comedy by people who didn't go to university', in spite of the fact that three of them (Mayall, Edmondson, and Planer) had attended university (See 'Alexei: Sold

Out?', The Sunday Times Magazine, 8th November 1981, p.9; Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, pp.53-54, p.57)

37. Roger Wilmut, From Fringe to Flying Circus, London, 1980, p.64, p.75

38. Rik Mayall has admitted that whilst the Oxbridge set were frowned upon, they were still an influence; and Alexei Sayle expressed admiration for Monty Python's Flying Circus's 'entirely unconventional structure' having had his television series Alexei Sayle's Stuff compared with it (See Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.95; 'Sayle's Pitch', Radio Times, 8th-11th October 1988, p.13)

39. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.11

40. Author's interview with Jim Barclay, 1st February 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)

41. Author's interview with Jenny Lecoat, 21st April 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians). Lecoat talks of 'the old Store', referring to the original Comedy Store venue, housed in the Gargoyle, rather than the current venue in Leicester Square

42. Fundamental Frolics side 1

43. Bootleg cassette of Alexei Sayle at the Theatre Royal Nottingham, October 1983

44. Alexei Sayle, Cak, Springtime Records, 1982, CAK 1, side 2

45. Bootleg cassette of Alexei Sayle at the Theatre Royal Nottingham. 'Nick nick' is the catch-phrase of club comic Jim Davidson; 'Shut that door' is the catch-phrase of camp television comic Larry Grayson

46. 'How to Talk Dirty and Get Arrested'. Other versions of this routine are quoted in Cabaret, p.186: 'Anyway, there was this drunk, homosexual Pakistani squatter who takes my mother-in-law to an Irish restaurant and he says to the West Indian waiter, "Waiter, there's a racial stereotype in my soup," and the waiter says, "What d'you expect for 40p- a caucasian stockbroker?'; and in Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.29: 'O.K., stand-up comedy, I know what you want...There was this drunk homosexual Pakistani squatter trade unionist takes my mother-in-law to an Irish restaurant...says to the West Indian waiter, 'Waiter, waiter, there's a racial stereotye in my soup...'

47. The Comic Strip, side 1

48. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.45. This is a joke about the armed conflict between Britain and Argentina in the Falkland Islands in 1982. On May 5th 1982, the British ship H.M.S. Sheffield

was sunk by an Argentinian Exocet missile, and this is the £120,000,000 object mentioned in the joke. According to The Times, 5th May 1982, the ship actually cost £23 million to build in 1971, was refitted in 1975, and by 1976 cost £5,200,000 per year to run

49. Signals: Only Joking, Channel 4, 10th January 1990. In the early 1980s, there were several stories in the mass media in which military early warning systems had mistaken natural objects, like flocks of geese, for a nuclear attack
50. The Comic Strip, side 2 'Piss' is a slang word for urine
51. The Comic Strip, side 2
52. Fundamental Frolics, side 1
53. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.34
54. John Hind, 'This man is dangerous', Blitz, No. 90, June 1990, pp.50-53, esp. p.53
55. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.34
56. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, pp.157-58
57. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.158; Combing the Fringe, B.B.C.2, 29th August 1987
58. Edinburgh Nights, B.B.C.2, 6th September 1989
59. Edinburgh Nights, B.B.C.2, 6th September 1989
60. Just for Laughs, Channel 4, 3rd September 1988
61. Just for Laughs, Channel 4, 3rd September 1988
62. Combing the Fringe, B.B.C.2, 29th August 1987
63. All excerpts from Johnny Immaterial are taken from a performance by Johnny Immaterial at the Red Rose Club, London N7, 2nd December 1989. This joke reverses the fact that many British student's union buildings are named after Nelson Mandela, the most prominent figure in the liberation struggle in South Africa
64. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.34
65. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.49
66. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.10, pp.44-45
67. Neil Spencer, 'Five go mad in mainstream', New Socialist, No. 44, pp.28-29
68. The Comic Strip, side 1

69. Gerry Sadowitz, The Total Abuse Show, Virgin Video, WD 442, 1988
70. Performance by Johnny Immaterial at the Red Rose Club, London N7, 2nd December 1989
71. Performance by Mark Hurst, Fools Paradise, Sheffield, 1st December 1990
72. Cak, side 2
73. Let the Children Play, Panic Records, PEACE 1, no date, side 4
74. Performance by Kevin McAleer at Big on Wednesday, Norwich, 6th December 1989
75. Cabaret at the Jongleurs, B.B.C.2, 25th February 1988
76. 'Jokes', Implicit Meanings, London and Boston, 1975, pp.90-114; p.98
77. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.34
78. Performance by Tony Allen, Fools Paradise, Sheffield, 28th November 1989. His science-based material was adapted for television, appearing in Channel 4's science and ecology programme, 4th Dimension in 1990
79. It seems likely that some of the comic singers from the heyday of Music Hall were perceived as political performers. G.H. Macdermott, for example, made much of his fanatical support for the Conservatives. However, there is no evidence of a similar openly political identity to later performers. For example, it seems unlikely that, say, Dan Leno was thought of as a political comedian, in spite of the fact that some of his material, for example 'Midnight March' (in which he parodied radical public speakers), was clearly political
80. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.27
81. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.134 (Lecoat); p.131 (Fanshawe); Tony Allen advertizes his anarchism in various ways, for example by wearing an anarchist black star badge on stage
82. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.36. This joke refers to the Special Air Service Regiment's storming of the Iranian Embassy in London, in May 1980, which was televised live, and received a special trophy from the Royal Television Society (The Times, 6th May 1980, p.1; The Times, 20th May 1980, p.14)
83. Signals: Only Joking. Lord Scarman described his politics as 'without using capital letters "liberal and radical."' His report on the inner cities advocated various reforms of the police, including improvements in dealing with complaints against the police, better

police training in dealing with the public, and with public disorder, racist behaviour by the police to be made a dismissal offense; he also advocated a concerted attack on problems relating to inner city areas.

84. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.45 (Jim Barclay joking about the Falklands); p.44 (Pauline Melville joking about Labour M.P.s' visit to Afghanistan); Cak, side 1 (Alexei Sayle joking about Operation Countryman). In 1981, 3 Labour M.P.s visited Afghanistan, and this was criticized by Margaret Thatcher who said it offered 'aid and comfort to the occupiers' (The Times, 14th January 1981, p.5); 'Operation Countryman' was an investigation into allegations of corruption in the Metropolitan C.I.D. by officers from provincial forces in the late 1970s and early 1980s (The Sunday Times, 2nd December 1979, p.4; The Times, 6th February 1980, p.14; The Times, 21st January 1981, p.28)

85. Friday Night Live, Channel 4, 4th March 1988. 'Yuppies' is an acronym of Young and Upwardly-Mobile Professional. The Stock Market crash, which came to a head on 19th October 1987 ('Black Monday', see The Sunday Times, 1st November 1987, p.76) led to many investors (especially those who might be considered 'yuppies') losing a good deal of money. In March 1986, the World Jewish Congress accused Kurt Waldheim of nazi war crimes, including being a member of the paramilitary S.A., and serving in a Wehrmacht unit responsible for transporting over 40,000 Jews to death camps (The Times, 5th March 1986, p.1); Waldheim denied ever being aware of being a member of the S.A., even though the World Jewish Congress had documentary evidence which suggested that he had been a member (The Times, 6th March 1986, p.6). In spite of this, Waldheim was elected as Austria's president in June 1986 (The Times, 9th June 1986, p.1)

86. Cak, side 1

87. Let the Children Play, side 3

88. Cabaret, p.183

89. The Comic Strip, side 1

90. Nick Revell, B.B.C.1, 24th June 1989. The Youth Training Scheme, introduced by the Thatcher government in 1983, was strongly criticized by the opposition, who claimed it was created merely to improve unemployment statistics; the scheme was launched with a television advertizing campaign which cost £1 million

91. Bootleg cassette of Alexei Sayle at the Theatre Royal Nottingham

92. Cak, side 1

93. Cak, side 1

94. Performance by Mark Steel, Fools Paradise, Sheffield, 18th March 1989

95. Performance by Mark Steel, Fools Paradise, Sheffield, 18th March 1989
96. Cabaret at the Jongleurs, B.B.C.2, 25th February 1988
97. Hysteria 2, Channel 4, 1st December 1989
98. Signals: Only Joking
99. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.75
100. Bryan Appleyard, 'Cultural savagery', The Times, 18th September 1981, p.9. 'Guardianish' refers to the newspaper The Guardian, a publication which is associated with well-meaning middle class liberals
101. Author's interview with Jenny Lecoat, 21st April 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
102. Cabaret, p.186
103. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.48
104. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.40
105. The 'Yorkshire Ripper' was a mass murderer and rapist, called Peter Sutcliffe, who raped and killed 13 women and attacked several others between 1975, and 1981 when he was caught (The Times, 5th January 1981, p.2)
106. Cabaret, p.186; The Joke's On Us, p.26; author's interview with Jenny Lecoat, 21st April 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
107. 'I think I was probably the first one that was perceived to be a feminist comic.' (Author's interview with Jenny Lecoat, 21st April 1990 [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians])
108. The Joke's On Us, p.28
109. 'It was a time of enormous feminist politics, and people were having very serious discussions about political lesbianism, and all that sort of stuff, which we tend to snigger about a bit now, but at the time it was taken very seriously, so what I was doing was only a natural development of what was going on socially, and there was a market for that, because it was going on all through that London culture of the kind of audiences who were coming to the gigs.'  
(Author's interview with Jenny Lecoat, 21st April 1990 [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians])
110. The Joke's On Us, p.128
111. The Joke's On Us, p.26

112. The Joke's On Us, p.26
113. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.134
114. Signals: Only Joking
115. Just for Laughs, Channel 4, 18th June 1988
116. Signals: Only Joking
117. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.134
118. First Exposure, Y.T.V., 16th February 1990
119. Friday Night Live, Channel 4, 8th April 1988
120. Friday Night Live, Channel 4, 8th April 1988
121. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.132
122. Let the Children Play, side 3
123. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.44
124. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.144
125. Tristan Davies, 'Boys from the black stuff', The Independent, 1st December 1990, p.14; The Late Show, B.B.C.2, 30th April 1990
126. Cabaret at the Jongleurs, B.B.C.2, 7th April 1988
127. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.41
128. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.46
129. Author's interview with Alexei Sayle, 5th April 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
130. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.47
131. 'How to talk dirty and get arrested'
132. Author's interview with Jim Barclay, 1st February 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
133. 'How to talk dirty and get arrested'
134. Author's interview with Alexei Sayle, 5th April 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
135. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.77. 'New Romantics' were followers of a fashionable youth cult in the early 1980s, centred around rock bands like Spandau Ballet, Visage, and Duran Duran

136. Author's interview with Alexei Sayle, 5th April 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
137. Author's interview with Jenny Lecoat, 21st April 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
138. Signals: Only Joking
139. Let the Children Play, side 4
140. The Joke's on Us, p.22
141. Author's interview with Tony Allen, 30th September 1988 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
142. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, pp.29-30
143. 'The Wine Bars of Old Hampstead Town', Cak, side 2 (Alexei Sayle); Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.44 (Pauline Melville); Let the Children Play, side 3 (Arnold Brown and Ben Elton)
144. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.45
145. John Connor: 'Talking to the original Store performers about the current state of comedy, the word "bland" comes up time and time again' ('Laughs in Store'); Mark Steel: 'They come up with the most bland bloody things possible' (author's interview with Mark Steel, 18th March 1989 [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians]); Jeremy Hardy on current Alternative comedians: 'bland, samey, indifferent people, with nothing to say' (author's interview with Kit Hollerbach and Jeremy Hardy, 29th April 1989 [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians]); Juliet Blake, producer of the Alternative cabaret showcase First Exposure 'said she was having a hard time getting sufficient raw and individual material from cabaret comedians, who wanted to present their blander pieces.' (Robert Keith, 'Come to the cabaret', What's On, 24th-31st May 1989, p.41)
146. Author's interview with Jenny Lecoat, 21st April 1990; 'Laughs in Store'; author's interview with Simon Fanshawe, 20th January 1990; author's interview with Kit Hollerbach and Jeremy Hardy, 1989 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
147. Carol Sarler, 'Jokers Wild', The Guardian, 14th July 1987, p.11. Norman Tebbit is a controversial Conservative politician; The Sun is a populist Right Wing tabloid newspaper; the Nolan Sisters are an Irish singing group; cruise missiles are American nuclear missiles which were sited in Britain; 'Saatchis' is Saatchi and Saatchi, an advertizing company famous for running the Conservative Party's election campaigns; Socialist Worker is the newspaper of the Socialist Worker's Party; Diane Abbott is a radical Labour politician, who became the first black woman to become a British M.P.; and a UB40 is a form connected with unemployment benefit

148. For example, cabaret compere and promoter Ivor Dembina says: 'A lot crop up again and again- stuff about adverts, stuff about, I don't know, condoms, stuff about horror movies' (author's interview with Ivor Dembina, 7th July 1988 [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians]); and cabaret critic Malcolm Hay refers to 'the well-worn joke about the Northern Line.' ('Cabaret preview', Time Out, 15th-22nd November 1989, p.39)

149. Friday Night Live, Channel 4, 8th April 1988

150. Friday Night Live, Channel 4, 11th March 1988

151. 'Cracks in the comedy clubs'

152. For example, Jeremy Hardy on current Alternative Comedy audiences: 'They're watching performers doing T.V. auditions, and they don't want to hear political material any more' ('Laughs in Store'); Felix: 'Most people who started off in the early stages, if they weren't saying something socially and politically, they were imbued with some sense of being different, or creative, or innovative. Whereas now, it's simply trying to be a laughter machine' (author's interview with Felix, 18th January 1990 [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians]); Linda Smith (Sheffield-based Alternative comic); 'It's not got less political, it's just got more Right Wing political' (author's interview with Linda Smith, 7th September 1989 [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians]). Other comedians have taken a different point of view, arguing that Alternative Comedy was never particularly politically radical. For example, Jenny Lecoat has argued: 'There's a lot of stuff talked about the good old radical political days, and the fact that everything's got very bland, I don't think that's actually true, I mean I don't think it's necessarily true that it was very radical in the old days' (author's interview with Jenny Lecoat, 21st April 1990 [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians]); similarly, Simon Fanshawe has argued: 'The new comedians were anti-establishment, for sure, but the establishment they challenged was the comic one. That did not make them political, it merely made them interesting. Think back to the first time you saw French and Saunders, if you were one of the devotees. Thatcher jokes? C.N.D. jokes? Left Wing, radical punk humour? I think not.' ('Carry on laughing', The Guardian, 19th May 1989, p.32)

153. The Joke's On Us, p.26; author's interview with Jenny Lecoat, 21st April 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)

154. Author's interview with Jenny Lecoat, 21st April 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)

155. Ian Merrilees, 'A comic card', Review '89, No. 1, 14th-20th August 1989

156. Signals: Only Joking

157. Author's interview with Ivor Dembina, 7th July 1988 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
158. Amy Druszewski, 'Pulling out the chickens', Festival Times, 16th August 1989
159. Malcolm Hay, 'The gob father', Time Out, 29th November-6th December 1989, p.27
160. The Total Abuse Show; Combing the Fringe. Norman Tebbit is a controversial Conservative politician; the joke about Scottish Tories refers to the fact that Scotland is a Labour stronghold, and in the General Election in 1987, it was feared that there would be no Conservative M.P.s returned in Scotland
161. 'By jove madam, by jove, what a lovely day for taking a big plank of wood, covering it in drawing pins, shoving it up Malcolm Rifkind's arse, and saying, "How's that for a poll tax?"', The Total Abuse Show. Part of the point of the joke is that it deliberately steals its structure ('By jove madam, what a lovely day for...') from the veteran comedian Ken Dodd. Malcolm Rifkind was the Secretary of State for Scotland who oversaw the introduction of the poll tax in Scotland, where the new tax was tested
162. '[Tears up a copy of The Sunday Sport] Well, that's what I think of The Sunday Sport', The Total Abuse Show
163. The Total Abuse Show
164. The Total Abuse Show
165. The Total Abuse Show
166. The Total Abuse Show
167. The Total Abuse Show
168. The Total Abuse Show
169. The Total Abuse Show
170. The Total Abuse Show
171. The Total Abuse Show
172. The Total Abuse Show
173. 'The gob father'
174. Gerry Sadowitz: 'Any observations I make, like about Pakistanis in Glasgow, are all fucking true.' (The Stud Brothers, 'Jerry Sadowitz', Melody Maker, 14th October 1989, pp.44-45) Similarly, in another interview, he said of his material on Pakistanis: 'I'm not going to change anybody's point of view on such subjects but people

have to understand the humour in those circumstances, because there is. Whether I'm dead or alive, it's there.' (James Brown, 'Hate male', New Musical Express, 21st October 1989, p.27)

175. James Brown and Stephen Wells, 'Far from the Manning crowd', New Musical Express, pp.12-13, p.37; p.13

176. The Comedy Store, Y.T.V., 30th December 1989

177. The Comedy Store, Y.T.V., 30th December 1989. 'A piece of piss' is a slang expression meaning 'very easy'

178. The Comedy Store, Y.T.V., 30th December 1989

179. The Comedy Store, Y.T.V., 30th December 1989. Tie-dyeing is a dyeing technique associated with hippy fashions, involving tying knots in a garment before dyeing it, so as to leave patches unaffected by the dye. Here, Dee jokingly bisociates these patches with sweatmarks under the man's arms

180. The Comedy Store, Y.T.V., 30th December 1989

181. These jokes are based on two very well-known advertizing slogans, one which described the T.S.B. as 'The bank that likes to say, "Yes"', and the other, 'American Express? That'll do nicely.'

182. Eddie Gibb, 'Cockney menace', Festival Times, 23rd August 1989, p.10

183. Friday Night Live, Channel 4, 26th February 1988, 15th April 1988. K2 is a mountain. Sumo wrestling is a Japanese sport, in which the participants are usually hugely fat

184. Friday Night Live, Channel 4, 26th February 1988

185. Paramount City, B.B.C.1, 28th April 1990

186. Paramount City, B.B.C.1, 28th April 1990

187. Paramount City, B.B.C.1, 28th April 1990

188. Review in Festival Times, 16th August 1989, p.31

189. Aileen McColgan, 'The divine comedians', Festival Times, 23rd August 1989, p.40

190. 'Cracks in the comedy clubs'

191. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.46, p.79

192. Author's interview with Jenny Lecoat, 21st April 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)

193. 'Cracks in the comedy clubs'

194. Author's interview with Jim Barclay, 1st February 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
195. See Appendix I: My experiences of the Alternative Comedy circuit
196. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.118
197. See Appendix I: My experiences of the Alternative Comedy circuit
198. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.232; 'Thompson to ban offensive jokes', The Stage and Television Today, 15th February 1990, p.3. Saatchi and Saatchi is an advertizing company responsible for several Conservative Party election campaigns
199. The Comic, programme from the London International Comedy Festival, presented by Holsten Funny Business, 24th February-11th March 1989
200. The acts televized from the Comedy Store were broadcast by Y.T.V. in December 1989, under the full title What Are We Talking at the Comedy Store; 'What are we talking? We are talking Trophy' is an advertizing slogan for Trophy Bitter. Similarly, the second and third seasons of Fools Paradise in Sheffield went under the title 'We Are Talking Fools Paradise'
201. See Appendix I: My experiences of the Alternative Comedy circuit
202. Author's interview with Felix, 18th January 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
203. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, pp.76-77 (and Peter Rosengard mentioned the same incident on p.11)
204. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.40
205. Author's interview with Mark Steel, 18th March 1989 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)
206. 'Cracks in the comedy clubs'
207. Peter Richardson, quoted in 'Alexei: Sold Out?'; Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, pp.53-55, p.57 reveals that Rik Mayall, Ade Edmondson and Nigel Planer attended university
208. Nick Revell and Patrick Marber were in the Oxford Revue Company (Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.155 [Revell]; John Connor, Comics, London and Basingstoke, 1990, p.92 [Marber]); Nick Hancock, Neil Mullarkey, Sheila Hyde, Dave Baddiel, and God and Jesus were in the Cambridge Footlights (Footlights, B.B.C.1, 4th June 1983 [Hancock and Mullarkey]; The Joke's On Us, p.201 [Sheila Hyde];

Comics, p.89 (Dave Baddiel); The Independent, 24th August 1989, p.11 (God and Jesus)

209. Author's interview with Jim Barclay, 1st February 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)

210. Author's interview with Alexei Sayle, 5th April 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)

211. For example, Felix has argued, 'Lot of people have got a career structure about comedy, and they're thinking almost from the first time they go on the stage about their future career in comedy.' (author's interview with Felix, 18th January 1990 [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians])

212. Author's interview with Mark Steel, 18th March 1989 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)

213. For example, see author's interviews with Alexei Sayle (5th April 1990); Mark Steel (18th March 1989); Kit Hollerbach and Jeremy Hardy (29th April 1989); Hattie Hayridge (5th November 1989); Linda Smith (7th September 1989) [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians]

214. Author's interview with Felix, 18th January 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)

215. Signals: Only Joking

216. For example, Jim Barclay argues: 'There are more people from more social stratas coming in to see the shows' (author's interview with Jim Barclay, 1st February 1990); Hattie Hayridge argues: 'It's getting a more mainstream audience in probably, because there's more comedy on the telly' (author's interview with Hattie Hayridge, 5th November 1989); Jeremy Hardy argues, 'Trendy Lefties don't go to Alternative cabaret...the people who go to cabaret now in London are people who've seen Saturday Live, and Kit Hollerbach argues: 'It's very mainstream now' (author's interview with Kit Hollerbach and Jeremy Hardy, 29th April 1989) [See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians]

217. Author's interview with Jenny Lecoat, 21st April 1990 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)

218. Signals: Only Joking

219. Author's interview with Tony Allen, 30th September 1988 (See Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians)

#### Chapter Six: Three Comedians

1. Frankie Howard, On the Way I Lost it, London, 1976, pp.11-13

2. On the Way I Lost it, pp.27-64
3. On the Way I Lost it, pp.71-80
4. Frankie Howerd at The Establishment and at the B.B.C., Decca Records, MONO LK 4556, 1963, side 2
5. On the Way I Lost it, p.49
6. On the Way I Lost it, pp.73-76
7. 'Oooh Er, Missus!- The Frankie Howerd Story', Arena, B.B.C. 2, 1 June 1990; and Wogan, B.B.C.1, 23rd March 1990
8. Wogan, B.B.C.1, 23rd March 1990
9. On the Way I Lost it, p.42
10. Fifty Years of Radio Comedy, B.B.C. Records, REC 138, 1972, side 1
11. On the Way I Lost it, p.76
12. On the Way I Lost it, p.76: 'If you were very daring, you could say: "There was a young girl called Nelly, who had a great pimple on her...um...chest."' Max Miller was one comic who used this joke: 'She's a girl that's just built to my liking/ A wonderful figure is Nellie/ Two rosy lips, and very broad hips/ And a nice little mole on her shoulder.' (Max Miller, In the Theatre, ONE UP/ E.M.I. Records, OU2075, no date, side 1)
13. Eric Partridge, A Dictionary of Historical Slang (abr. Jacqueline Simpson), Harmondsworth, 1972, p.737
14. Please Yourself, B.B.C. Records, REH 230, 1976, side 1
15. 'Oooh Er, Missus!- The Frankie Howerd Story'
16. Please Yourself, side 1
17. 'The Ten Guinea Cruise'. The joke plays on a double meaning of the word 'broads', in the first instance being used as a place name (The Norfolk Broads), and in the second as a slang word for 'women'
18. Extract from The Frankie Howerd Show (1966), 'Oooh Er, Missus!- The Frankie Howerd Story'
19. Please Yourself, side 1
20. Please Yourself, side 1
21. Make 'Em Laugh, London, 1979, p.156

22. 'Oooh Er, Missus!- The Frankie Howerd Story'
23. Roger Wilmut, Kindly Leave the Stage!, London, 1985, pp.163-64
24. John Fisher, Funny Way to be a Hero, London, 1973, p.234
25. Please Yourselfs, side 1
26. Please Yourselfs, side 1
27. Please Yourselfs, side 1
28. 'Today's eisteddfod', 'the crypt', and 'casu-ality', Please Yourselfs, side 1; 'Harken', 'Harr-ken', 'Harr-ever so ken', and 'snarling and grorling and daddling and jostling', Fifty Years of Radio Comedy, side 1
29. On the Way I Lost it, p.68
30. Please Yourselfs, side 1
31. Fifty Years of Radio Comedy, side 1
32. Extract from Variety Bandbox, 1950, in Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.164
33. Extract from The Frankie Howerd Show (1966), 'Oooh Er, Missus!- The Frankie Howerd Story'
34. As noted in Funny Way to be a Hero, p.237, and Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.164. 'Pray temper your hilarity!' quoted in Leslie Halliwell, Double Take and Fade Away, London, Glasgow, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland, 1987, p.316
35. 'Oooh Er, Missus!- The Frankie Howerd Story'
36. 'Oooh Er, Missus!- The Frankie Howerd Story'
37. Frankie Howerd at The Establishment and at the B.B.C., side 1
38. On the Way I Lost it, pp.81-82; p.193
39. Johnny Speight, It Stands to Reason, Walton-on-Thames and London, 1973, p.169
40. On the Way I Lost it, pp.74-75
41. Les Dawson, A Clown Too Many, London, 1985, pp.17-21
42. A Clown Too Many, pp.54-63; pp.76-80
43. A Clown Too Many, pp.88-122

44. A Clown Too Many, p.74, p.88, p.144, p.224. The first joke works by taking an incongruously insulting attitude towards Yorkshire, by combining the bleakness of Cumberland with a hostile attitude; the second partrays Filey in a similar way, portraying it as a cross between a corrective institution and a seaside resort; the third is based on class differences, Bournemouth having the image of a respectable middle class resort, and chips connoting working class values; the fourth uses the Isle of man to connote boringness, thus contradicting the image of Hong Kong as an exciting, exotic island

45. Make 'Em Laugh, p.176, p.182; A Clown Too Many, p.88. The first joke suggests that the house is incongruously far from the city centre, in Norway to be precise. The second plays on the incongruity between a nun, who connotes religious serenity and gentleness, carrying out an act of violence like a mugging. The third plays on the incongruity of flies being attracted to D.D.T., a spray designed to kill flies, and somehow construes that this incongruity implies that the house is extremely dirty

46. 'As soon as I heard the knock on the door I knew it was her [the mother-in-law] because the mice were throwing themselves on the traps.' (A Clown Too Many, p.194). 'Just then there was a knock at the door. I knew it was the wife's mother because the mice were throwing themselves on the traps.' (Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.223). 'As I sat cushioned by the early morning silence there was a knock on the door, and I knew it was the wife's mother, because the mice were throwing themselves on the traps.' (The Les Dawson Show, B.B.C.1, 26th October 1989)

47. A Clown Too Many, p.122

48. 'Mother was so musically minded, as a child, I would clamber on her knee and whisper, "Mummy, Mummy- sing me a lullabye do," and...she'd say, "Certainly my angel, my wee bundle of happiness. Hold me beer while I fetch me banjo."' (The Les Dawson Show, B.B.C.1, 19th October 1989).

49. A Clown Too Many, p.152

50. Make 'Em Laugh, p.182

51. A Clown Too Many, p.182. 'Swish Rail' is the brand name of a type of curtain rail. In saying that his mother-in-law uses curtain rail instead of elastic in her knickers, Dawson is implying that she is incongruously fat

52. The Les Dawson Show, 26th October 1989

53. A Clown Too Many, p.182. The idea of the joke is that whilst men would want to have a duelling scar and muscles themselves, they would not find these features attractive on a woman

54. A Clown Too Many, p.65

55. A Clown Too Many, p.140
56. A Clown Too Many, p.114
57. A Clown Too Many, p.216
58. A Clown Too Many, p.183
59. The Les Dawson Show, 26th October 1989
60. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.223
61. The Les Dawson Show, 19th October 1989
62. Make 'Em Laugh, p.190. The Gestapo was the secret police force in Nazi Germany, infamous for their torture techniques
63. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.223. A spiritualist claims to communicate with the souls of the dead
64. The Les Dawson Show, 26th October 1989
65. A Clown Too Many, p.194
66. A Clown Too Many, p.151; Make 'Em Laugh, p.175
67. A Clown Too Many, pp.147-48
68. A Clown Too Many, p.88
69. A Clown Too Many, p.139
70. Don McPhee, 'Les Miserable', The Guardian, 12th June 1975, p.10
71. Kindly Leave the Stage!, p.223
72. A Clown Too Many, p.151
73. A Clown Too Many, p.193
74. The Les Dawson Show, 19th October 1989
75. A Clown Too Many, p.121
76. Comedy from Fun at One, B.B.C. Records, REB 371, 1979, side 2
77. A Clown Too Many, p.224. Here, Dawson refers to a stereotyped type linked with Chinese laundries
78. A Clown Too Many. 'H.P.' is hire-purchase, a way of buying something by instalment
79. A Clown Too Many, pp.151-52

80. A Clown Too Many, pp.202-203
81. Peter Rosengard: 'Les Dawson was an exception. He performed a couple of times and was very well received, even though his first act was very different from the type of comedy the young audience was expecting.' Roger Wilmut and Peter Rosengard, Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, London, 1989, p.9
82. A Clown Too Many, p.167
83. A Clown Too Many, p.113
84. A Clown Too Many, pp.24-25; 'Les Miserable'
85. 'Les Miserable'
86. 'Manic genius of a comic motormouth', The Observer, 25th March 1990, p.17; pamphlet from Motormouth L.P., Mercury Records, BEN LP 1, 1987; Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, pp.90-93
87. Ben Elton, Motormouth, side 1
88. 'Tits', Motormouth, side 2. Benny Hill is a British television comedian famous for his smutty humour. 'Laugh, I nearly did' is a joke based on a cliched expression from newspaper reviews, 'Laugh? I nearly died!'
89. 'Tits', Motormouth, side 2
90. 'Audience Participation', Motormouth, side 1
91. 'Real Ale', Motormouth, side 1
92. Ben Elton, Motorvation, Mercury Records, 836 652-1, 1988, side 2
93. The Comic Relief Utterly Utterly Rude Video Live, Virgin Video, VVD 169, 1986
94. 'Ads', Motormouth, side 1
95. Motorvation, side 1. 'Fark' is 'fuck' with posh accent
96. Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, B.B.C. 1, 15th March 1990. 'Fanny' is a slang word meaning vagina
97. 'Nobs on the Beach', Motormouth, side 1; Motorvation, side 2; Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, 15th March 1990. The 'raspberry' referred to is an emission of air from the vagina, causing a sharp, vibrating sound. 'Pubes' is a slang word meaning pubic hair
98. 'Tampons', Motormouth, side 1; Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, B.B.C. 1, 15th February 1990; Motorvation, side 2
99. Motorvation, side 1

100. 'Tampons', Motormouth, side 1. This routine recalls an essay by the American feminist Gloria Steinem in Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions, London, 1984
101. Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, 22nd February 1990. 'Farties' is a word used by Elton to mean, roughly speaking, 'ordinary people like you and me'
102. Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, 15th March 1990. 'Toot-toot' is a euphemism for 'vagina', mentioned by Elton in his discussion of the word 'fanny' which precedes this section. When Elton says the 'toot-toot toots', he is referring to the sound made by the vibration caused by an emission of air from the vagina
103. Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, 15th March 1990. Tom Cruise is a young Hollywood sex symbol. 'Velcro' is a product used to fasten clothing
104. 'Tits', Motormouth, side 2
105. Motorvation, side 2
106. Motorvation, side 1
107. 'Yappy the Dog', Motormouth, side 1
108. Ben Elton, 'A comedian writes', Radio Times, 10th-16th February 1990, p.12
109. Didn't You Kill My Mother-in-Law?, p.91 (Sayle); p.272 (Allen); Carol Sarler, 'A Hardy Annual', The Weekend Guardian, 5-6 August 1989, pp.19-20 (Hardy); author's interview with Mark Steel, 18 March 1989 (Steel) [see Appendix III: interviews with Alternative Comedians]; James Brown, 'Hate Male', New Musical Express, 21 October 1989, p.27 (Sadowitz)
110. For example, on The Comic Relief Utterly Utterly Rude Video Live; contraception routine from Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, 15th February 1990. 'Wally' and 'prat' both mean 'idiot'. 'Posey' means 'pretentious'. 'Rubber johnny' means 'condom'
111. The Comic Relief Utterly Utterly Rude Video Live, ('sophist', 'nudie', 'farty'). Motorvation, ('Mrs Thatch', 'Normo Tebbs')
112. 'Yappy the dog', Motormouth, side 1
113. 'Fast Food', Motormouth, side 2
114. Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, 22nd February 1990
115. Arthur Schopenhauer, The World as Will and Idea, London, 1886, volume 2, p.276
116. 'Real People', Motormouth, side 1

117. Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, 22nd February 1990
118. Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, 22nd February 1990
119. Motorvation, side 2
120. Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, 22nd February 1990. Waving two fingers is a derisive gesture, meaning 'fuck off' or 'go away'. 'A hundred grand' is £100,000
121. Ben Elton, Stark, Harmondsworth, 1989; Gasp opened at the Haymarket Theatre in London, in 1990
122. Didn't You Kill my Mother-in-Law?, pp.196-97
123. 'Cabaret's Artful Dodger', The Independent, 30th September 1989
124. John Connor, Comics, London and Basingstoke, 1990, p.42
125. 'Cabaret's Artful Dodger'

#### Conclusion

1. CaK, Springtime Records, CAK 1, 1982, side 1. This joke is based on the bisociation of Operation Countryman with old-fashioned newspaper competitions, in which readers had to spot a disguised employee of the newspaper, and confront him or her with a copy of the newspaper, and thus to claim a small cash prize
2. Morwenna Banks and Amanda Swift, The Joke's On Us, London, 1987, p.1

## Appendices

Appendix I: My experiences of the Alternative Comedy circuit

Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs

Appendix III: Interviews with Alternative comedians

## Appendix I: My experiences of the Alternative Comedy circuit

I began experimenting with stand-up comedy in around 1984, whilst I was studying drama at Exeter University. As a student, I performed infrequently, appearing mainly in student venues, and occasionally elsewhere. My performance was not stand-up in the purest sense, consisting of character monologues, poems and songs as well as straight patter. I spent the year after graduating trying to pursue a career in cabaret in Exeter, a hopeless task as there were no venues that put on cabaret regularly. Most of my gigs were political benefits, most of them held in a pub called Barts Tavern, frequented mainly by anarchists, punks and hippies, who usually only came to see the punk bands on the same bill. Straight stand-up was exceptionally difficult in such circumstances, so I developed a manic, visual style, which included covering myself with lentils or tinned tomatoes, performing topless, rapping, singing songs accompanying myself on a mandolin put through a distortion pedal (so that it sounded like a rock guitar), and performing one-man sketches playing all the characters in American cartoon shows like Scooby Doo and The Flintstones, and adding political themes to them.

After moving to Sheffield in 1987, I continued to perform, and at the beginning of 1988, started to put on cabarets at the University. This led to the formation of Red Grape Cabaret, a collective of stand-up comedians. The four Red Grape comedians exhibit a variety of styles. Phil D. Rogers is a gay comic, recalling fantastic adventures of his youth in a confidential style laced with homosexual innuendo. Roger Monkhouse, whose delivery is rather aggressive and menacing, exhibits some of the tendencies of the backlash comedians in that his material tends to fly in the face of liberal values, for example joking about old people slipping over in the winter, or ridiculing the feminist writer Germaine Greer, pretending to be her ex-toyboy; he also produces a good deal of clever and witty topical material. Adam Cavaleri's delivery is deadpan, and he tends to discuss matters connected with sexual anxieties, and tales of the macabre, with some surreal touches

thrown in. My own style is a continuation of my work in Exeter, my act consisting of a series of visual gags, songs, sections of patter and one-man sketches based on T.V. shows, with some elementary Left Wing politics thrown in. We all perform regularly in Alternative cabaret venues all over the country, including London, as well as in university and polytechnic venues and Arts Centres. In 1989, we took a show called Comedy Abattoir to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, selling out by the end of our two-week run.

Working largely outside of London gives me a fairly good knowledge of the Northern Alternative comedy scene. Certain cities seem to have quite established scenes, and identities. In Newcastle, there are several venues, notably Cabaret a Go Go. The scene there is quite Left Wing: my anti-Thatcher jokes went down noticeably better there, and Roger was disliked, his act being considered sexist. Newcastle has produced comedians like Anvil Springsteen, who establishes a very strong rapport with the audience, delivering material which exhibits a passionate Left perspective; and Huffy, a lesbian comedian with an effective aggressive delivery, whose material is often based on her family. In Manchester, there are several regular venues. Alex Hardee (younger brother of Malcolm Hardee of the notorious Tunnel Club) is an important cabaret promoter in Manchester. Important Manchester performers include: Henry Normal, a performance poet with an excellent comic style, delivering serious poems alongside comic ones with understated one-liners in between; Kevin Seisay from Stockport, a highly talented black protest singer, articulating Leftist anger with considerable wit, and very funny patter between the songs; and Bob Dillinger (apparently no longer living in Manchester) another singer, who establishes a strong rapport with the audience, and breathes life into elderly material with a superb delivery. Birmingham has a very strong Alternative cabaret scene, which has been built up largely by the work of two men, Malcolm Bailey, who runs Duck Soup Enterprises, and Frank Skinner, a comedian. They run two weekly cabarets, one in Bearwood, one in King's Heath, sponsored by the Birmingham Repertory Theatre and Ansell's Brewery (the cabarets are called 'The 4X

Cabaret', named after a brand of lager produced by Ansell's); recently, they have extended their operations to include regular weekly cabarets in Cheltenham (not a 4X Cabaret, it is called 'Pillar Talk'), and one in Bristol. It is exceptional for the Birmingham venues not to sell out, largely because of Skinner's brilliance as a comic compere, using new material every week (about forty minute's worth), and improvising freely to create an extraordinary relationship with the audience. (Skinner has now stopped compering these Birmingham venues) The success of the 4X Cabarets has inspired others to start performing stand-up comedy, notably Sean Percival, and Norman. The Birmingham scene is not very politicized: ridiculing middle class values is the nearest it gets to a left stance, and there are occasional anti-gay jokes, and sick jokes about midgets and disabled people. I have no first hand experience of it, but Glasgow has an established comedy scene, centred around the Funny Farm collective, which includes comedians like Kate Donnelly, Bruce Morton, and Stu Who? When I met Stu Who? at the Edinburgh Festival, he told me that the Funny Farm has a policy of 'no sexists, no racists, no Tory bastards'. South Yorkshire does not have an identifiable cabaret scene. Sheffield now has only one regular venue, Fools Paradise, sponsored by the Trophy Bitter brewery. It features only very established London acts, and is now compered by Phil D. Rogers. Other venues have existed in Sheffield, and in nearby Rotherham and Chesterfield, but these are now defunct. The most successful stand-up performers based in Sheffield are Linda Smith, a talented political comedian with a good deal of topical material; and Betty Spital, a character comic, portraying a revolutionary pensioner, with scripts written by a local Arts Officer called Chris Mead. There have also been cabarets in the following towns and cities, some of which are still running: Nottingham (Spotz, temporarily closed whilst searching for a new venue); Leicester (The Big Banana Club, now closed); Norwich (Big on Wednesdays); Peterborough (The Gaslight Club); Liverpool (Koff Comedy Club); Leeds (Leeds Alternative Cabaret, now closed); Bradford (The One in Twelve Club); and Barrow-in-Furness (a

temporary venture, run in a discotheque by the theatre company Welfare State International).

Venues outside London vary massively. Some, like Birmingham's 4X cabarets and Coventry's TIC TOC Club are professionally run, highly successful, and are not significantly different from London venues. Others are less professionally run, but have a more experimental feel. For example, the Cabaret a Go Go in Newcastle was poorly attended when we performed there, but a number of people who were there got up and did five minutes of material off the cuff. Similarly, the Madhouse in Rotherham mixed local acts of differing proficiency with professional London acts in a lively atmosphere, but the club lost its audience when it moved from a Friday to a Saturday night: we performed there just before our trip to Edinburgh in 1989 to an audience of around ten. Eventually it was forced to close. Venues are run in various places, usually function rooms above public houses, but sometimes in Arts Centres or Town Halls. Venues outside London are often little more than satellites of the London circuit, with London acts making up most of the bills, and almost invariably headlining.

My experience of performing in London is less extensive. As a newcomer, my experiences have been varied. The basic system for those trying to break into the London cabaret circuit starts with open mic. spots. In these, new comedians perform without payment, usually a spot lasting five or ten minutes. If they go down well with the audience, they may be offered a half spot, which lasts about twelve to fifteen minutes, and for which the comic receives half of the normal payment. If this is well received, the comedian may be offered a full spot, lasting twenty minutes, and receive the full payment, which is a 'door split', a percentage of the money taken at the door. This system places a lot of power in the hands of the promoter, as they have no obligation to book acts even if they go down well: I was told by the promoter at a major South London venue that I had only gone down well because the audience was particularly good that night, so I would not be given a paid

booking. This power is advantageous for promoters in two respects. Firstly, because they can decide who to book, they can affect how Alternative Comedy develops: they can push the type of act that they like, and deny work to acts that they dislike. Secondly, they get free or cheap labour: open mic. spots do not get paid at all, and half spots get half of the usual money for three quarters of the usual work. Some promoters deliberately exploit the system: a promoter in an established Central London venue, who has claimed in an interview that he only books two out of every hundred tryout acts paid bookings, told me that he would not offer me a paid booking even before I had done my open mic. spot, because I was not a well-established act, and the fact that I went down very well in his venue made no difference to his decision; similarly, Roger Monkhouse was refused a paid booking after going down better with the audience than at least one of the other acts, who 'died', but the promoter had not even turned up to watch how well he had gone down. However, not all promoters are so mercenary. Andy Waring of the Banana Cabarets offered every one of the Red Grape comedians full paid spots on the strength of our five minute open mic. spots, thus allowing us to bypass the half spot stage, and taking a considerable risk; and Piers Gladhill of the Black Cat Cabaret in Stoke Newington offered the whole Red Grape collective a paid gig on the strength of one open mic. spot by Roger Monkhouse. Promoters like this are still more interested in the acts than in the business opportunities offered by the London circuit. Andy Waring says that he was inspired to become involved in the scene in the early 1980s because he was excited by the Left politics of the comedy, and by the way in which the comedians were able to include complex political ideas in their work. He also expresses a preference for booking comedians who do take artistic risks, citing John Hegley and Eddie Izzard as examples of performers who expand the boundaries of stand-up comedy, whilst maintaining a particularly high standard of performance.

There are several aspects of the current London Alternative Comedy scene which strike the aspiring non-London comic trying to find a foothold. Firstly, Alternative comedy is a well-established part of

London life. With admission prices currently ranging from about £2.50 to about £8.00, this means that both comedians and promoters can make a very healthy living on the circuit. Because many promoters run their venues on a commercial basis, rather than just to be part of the Alternative subculture, this can affect the nature of the material which is performed, because they will tend to only book acts which they know will go down well with the audiences: this means that new acts, established acts which experiment and therefore risk audience disapproval, and highly political acts which may offend some people may find it hard to get bookings. Roger Monkhouse was told to cut a reference to menstrual blood in one venue, because they served food there, and it was thought that the mention of menstrual blood would put the customers off their food. This is a clear example of a promoter's attempting to impose censorship so as not to offend the audience, and thus to protect their commercial interests.

Secondly, there seem to be at least three different categories of venue. There are venues which are very professionally run and expensive to get in, which only put on very established acts; this category would include the Comedy Store and Jongleurs. Then there are venues which are well run and well established which charge slightly less to get in, and put on less established acts; this category would include Ivor Dembina's Red Rose Club, the Banana Cabarets, and the Cartoon at Clapham. Finally, there are venues in less accessible parts of London which cannot afford to pay some of the big names of the circuit, and have a more shambolic, rough and ready feel; these include the Black Cat in Stoke Newington, and the Rub-a-Dub Club in Sydenham. Some venues have the reputation of being particularly difficult to play, with audiences which are very hostile to the comedians. One of these was the now-defunct Tunnel Club, run by Malcolm Hardee, in which the heckling was fairly ritualized: Johnny Immaterial told me that there was a gang of supporters of Millwall Football Club, who used to go to the Tunnel, but instead of watching the acts, they would play pool in another room; if an act was going particularly well, somebody would come

through and fetch them, and they would heckle the act off until it was forced to leave the stage. The late show at the Comedy Store has a reputation for being even harder to play, and other venues with similar reputations include Jongleurs and The Town and Country Comedy Clubs.

Thirdly, if Alternative Comedy audiences were once dominated by middle class white liberals, this is now no longer the case. Audiences are now more diverse, being made up of people from different social groups. Alternative cabarets are also no longer dominated by liberal values. I did an open mic. spot in the Screaming Blue Murder venue in Hampton Wick in April 1989, and a black comedian called Sheila Hyde received a hostile reception from a section of the audience which talked through her act, and muttered racist insults. The promoter threw them out at the interval, claiming they were members of the National Front. Similarly, after going down badly at one London venue, Phil D. Rogers overheard a member of the audience telling the compere, 'We don't want no more mud sharks on in 'ere.' ('Mud sharks' is a derogatory term for homosexuals) Whilst performing at a pub called The Prince of Orange (the venue which Malcolm Hardee opened after his infamous Tunnel Club was shut down), the audience responded to a list of the achievements of the revolutionary government in Nicaragua in one of my sketches with boos; jokes by other comedians about the Hillsborough football stadium disaster, which had killed about a hundred people in Sheffield the day before, were applauded by the same audience.

## Appendix II: Interviews relating to Working Men's Clubs

### 1. Interview with ERIC THOMAS, columnist for Our Clubs, Sheffield clubs listings magazine, 16th May 1988

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been involved with the club circuit in Sheffield?

ERIC THOMAS: Well, I've been writing for the journal [Our Clubs] 26 years, but I've been going in clubs, off and on, since 1938.

INTERVIEWER: What do you know about the history of the clubs?

ERIC THOMAS: Well, it's comparatively changed, club life, from what it used to be: money problems and rising prices, you know, like artist's fees, etc, etc, have all sort of changed, you know, drastic change. They're not at all like they used to be. I mean, in the old days, you could get the best entertainment around for perhaps thirty shillings, now you're talking in terms of anything up to £100, and more than that in some cases.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a big change when Variety ended in about 1960, when the artists started moving into the clubs?

ERIC THOMAS: Yeah well, now then, that's a good point that, because Variety acts, or most of them, did their early work in clubs. And even in the old days, when places like the Empire, Lyceum, and Royal were all going, what they used to do, entertainers used to work in theatres on Saturday night, stay the weekend and work clubs Sunday noon and night. Always, you know, so they were equally adaptable, whether they were working theatres or working clubs. In any case, most of them started in clubs.

INTERVIEWER: How have club comedians changed since you first started going to clubs?

ERIC THOMAS: Yeah well, as I say, in the old days, the typical dress was scarf, muffler, and probably an old football jersey to add a bit of colour. Well those days are gone, they're a bit more sophisticated now, and the repartee is one hell of a lot more bluer. In the old days, comedy was a bit more subtle, but today, it seems to be that the bluer you are, the better you get on. That's the way

people are nowadays. And if you don't introduce a bit of that into your act, some people will probably say, 'Well, it's a bit tame.'

**INTERVIEWER:** So what are the main topics of comedy now?

**ERIC THOMAS:** Well, it used to be Irish people, and there's still a lot of jokes about Irish, and Scots people, and topical things. Mostly they see television, most of them, and they find something about some soap opera which they don't like, and they bring that up and they'll murder it if necessary. They do a lot of that, that's quite comic that. I mean, I've heard actors who've taken part themselves in soap operas, I've heard them in clubs afterwards depicting in detail everything that goes off in the soap opera, and slagging people in the bargain. It goes off, that. It's a mixture really, what they do, I think it all depends on t'comedian. Such as Paul Shane, when he was on t'clubs, he used a lot of things in his act, he didn't just stick to one particular brand of comedy.

**INTERVIEWER:** Is there a political slant to the sort of things people make jokes about in clubs?

**ERIC THOMAS:** Oh yeah, they'll rib politicians, nobody's safe on stage, Maggie Thatcher, anybody's a target, oh yes. That's commonplace that.

**INTERVIEWER:** Have you got a favourite club comedian?

**ERIC THOMAS:** I've got one or two. Well, the best I've ever seen for timing, jokes, it's got to be Ron Delta. Not now, or course, because he's nearing the end, but Ron Delta in his younger days, he was the daddy of them all.

**INTERVIEWER:** And what was it that you liked about him?

**ERIC THOMAS:** Ooh, his jokes, his timing was spot on. He had the look of a comic.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was his act like?

**ERIC THOMAS:** Well, he covered a variety of things, Ronnie, he'd go on stage and do a forty minute spot without any problems, but to do it all, he had a lovely singing voice, he always used to finish off with a lovely little number, you see. He was brilliant, Ronnie Delta, it's not just my opinion, you'll find a lot of old hands that will say the same, that Ronnie Delta in his prime was the daddy of them all.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of people who started out on the clubs, who now work on television?

ERIC THOMAS: I think they've been lucky, and I think there's people on the clubs today who are better than them, they've just had a lucky break, such as Paul Shane, he happened to be in the right place at the right time for the right part, and he was chosen, it's just one of those things, good luck to him, he's done well, he's made capital out of it.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of other sorts of comedy, like Alternative Comedy?

ERIC THOMAS: Scatty comedy, do you mean? They're OK, but I tend to lean towards the old traditional stuff, I'm not saying I don't enjoy it, I like it for a change, but I wouldn't like to watch it regularly. You see, women comedians, they're branching out now, Janice York and one or two more, I mean comedy used to be a man's business, but it's not now. Ella Raines, she's another one.

INTERVIEWER: Is there a noticeable difference between the way male and female comics work?

ERIC THOMAS: Well they touch on the same subjects, but they don't do it with the same authority that you get from a man, not in my view anyway, you know, they make it sound more trivial and feminine, you never lose sight of the fact that they're a woman in other words. They can be as blue as the men too, they don't pull any punches, they have to do really to make an impression really, whereas the man could get by on an ordinary joke, a bit of audience participation, some women can't, they've got to add impetus to everything they do to prove themselves. It's a funny business, comedy. And getting an audience behind you is no easy job too, you know, especially where they're used to good acts, like Dial House, clubs like that, where they're used to the best in entertainment, anything lower in standards, no chance. Anything lower in standard could be a good act at another club, but at Dial House where they get the best, and they've always had the best, that's it.

INTERVIEWER: How common is a comedy act amongst the artists in clubland?

ERIC THOMAS: They're a breed apart, comics, not like singers, they're in their own little world.

INTERVIEWER: But what I meant was, compared with the number of singers, how many comics are there?

ERIC THOMAS: Comics are in the minority. More singers about, a lot more singers about. And specialist acts, I mean you get mime comedy now, like the Discoes, you've heard of the Discoes, haven't you? Well, there's a different kind of comedy again, theirs is mime comedy, with tapes of various shows on TV and radio, bits of this, bits of that, and that's how they make a go of it, they just mime over it. But they're very good, I mean they've been packing clubs for years now, and they're still packing them.

INTERVIEWER: Did you hear about Frank Carson going down badly at the Crookes Working Men's Club?

ERIC THOMAS: Ooh, they paid him off, I think. Paid him up. Paid her up as well, Ella Raines. It's not easy, club work, I mean it's all right going on t'box, that's dead simple because that's pre-arranged. It's not like that in live audiences, it's damned hard work. He had a bad night. He's not the first one, like. Ted Lune, there used to be a character called Ted Lune who went round the clubs, I think he's dead now, and he died a death there. There's one or two more who've died a death, too. You've got to be adaptable to club life, it's not something you can just come off box and say, 'Right, I've been a success on television, I'm going to go on clubs.'

INTERVIEWER: I read about Frankie Howerd, and he said that when the Variety theatres closed down, he moved onto the clubs, and it was a different world.

ERIC THOMAS: It was a different world. He's an old trouper, Frankie Howerd, he's a bit special, Frankie Howerd. But most of them actually, most of the names like Frankie Howerd, Tommy Trinder, all started by busking outside theatres in London, that's how they all started. Then, of course, they make their way, pubs and clubs, then theatres, then t'theatres went bust, and I suppose they went on clubs.

2. Second interview with ERIC THOMAS, 27th July 1988.

(The batteries in the cassette recorder were running out when this interview was conducted. As a result, the latter part of it is paraphrased)

INTERVIEWER: When did the change from the old-style comedians like Bobby Thompson, to the more recent style of comedian, like Bernard Manning occur?

ERIC THOMAS: What, from stand-ups, to the modern comics? I should say it started switching over in the 1960s. Definitely in the '60s, I would think.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me the names of some of the old-style comedians?

ERIC THOMAS: Well, in Sheffield there was Jackie Hood, Harry Buxton, he were a fabulous comedian, Harry Bendon, Geordie Thompson, you've got him haven't you? Goo [?] Tweed, he was another, Gooton [?] Tweed from up North. The one I just mentioned, Harry Buxton, he was a legend here, he was a legend in Sheffield. He wasn't just like the ordinary stand-up comedian, he had something entirely on his own, he was unique. He used to do the craziest things, and come out with the craziest sayings, he were a bit special, and he was unique, and that's all there is to it.

INTERVIEWER: What was their style of comedy like?

ERIC THOMAS: Well, most of them favoured a colourful approach on stage. One in particular, I remember, he always wore a football jersey, a blue and white football jersey, with striped patterns. They were very colourful, you know, and a lot of them used to do that. Some used to come in with a muffler and a cap. They all had their little idiosyncracies about dress, and they're not like that today because, in their dress anyway, they tend to be a bit more sophisticated: suits, and they don't come on in gear like they used to in the old days, times've changed.

INTERVIEWER: Do they wear dinner jackets?

ERIC THOMAS: Oh yes, they even run to that, some of them. I think they go overboard a bit. Then you get the odd comedian who thinks,

'Well, I'll dress accordingly to what I am.' And he dresses accordingly to what he thinks suits him. Well, if it's outrageous, he'll dress outrageous, he'll dress outrageous, you know what I mean? If he's a quiet kind of feller, he'll dress that way. It tends to go with the nature a little bit, you know. They're a very funny breed, comedians.

**INTERVIEWER:** The television series The Comedians was made in the early 1970s. Would you say club comedy has changed much since then?

**ERIC THOMAS:** No, I shouldn't imagine that much, because comedy is very difficult. Getting the right material, that's the problem. Today, even those people, you will find that if you go and watch one one night, you probably hear a lot of the same material from one that you do from the other, and everyone's pinching one another's material, you see, borrowing it, taking it, whatever. It's so difficult to get hold of.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think comedy has changed at all then?

**ERIC THOMAS:** Probably it has, because there are a lot of younger ones these days. In the old days, if you went to see a comedian, they're more or less middle aged, or in their fifties. There weren't a lot of young comedians about in the old days. Whereas today, it's a different act altogether.

**INTERVIEWER:** Does the age of the comedian affect his or her approach?

**ERIC THOMAS:** Oh, I would think so. Well, it stands to reason, doesn't it? If he's mature, and he's had experience, he has the gift of weighing his audience. Before they start, this is a proven fact, a good comedian, if he's had experience, before he even goes on stage, will have a peep at his audience. See how many people are young, middle aged. And if he's got the necessary experience, he'll rearrange his stuff to suit the audience. Whereas the young ones, who won't have this knowledge, he'll go on and try a few good jokes, and if he fails, he'll probably wonder why afterwards.

**INTERVIEWER:** So it's a case of older comics knowing their craft better?

**ERIC THOMAS:** Yes. And having an inward feeling of what old people like. That's the gist of it, really. I mean, some of the young ones,

they're very difficult to please, they'll go for the smutty jokes, go for the blue jokes, and if you try a subtle joke on them, they wouldn't work it out, whereas middle aged people would.

[Paraphrased from now on]

INTERVIEWER: How far back does the older style of club comedy, typified by Bobby Thompson, go?

ERIC THOMAS: As far back as I can remember. Club comedians used to play in Variety theatres alongside Music Hall acts.

INTERVIEWER: Whereas the performers on The Comedians tended to tell a series of short, unconnected jokes, Bobby Thompson's act was more of a continuous monologue. How typical was his style of comedy?

ERIC THOMAS: Not very typical. You've got to be something special to do an act like that. If you're doing a 30-minute spot, you can't take up a lot of time with a long story, if it doesn't go down very well, then you struggle. You've got to hit 'em hard, you've got to get the audience, then you can start, you've got to get them first.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think mother-in-law jokes are so popular?

ERIC THOMAS: Well, that's been going on for years, you know. The average man regards his mother-in-law with a certain amount of disgust. There was a guy whose mother-in-law played the piano, he'd make jokes about her, and she just sat there stony faced.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think racial jokes are so popular, and are they as popular as they were when The Comedians was made?

ERIC THOMAS: You have to be more careful if you're doing that kind of stuff now, you have to tone it down a bit. There might be some ethnics in the audience who'd be offended. Jokes about coloured people are ready ammunition, that's all. I mean, a comedian likes to be topical, he'll read a paper, and say, 'Have you heard about so and so...?' They'll even have a go at royalty. Nobody's immune from comics, nobody's sacred, nobody.

INTERVIEWER: Did the older comics pace their material more slowly?

ERIC THOMAS: Yes, because it made their material go further.

Nowadays, they take it more quickly, and you hear the same material used by different comedians.

[Cassette almost indecipherable at this stage. Further topics of conversation:]

Bobby Thompson Very popular in South Yorkshire, but he didn't play here much. He didn't tone his accent down when he played outside the North East.

'Queer comedians' Like Freddie Talbot, Billy Walsh, and Ray Cooper. This type of comedian was popular, because 'it's a juicy bone a man likes to get his teeth into'.

Hecklers If a comedian puts a heckler down well, most of the audience will be behind him. In the old days, the chairman used to silence hecklers, but this is no longer the case.

Audience participation Some comics comment on every move in the audience: when someone goes to the bar, or to the toilet. Sometimes, this offends people in the audience. Some comics build their whole act on audience participation.

### 3. Interview with FRANK EAMES, Secretary of Dial House Social Club, one of the largest clubs in Sheffield, 19th May 1988

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been involved with the club scene?

FRANK EAMES: Since 1940.

INTERVIEWER: And when did you become the Secretary here?

FRANK EAMES: May '72. First of May 1972.

INTERVIEWER: How have Working Men's Clubs changed since you first started going to them?

FRANK EAMES: They've changed a lot. The days of the old concert secretary have gone. Nowadays, it's all agents. I were a concert secretary for about 18 years for this club, and I used to go out, you know, watching turns and owt like that, but all of a sudden, you'd go and ask an artist for a booking, you know, ask permission to go into t'dressing room after the show, and you'd say, 'Right, we're wanting to book you at Dial House.' 'Oh, you'll have to see me manager, or me agent.' And I packed up then.

INTERVIEWER: When did that start happening?

FRANK EAMES: Let's see, it's '88 now, isn't it? I should say it's about 10 years since.

INTERVIEWER: Has it changed the nature of the acts that you get in the clubs?

FRANK EAMES: Ooh, the acts now, I mean at one time I used to book three acts at Saturday and Sunday, and there wasn't a group in sight. And then the groups started coming on t'scene and now, as far as I'm concerned, there's too many groups, you know what I mean? And there's some bad uns, and there's some good uns, but there's more bad uns than good uns.

INTERVIEWER: So what sort of acts made up the bills before the bands started coming on the scene?

FRANK EAMES: Well, there used to be a girl singer, and sometimes you had a duo, boy and girl, and then a comedian.

INTERVIEWER: And what would be a typical bill nowadays?

FRANK EAMES: Well, now, here, it's groups Saturday and Sunday, and on Monday, they usually have either a single act or a double act, that's a family night, then sometimes, we do slip a group in for the kids, like, on a Monday night. It's groups mostly. You know, at t'weekend, if we don't 'ave a group on, the young uns don't want to know, see what I mean?

INTERVIEWER: Has the style of comedians changed since you first started going to the clubs?

FRANK EAMES: Well, the style has definitely changed.

INTERVIEWER: So what were the old-style comedians like?

FRANK EAMES: Well, they were very droll, you know, they used to get to t'audience. We had quite a few here who were good comedians, but there's not as many good comedians now as what there used to be. You know, they could get the people up every weekend, at least once a weekend, you know what I mean? Now, you've a job to get them. I mean, Billy Pearce, I should say he's the best comedian on the go now, but even 'im, he's going to float down to London soon, in fact he is wi' Grade now I think, and he'll take him away. His money, well, it's getting out of our limit, Billy Pearce's money, but he packs the place.

INTERVIEWER: Have the sort of things people make jokes about changed?

**FRANK EAMES:** Well, to tell you t'truth, I don't go in t'concert room. I very rarely used to go in when I were concert secretary. In my opinion, they're too fast, delivery's too fast, whereas the others used to be droll and take their time, nowadays they've got to rush it, and you miss half the jokes, in other words, he's onto another one before you've started laughing at the last one.

**INTERVIEWER:** Has the way that comics dress changed?

**FRANK EAMES:** Well, I mean you've got Billy Pearce, he dresses a comic, in the right colour. You know, he dresses in big, bright colours, he's like more of a clown, dressed like a clown.

**INTERVIEWER:** What sort of subjects do comedians joke about?

**FRANK EAMES:** Sex. You don't get 'em talking about much else.

**INTERVIEWER:** Is there any form of censorship?

**FRANK EAMES:** Well, we don't let 'em go too far, put it that way. If we think they're going too far, they come off stage. Oh no, we don't let 'em go too far. I mean, such as your Chubby Browns and your Bernard Mannings, I mean, they're effing and blinding, and we don't like that, and t'customers don't like it either.

**INTERVIEWER:** Is there a political slant to club comedy?

**FRANK EAMES:** No. We wouldn't allow it anyway.

**INTERVIEWER:** They don't make jokes about politicians, then?

**FRANK EAMES:** Well, you do get odd un doing it, but negligible.

**INTERVIEWER:** Are women comedians different from men?

**FRANK EAMES:** No, it's about sex just the same.

**INTERVIEWER:** Is the way they approach things different, though?

**FRANK EAMES:** Yes, that's right. I think there's about two comediennes that are good, you know. There's that Diane Cousins one. I just forget the other one's name. Blonde haired girl she is, she's very good. I think they call her Marie King, something like that.

**INTERVIEWER:** Does the fact that they're women change the way in which the audience responds to them?

**FRANK EAMES:** Well, they accept it more off a woman comedienne, they expect her to be coming out with sexy jokes, and well, they make them laugh.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do many comedians do audience participation?

FRANK EAMES: No. I don't think so. Well, there is some banter. We used to have stag shows at dinner time, and we used to have comedians and strippers, but it wasn't our cup of tea, it wasn't *my* cup of tea anyway. They were effing and blinding, and when there's women in the audience... Mind you, they might have liked it, I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: Who is your favourite comedian, and why?

FRANK EAMES: Well, as I say, I don't go in concert room. But well, it's Billy Pearce, obviously, he stands out on his own. Well, you don't know what he's going to do next, put it that way, I don't think he does himself. But, well, he keeps them laughing, that's the main thing.

INTERVIEWER: What about your favourite comic from the older generation?

FRANK EAMES: Well, the way I think on it, the old good comedians have all finished now. Names? You forget about the names, but I've got all me books when I were concert secretary, people that I did book. All me diaries, I've got all me diaries in there. I can look back on 'em, and think what bloody good acts we had then. And that's before the groups came into it. You used to have your trios and that, but not the heavy stuff like they're doing now, they didn't have that. But as I said, we used to have three acts every Saturday, and three every Sunday, and it used to be noon and night, but now we've got strippers, and we've got horse racing as well. They have a bet on horses like, they have a tote kind of thing, there's eight horses in a race, so you take a number ticket, of one to eight. It's only twenty pence to have a go. Horse racing on a film. We usually have about five or six on a Sunday dinner time. And sometimes it's football they put on, sometimes it's trotting, you know, greyhounds, it's not all horse racing, it's different aspects of sport.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of the artists who started working the clubs, and have moved on to the television, people like Les Dawson, Bernard Manning, and Cannon and Ball?

FRANK EAMES: Well, Cannon and Ball I paid up one Sunday dinner time, because they were crap. I'm going back a long time, you know, I'm going back while Sheffield Empire. They were on at t'Sheffield

Empire, and I booked 'em for Sunday dinner time when they'd finished their stint. They were in pantomime, they were front and back end of t'donkey, that's what they were doing then, and they called them Harper Brothers then. And they did a spot at dinner time, and I said, 'Right, don't bother coming tonight, here's your money, and your bike,' and I got somebody else for t'night. And in fact, they did mention it. They were at City Hall the other month, couple of months since, and t'little un said, 'Where's that concert secretary from Dial House, is he in? What paid us up, like.' Wish I'd been there actually. I don't rate 'em now, Cannon and Ball.

**INTERVIEWER:** Who would you say is your favourite comedian of all time?

**FRANK EAMES:** Freddie Frinton. Well, he's dead now, but he used to take off a drunk, like, but he never drank in his life. He had a cigarette, and it used to flop over like, and he never smoked in his life. And all he used were a big long table, and his wife were sat at one end, never said a word, his wife never said a word for whole of spot, while he were waiter like, supposed to be serving these guests. There were nobody there, he would just drink it up till 'e were, well, 'e were pretending to be paralytic, like. And I could laugh all bloody day on it, me. But 'e used to do it every time 'e came, it was same thing, but I could still sit and laugh at him. Then there were Gladys Morgan and Company. She were a Sheffield lass, but she lived in Wales. Derek Roy. Ooh, names, you know, you forget 'em. Bert Lyle, he were another good comedian, and he were very clean. Then you'd got Maurice Burns and Irene, you know, a double act, they were very good. Fred Ashley from Blackpool. Don from Leeds, Don Jackson I think they called him, he were only a thin bloke, little thin bloke, he used to have little crosses put on his arms where the muscles were supposed to be, very good. Somehow, they're different today, these comedians now. They used to get 'em from Leicester, and all over, you know.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think comedians change much once they get on television?

**FRANK EAMES:** Well, for example, Paul Shane. They've had him quite a lot, and he doesn't do clubs any more, he got on that show and

that's it, he dunt bother about working clubs or anything like that. He altered altogether once he got on that show. Paul Shane were a very good comedian, and he could sing as well, and when he got on Hi De Hi, he hadn't really time to do any clubs, for t'rehearsals obviously, for t'show. Then you've got Bobby Knutt, you know, he's quite a good comedian. The trouble is, when they get good, they price themselves out. That's the trouble. As I say, same as Billy Pearce, I mean he won't be working in clubs much longer, he'll be going to these big cabaret clubs, night clubs, you know, and doing it there, because that's where the money is. I mean they're charging six and seven quid for you to go in. Then there's your beer, that's overpriced, and it's like bloody watter for a start. Can't see many comedians coming up really now, you don't seem to get so many, they've got one that's on Stones promotion show [a roadshow which tours round the clubs, put together by a brewery], Jimmy Carol, well he's a bit near t'knuckle, you know. He's got a public house actually, but he works t'clubs.

**INTERVIEWER:** How do the breweries get a show like that together?

**FRANK EAMES:** Through an agent, they put the shows on. It's Ceebee Agents. Our concert secretary is an agent for Ceebee. He gets them acts together. You know, Discoes, Jimmy Carol, then there's Jan Lesley and Academy. It's not actually a group, it's just that she has two lads backing. She's a good singer, very good singer. She's got her own backing. 'Course, you have to pay for them. You pay twice. You've got your own. Then you have to pay for theirs as well.

#### **4. Interview with MIKE TUNNINGLEY, of Mr T's Entertainment Agency, a club agent supplying acts to Working Men's Clubs, 31st August 1988**

**INTERVIEWER:** What does your work as an agent entail?

**MIKE TUNNINGLEY:** Well, initially, if you start at the beginning, first and foremost, you need venues to put your artists in. Without venues, you make no money. That's one point. Point two, you need the acts to put in, so therefore advertizing to the right market, distribution is the area which you aim at. Initially, I advertize in

three generally pretty local club magazines, the Sheffield one, the Leeds/ York/ Halifax/ Scarborough one, and the North Motts. and Derbyshire one. And in the advert, it asks acts to send the photographs and date sheets through to me. New acts invariably do go along with that, and I get stacks and stacks of acts and artists that way. Once I've got the artists, of which I've got something like thirteen hundred at the moment, on me books, that I can ring directly, then it's a question of not booking them out to a venue until you've vetted them. You see, it's necessary for an agent to travel miles and miles at night time, vetting acts, to ensure that the act is: one, up to the standard; they're not officious, they're not bigheaded or anything like that. Obviously, there's that many branches of entertainment, and then, of course, you have to designate which of your venues that act would go down well in, i.e. such as Manor Social Club in Sheffield, they're a big group club, they're a big club, six hundred people seated, they like up-tempo chart bands generally in that club. Now, I've got quite a lot of acts, groups, that in my view wouldn't go down at that particular venue because they're more commercial, in other words, they do '50s, '60s, '70s, and '80s music, which combines one heck of an age group within that club region, you see.

**INTERVIEWER:** In what geographical area are the clubs that you supply acts for?

**MIKE TUNNINGLEY:** Well, I generally work Lincoln area. I go as far as Mablethorpe, Spalding, Bourne, that area. Then I've got a couple in Mansfield, some in Worksop, and some in Sheffield, so that is my sort of area, but then again, every agent is in competition with each other, so therefore their area is also growing, just as mine is.

**INTERVIEWER:** Are you the exclusive agent in the clubs which you supply acts for?

**MIKE TUNNINGLEY:** It varies with venues, some venues I've got are solely represented by this agency, i.e. no other venue would venture in there and try and pinch the venue off me. And the same goes for me into other people's venues, which I need to travel into, obviously, to vet artists. I never step on an agent's toes. If it's

a sole represented club by one specific agent, then I don't go and sell my wares there. However, there are a number, in fact an increasing number of clubs now that like to share the agents out, which means that each agent's got X amounts of acts of their own, and therefore the members of that club see different acts, by the concert secretary, using different agents. This helps create competition between the agents, in order that they book, if they're given three months' work out of one venue per year, then in that three months, it's up to that agent to put three months' good artists in, otherwise, when his turn comes round again for his next three months, then they're gonna look elsewhere if you put some rubbish acts in, they'll always look elsewhere. So therefore it creates competition, it's beneficial to the club, because they get different acts, not the same faces. If one agent is booking, they're booking the same acts in over a twelve month period, and so the members appreciate seeing different faces.

**INTERVIEWER:** Are you the sole agent of the acts which you represent?

**MIKE TUNNINGLEY:** By far and away the majority of all agents do not have that many acts that they solely represent. For example, one of the biggest agents in Sheffield are Ceebee Variety Agency, and they, to my knowledge, have something like thirty solely represented acts. They have to provide work for those artists, because they're under contract, so they've got to provide venues for those acts to go in. Now, they, as I say, are the biggest, so we all use each other's acts. There isn't any problem. I mean, if I want a specific act that is solely represented by Ceebee Variety Agency, then I'll ring Keith Chapman at Ceebee, and say, 'Look, I want to book, say, Stuart Jason out (he's a comedian) at one of my venues,' you see. So therefore, the next move is to split commissions, 7½ to me, and 7½ to Ceebee, and Stuart Jason will appear in one of my venues. *Vice Versa*, if he wants any of my acts, then he will ring me, and the same will occur, in reverse.

**INTERVIEWER:** What proportion of the acts that you represent are comedians?

**MIKE TUNNINGLEY:** A relatively small proportion, basically because there isn't that many comedians as against other aspects of entertainment. Solo acts are probably the biggest area now, for any agency. Girl vocalists and male vocalists, generally that are self-contained, that means they've got their own backing equipment, they don't need an organ and drums. The self-contained male vocalist is by far the biggest percentage of any agent's acts. Comedianwise, there isn't that many about, then once you've got the few that do that particular branch of entertainment, you'll find that not every one is good. Plus the fact that comedy varies in such Nth degrees, from the Chubby Brown-type comedian, swear swear swear to pull his crowds in, but he's on five thousand a night, because he knows that theatre he's appearing at's gonna be chock-a-block, because people want to hear that sort of comedy; on the other hand, you can go right over to the other end of the scale, where comedians are very, very clean, they don't swear at all, and they get away with telling clean gags, etc, etc, but not necessarily is that venue full when they appear. So obviously, you have to tread very carefully with comedians. And also, with comedy acts, you'll find that when I put a comedian in a club, that club do not want that comedian back inside twelve months; because unlike any singer in the entertainment field, be it group, dancing, male, female vocalist, duos, trios, they can always change their repertoire depending on musical taste, I mean even the most middle-of-the-road, pleasant trio that don't do chart numbers and heavy music can go and pick one song out of the charts that's a ballad, and they can bring it into their acts, you see, so therefore, they are actually chart music, but that particular song is geared directly at the fifties, sixties, and seventy-year-olds that frequent that particular venue.

**INTERVIEWER:** Whereas the comedians aren't so flexible?

**MIKE TUNNINGLEY:** That's right, new gags cost money, they don't all write their own gags, therefore they have to send off to comedy scriptwriters, so I would say if you see one comedian one week, and you saw him six months later, you'd see exactly the same comic say exactly the same gags.

**INTERVIEWER:** How do comedians get hold of their acts?

MIKE TUNNINGLEY: Well, some, as I say, write their own gags, some pick up gags from other comedians, they pinch. Especially, what you find that in the Yorkshire area, maybe that's a bit too large, in Sheffield/ Chesterfield/ Worksop area, a lot of the gags are pretty similar. Unless you've got a different type of comedy, zany comedy, something like that, you'll have a different personality, each human being has, but on stage, you have to express yourself in the character or personality that you're trying to portray. Not every comedian has the gift of the gab, or are able to put over the joke to the degree that it gets an audience response. Therefore, that's another difficult area for them, but if you have comedian brought in for a ten-day run, say from the North East, which is a breeding ground for comics anyway, that if you have them over, and work them in Sheffield clubs, then it is a different sense of humour, albeit by far and away the majority of jokes that the North East comedians tell are unique in their area, so they've not heard them in Sheffield.

INTERVIEWER: Has the role of the agent and the concert secretary changed, putting more power in the hands of the agent?

MIKE TUNNINGLEY: That totally depends on the club, and it depends on the person elected to act as concert secretary. The concert secretary is only as powerful as he wants to be. The concert secretary can just be elected into that position annually or bi-annually, and he can sit in his little home, and ring an agent and say, 'Book me the next twelve months' acts.' That's one concert secretary, and there are quite a number that just ring up and say, 'Book me the next three months, it's yours.' On the other hand, there's the interested concert secretary that's worth his weight in gold to the club, and that is the guy that will not book artists into his venue unless he's actually seen them. He gets out and about in the clubs, meeting the comics, the duos, the trios, the groups of all kinds, he's in touch with other agents, he sees *their* acts, he travels about, goes to showcases which agents put on with half a dozen acts in. And that concert secretary is worth his weight in gold to the club. Agents are not the almighty gods of the entertainment business, although they are at the helm, that's

probably a better way of putting it, they're at the helm. They need to be there, to ensure that the act gets to the venue, and it's not gonna be cancelled. There's a lot relying on an agent. But generally, agents get on very well with concert secretaries. I find in a lot of clubs also, the concert secretary *has* been weakened, because he has to refer everything he does to a committee, an entertainments committee, so his role is not as powerful as it used to be, by no means. It doesn't necessarily mean that it's made the agent's role any stronger.

**INTERVIEWER:** How long have you been in an agent, and how did you get into the business?

**MIKE TUNNINGLEY:** Initially, twenty years ago, I used to manage groups, three or four groups, that were under me at the time, and I've always loved clubland, and then I hit on a group called Johnny Kalender and the Main Stream, and I stopped with them for about eight years. I was generally interested in reel to reel tapes which we had in those days, we don't have the little machines that do it now, and it were reel to reel tapes, just taping them, and followed that up and made a record, etc, etc. The agent then was Bill Smith. Now, I worked as a one-man operator on the buses, and at the time I just started booking a little club in Worksop, the landlord asked me to be social club secretary. Now with that, it wasn't just about entertainment: there were charity shows, and all sorts. And I just started booking then, and I got back into the swing of clubland again, so when I got married, some twenty years ago, we moved out of the club scene after about ten years, and went into going out for meals and that. But once I'd got this little pub, you know, building up with entertainment, I got the bug again, and it was getting bigger and bigger, and more people said, 'Oh, where did you get that act from,' you know, I says, 'So and so, and so and so,' and it was getting bigger and bigger, until I couldn't run two jobs together, I couldn't be a bus driver and carry on with my entertainment. Plus the fact that there were one or two niggling bits, that I hadn't got a license to operate as an agent, and that involved money obviously, commission, and so I thought, 'Well, I'll take redundancy and set up as an agent.' And I've been an agent officially since April this

year, but I'm a very knowledgeable one, I've not gone into it willy nilly, without any knowledge of what to do, etc, etc. I've worked hard, and spent a lot of money to get myself known around clubland, plus the fact I was in clubland twenty, twenty five years ago, a lot of the acts that were going then are still on the go now, you know, so I'll start enjoying it again now.

INTERVIEWER: What comedians do you represent?

MIKE TUNNINGLEY: Right, we've got Billy Bean, who's a very good comedian and after dinner speaker, one of the best in the business. He's from Bradford. There's Johnny Allan, a very good Scottish comedian who I use quite regularly, he's a local lad with being at Doncaster. Dick Pleasant, he's a very professional comedian, he's been on television in Crossroads and Emmerdale Farm, and bit parts here, there and everywhere. He's a member of Equity, he's done a lot of T.V. and radio as I say, and he lives near Chesterfield. Wee Georgie Wheezer, another Scottish comic [he's actually Welsh] that I work quite regularly, he's from Mansfield. Then, of course, there's Sheffield's own inimitable Bobby Knutt, who I work a couple of times a year. Bobby's done very well, he's well-known in clubland, and national television through Coronation Street. So they are the main few that I initially use. I could sit here and name you stacks.

INTERVIEWER: When you vet acts, what does that entail? Does it affect the content of the acts?

MIKE TUNNINGLEY: No, initially, when I go and vet a comedian, I'm broad-minded for a start, I can tell mucky jokes to you, and then trim 'em down when I tell 'em to the wife, you know what I mean? But I go into a club, sometimes the comedian doesn't even know that I'm there, this is one of the things I try to do, I might say I'm coming in incognito, they don't know me, and I sit there and watch the first spot, and then from that first spot, I try to judge whether the guy sells himself well or not, whether his gags are good, whether they are original, because there's so many comedians now using old gags, and they tend to lose the audiences by this. Any depth of comedy, be it zany, be it dirty, whether it's clean, so long as the guy is able to put it over, and also there's one of the jobs of an agent is to look at the audience's response. When the guy

tells a joke, it's as well to look round the audience, and see what the reaction they put in, because an artist is only as good as his audience, daft as it sounds. If the audience don't respond, then the comedian will not respond, he'll just give out the general patter of gags, you know, one after the other after the other, and at the end of the spot, he goes back in the dressing room and has half an hour, comes back and does a set or whatever. So I would say there are three or four main points that one does when one gets a comedian, but I never go by the actual content of the gags, because obviously, if he's a blue comedian, there are venues to put that type of act in, if he's a clean comedian, there's venues to put him in, so there are the places available to use whatever comedy the guy's putting out.

**INTERVIEWER:** How has clubland changed since you've been in the business?

**MIKE TUNNINGLEY:** Well, the obvious factor is, it's going downhill. Two or three main reasons why. One is unemployment. Obviously, Sheffield was a breeding ground for all sorts of entertainment, and over many years, they've had the best entertainment in Sheffield. Unfortunately, with the loss of the steelworks, and other industries, clubs that were open seven days a week, both noon and night, with entertainment on four or five nights a week plus Saturday and Sunday lunches, now just cannot afford them, because their membership has dwindled to such a degree. Virtually all of them used to employ an organ and drummer to back the artists. This is another thing of the past now. More and more clubs can't afford the forty, fifty pound they're laying out for an organ and drummer, and they'll book self-contained acts, so they get rid of that expense of an organ and drummer. So that is another area where clubs are going down, they're not opening as much, they have one act on a Saturday night, and one on a Sunday night, and that's all they can afford, whereas, as I said, before they had four or five nights a week of entertainment. So at the moment, this has created a very awkward position for anyone wanting to go into the entertainment business, from an artist's point of view, because there isn't the work available any more, and artists that years ago would work the

clubs because clubs pay better money, are now ringing up, 'Can you get me pub venues midweek, is there any pubs you've got,' and they turn out for a pittance, and I mean a pittance, thirty quid! For thirty, thirty five, forty quid that act will go on in a pub midweek, because there's only a few clubs open midweek in Sheffield. So it's made it harder and harder for an artist, especially one on his own, to be sort of totally professional, because there isn't the midweek work, and yet that same artist, no matter what a big name he is, goes on for probably up to £100, the same bloke telling the same gags, on Saturday night, you know what I mean? As the guy who'll turn out on a Wednesday and do a little pub in Shireoaks, Berridges, something like that for thirty quid, thirty five pound, because it's a bonus to artists today to get midweek work, because more and more pubs are now providing entertainment. They've picked up where clubs have dropped off. Initially, I find that entertainment in pubs isn't the same as in clubs. In clubs, it's very well organized, they have the concert secretary introducing the act on, you don't get many pubs providing that facility, and the artist just has to walk on a little stage, and some pubs haven't even got a stage, just walk on the floor and start the business, without no introduction or taking them off, but they're putting up with it, because it's a few quid from midweek.

INTERVIEWER: Has the style of the comedians changed over the years?

MIKE TUNNINGLEY: I think the style of the comedians *has* changed over the years, and people have had to change with them. They've realized that social society accepts more in 1988 than it did in 1958. They were far cleaner comedians that didn't have to resort to bad language and blue jokes to get the laughs in the '50s, but today, more and more comedians are gaining big reputations throughout clubland by using bad language and mucky jokes. The audience accepts that today, whereas thirty years ago they didn't accept that. They'd probably pay them up if they swore thirty years ago, but now, they can get away with murder, because it's a publicly, socially accepted norm.

INTERVIEWER: For how long have racial gags been part of club comedy?

**MIKE TUNNINGLEY:** Probably since the 1960s or early '70s. Charlie Williams, being as he is, a coloured comedian, got over a lot of this. You didn't look at the guy any more as being a black comic or a white comic, or a white comic telling jokes about the blacks. When you talk about racialism, you can talk about the thousands and thousands of comedians that take the mickey out of the Irish. That's racial, just as much as it is with a white man telling jokes about the zulus, or whatever. Everybody accepts that Irish are supposed to be thick, and they're all Murphys, etc, etc, but generally you find that this is done throughout clubland now. I notice Bobby Knutt was cracking a gag about the zulus in Africa in this venue, and in walked a black man in the middle of this gag, and he just fitted him into the patter, he says, 'Oo, here's the king of the zulus just walked in- have you got your spear with you?' Now fortunately, the guy wasn't offended, and he took it in good part because he knew Bobby Knutt was a biggish name and so on and so forth, and everybody else in the venue laughed their heads off. But had that guy been put out by it, then there would have been a right holy war on there. I don't agree with it to a certain extent, but if Charlie Williams is up there taking the mickey out of the whites, I don't feel offended, I'll laugh if the gag's funny. I would laugh at it, it doesn't really bother me what colour, creed or race they are at all. But a lot of comedians do pick on certain humans.

**INTERVIEWER:** Why do you think they do that?

**MIKE TUNNINGLEY:** Well, that's posing a very good question. Off the top, I don't really know why. I don't really know. I don't think they could answer that, a lot of comics. Probably because it's the way they're depicted in television, films, you know. The backward, Third World countries, and things like that, and so on and so forth, and the Irish used to make so many mistakes with the building. That's probably why they take the mickey out of the Irish, but who knows?

5. Interview with JOHNNY WAGER, a club comedian from Manchester, 2nd July 1988

(The interview took place directly after a performance at Colley Working Men's Club in Sheffield)

INTERVIEWER: What did you think of tonight's audience?

JOHNNY WAGER: I thought tonight they were very good. You were in there yourself, and you listened to them, and one of the committee men was just saying to me that he's never ever heard 'em laugh like that before, which is as good an indication as any that you've gone down well. Sometimes it's not as easy as others, a feller said to me, 'Do you ever get stage fright?' I said, 'No, sometimes I go on and pretend I'm talking to one person.' And sometimes I am.

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been in the business?

JOHNNY WAGER: I've had so many auditions, I thought my name was 'Next'. It's one of those jobs that you don't just do an apprenticeship, and move up- you go through the mill, if you know what I mean, you go through the mill. And I think it's recognized that stand-up comic patter is the hardest avenue of showbusiness you can be in. It's also one of the longest lasting. Because if you look at George Burns, who is an American comic, he's nearly ninety, I think he's eighty nine and he's still working, and there's no other avenue of showbusiness that he could still work in. To have a comedian at that age, nobody's going to listen to Tom Jones at eighty nine.

INTERVIEWER: But how long have *you* been a comedian?

JOHNNY WAGER: Eighty nine years! After a hard night, it *feels* that long. But there we are. I've worked all over the country, I've worked abroad, I've worked in the States, I've worked in Vegas, I've worked in Los Angeles, I've worked in Italy, Spain many times, Germany, and I always tell 'em that I'm going to talk to them in a language that's not their own...and after a bit, they wonder whose it is! I've found I went down well in the States, very well in the States, I could have stayed in the States.

INTERVIEWER: I've heard that club audiences are the hardest audiences in the world. Do you think that's true?

JOHNNY WAGER: Well, they can be, it's what you might call the bread and butter of the business. Unless you get so big like Benny Hill, who doesn't appear in clubs at all. He just does T.V. Most entertainers, even top line entertainers still work Working Men's Clubs, the bigger type of Working Men's Clubs, they still do, because that is the bread and butter of the industry.

INTERVIEWER: Have you worked on television?

JOHNNY WAGER: Yeah, I mean I was on The Comedians, a television show, I was on Wheeltappers and Shunters, I've done most avenues of showbusiness now, but the thing is, you do have it built in you. One of the best comics who has affected me in my life, I doubt if anybody else will ever affect me as much at this stage now, is Bob Hope. Bob Hope is eighty five. Well Bob Hope has covered every aspect of showbusiness, and the man has got comedy drilled right through his body. He's not so good now as he was, obviously, because he's past his day. Although, then again, George Burns, he's better now than he ever was, so it all depends. But Bob Hope reached his peak, I think, about fifteen years ago.

INTERVIEWER: What are your favourite British comedians?

JOHNNY WAGER: British comedians? I like Bob Monkhouse, I like John Cleese, I like Ronnie Barker, shame he's retired now, because he has a marvellous brain, Ronnie Barker. I like other comics in certain aspects, but not entirely, some things they do are great, and other things they're not so good at. But I do think that Bob Monkhouse is probably the best, most glib comic in this country, for my money. *You see, it's very personalized, and what I like, probably you don't like, and I think that's the same in the whole entertainments spectrum. Some people might like John Wayne, and some people might like Laurence Olivier, and other people don't like them, it's very personal. I mean, I know a lot of people who like soaps, they love soaps obviously, because they're very topical listening, but I don't like soaps, I never watch the soaps.*

INTERVIEWER: Do you make jokes about soap operas?

JOHNNY WAGER: Well, you know the suspicions about the Neighbours? The Woodentops went for an audition, but they were too lifelike! And the women of Cell Block H, I don't know whether you ever watch that, it should be 'Preparation H', they know where they can stick it, terrible! And if it was up to me, I'd have all the cast of Emmerdale Farm go on a holiday, and then I'd have the 'plane crash on Coronation Street! Of course, I'm only joking, 'course they should be there, people love soaps, and I'm not saying that just because I don't like them they shouldn't be there. A terrific amount of people love soaps. But I'm just trying to say that this is why, it's with you on the stage, I find that meself, if I don't like a thing, I can't do it.

INTERVIEWER: So you believe in what you do?

JOHNNY WAGER: You've *gotta* believe in what you do. People come up to me and say they wanna be a comic, you can't be a comic unless it's inside you, you can't just learn. There's a feller opened a school, a school for comics. Well, there's no such thing, you can't train a person to be funny. It's got to be in 'em, or it's not in 'em.

INTERVIEWER: Where do you get your material from?

JOHNNY WAGER: Well, I've been doing it for some time now, and people tell me jokes sometimes, that I work around on, and I can work it into a gag that is a better gag than the one they tell me. Sometimes I make up a joke myself, without any assistance from outside. I think if anybody's speaking frankly, this doesn't really happen so much. I think that people usually glean humour from different avenues, and probably put 'em together themselves, and say they've written it themselves, but in actual fact, they haven't, they really got it in a sly way from someone else. But there's still a great art in being able to put it over yourself. The fact that material is stolen or whatever. There's a American comic called Milton Berle, I don't know if you've ever heard of Milton Berle, now it's recognized in American circles that he is the thief, he is the big thief of gags, yet the man is funny. I've watched Milton Berle on that show with the frog in, The Muppets, and he tore me apart, but probably everything he does is pinched, but it doesn't matter, he does it very well.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of Alternative Comedy?

JOHNNY WAGER: I'm not really very keen on it, it really doesn't make me laugh very much. Once again, I'm not saying that it's not clever. Some of the younger comics that are coming up today I think are very clever. Harry Enfield, he's very good, Loadsamoney, he's got a different slant, not everything he does is funny, but a lot of it is, and there's a terrific amount of energy in it. I think that the Blackadder is very funny, the television show, a very funny television show, written by Ben Elton, who I don't think is so funny when he's doing performing live. I don't think he's funny at that, he's not funny. But he writes with a feller called Curtis, whether the other feller fires him up I don't know, but the script for Blackadder I think is extremely funny.

INTERVIEWER: What don't you like about his stand-up work?

JOHNNY WAGER: Well, he just keeps on talking about topical situations without a gag. He waffles on about something that's happened that week. Incidentally, this is very hard to do, because he's doing it a few days before the camera starts turning. Another feller I think is very good, he's got an army of scriptwriters at the back of him, but he puts it over well, the topical stuff, is Jasper Carrott. I think he does that well. But he's got a lot of back-up, but he's still very good. Because the hardest thing to do is stand-up patter comedy that's topical. You have to be so quick.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think there is a place for politics in comedy?

JOHNNY WAGER: I think Ronald Reagan is one of the best comedians around. Well, politics and comedy is always interchangeable, and I think that at this moment, the way Russia's going, I think we could have some good gags coming out of Russia, because they're opening up now. Gorbachev's doing a great job over there, and I'm only saying this because I wanna get elected, folks! But I think it's all coming together. I mean Neil Kinnock, for instance, does the work of two men: Laurel and Hardy. And you've got Cyril Smith, got a good job in factory as whale meat.

INTERVIEWER: What about jokes about Irish people, Pakistanis, etc. Where do they come from?

JOHNNY WAGER: Well, it's... How do you hide a ten dollar note from a Paki? Hide it under a bar of soap! Standard jokes, actually, that everybody uses.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think they're popular?

JOHNNY WAGER: Well, they're popular because, I suppose, the person they're talking about is not popular. So that's probably what it is.

INTERVIEWER: Do you ever worry about that? What if there was a Pakistani person in the audience, do you think they'd be offended by them?

JOHNNY WAGER: Well, they shouldn't be here if they're offended. We make jokes about everybody, so long as they're here, then they've got to take it.

INTERVIEWER: What about if a Pakistani comedian got up and started telling jokes about white people?

JOHNNY WAGER: How 'I can't stand white people'? Ha ha ha!! White people? Well, they're all right in twos. It's a wide area, and... Actually, I've got to get back. If I'm not back by twelve o'clock, me wife rents out me room!

#### 6. Interview with RON DELTA, a veteran club comedian, 6th July 1988

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been in showbusiness?

RON DELTA: I was only a lad when I worked the clubs in and around Liverpool; and I left and went away for a six-handed act, there were dancers and singers, and they did comedy; then I went into the army, and I came out as an impressionist, I started a lot of impressions; and I went on to do just stand-up patter after that, and I had a few songs here and there. But I enjoy comedy, I like to hear people laughing, I always have done. But you were asking me earlier about ideas for comedy. Well, as I was saying to you, it's people themselves, they can be comical. For instance, you're going to get the bus into work, and you're stood in the bus stop, and an Irishman will come up and say 'Is that yerself?' There's nobody else there, only you. Things like that. You know, you're asking different questions on stand-up patter: you can do situation comedy while

you're stood there, if you use different voices, without props. What I like to do, I like to do different characters in a gag, to be able to put people in the picture. There's such a thing as one-liners, but I like people to visualize the different characters in the story. Like one might be a Welshman, one might be a Scot, or whatever. You're talking about the doctor, you do a doctor's voice, the woman's voice, the patient or the nurse, or whatever, in a different situation, which I think gives people a chance to visualize that situation at that particular time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think comedy has changed much since you began, particularly the comedy in Working Men's Clubs?

**RON DELTA:** Yeah, I find a lot of it now is Americanized, it's a lot quicker, a lot faster. I believe you were talking to Eric Thomas about this. The essence of a good gag is that you have to time it right: to say something, and lean back a little, and wait for the reaction, and never go over a laugh. If people are laughing, wait for 'em. And when they stop laughing, carry on. 'Cos while they're laughing, you're thinking about something else.

**INTERVIEWER:** What do you think about the jokes that club comics tell about black people?

**RON DELTA:** In the old days, people would talk about a coloured guy, but they didn't broach the subject, a lot of people wouldn't go near it. And yet they'd talk about a Chinaman, or an Indian, and it was accepted. But you see, this I'm afraid is getting into black and white, I mean if a man's black, he's black, you don't call him brown or coloured. At the same time, I wouldn't try and embarrass a black man particularly. If I had got a couple of gags in my repertoire appertaining to black people, and they were in my audience, I would still do them, and I would go and see those people afterwards, and say, 'I didn't mean any offence, I hope you haven't taken any.'

**INTERVIEWER:** I interviewed Johnny Wager, who had some quite savage jokes about Pakistani people, and he said that they have no right to be offended.

**RON DELTA:** Well, it depends what he said. If you go out of your way to insult anybody, black, white, Chinese, Indian, anybody like that, and even if you didn't like a particular person, well, meself

particularly, I wouldn't go out of my way to insult them in company. Especially in an audience, because when you're on that stage, the audience look to you to see what's gonna happen. And many a time, a chairman will come up and say, 'Don't do coloured gags.' 'Why?' 'Because we've two in,' and I say, 'Best to let me be the judge of that, and see how they take it,' because there are *sick* jokes, you know, about different people from different countries, but if you can't get a laugh without resorting to them, that's not stand-up patter to me, you might as well go running down the street after them, calling them names, and make sure he doesn't catch you.

INTERVIEWER: Who are your favourite comedians?

RON DELTA: Well I don't get about a lot now, I don't see a lot of them now. I was brought up in the theatre, in Variety as well, and I toured the country from when I left school when I were fourteen, until I was eighteen when I went in the army, and I went all over the country, different theatres, different towns, and I worked with so many comics, magicians, and some fantastic acts, and I learnt a lot from them.

INTERVIEWER: When the Variety circuit collapsed, did the acts tend to move onto the club circuit?

RON DELTA: Oh yeah, I mean, when I came to live in Sheffield, I don't live here now, I live in Chesterfield now, but when I did first come to Sheffield in about 1953, the theatres were just closing, and the clubs have always been a boon, Working Men's Clubs, but you'd find a lot of the professional artists were coming off the theatres, onto the clubs.

INTERVIEWER: Did that change the way they performed?

RON DELTA: Well, they had a certain standard in the theatres, they wouldn't do a rude joke, they wouldn't do anything blue. The old time Music Hall comics, they'd go to a Working Men's Club, and they'd probably die on their backside, because they wouldn't let their hair down, sort of thing, which is a pity really, because in this day and age now, you hear all sorts of swear words and rude, dirty gags on television, and in mixed company as well.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of the so-called Alternative comedians, like Ben Elton and so on?

RON DELTA: Well, unfortunately, Ben Elton and people like that, I haven't seen 'em. Well, it's a zany kind of comedy, isn't it? Years ago, I used to do a lot of knockabout comedy, slapstick, stuff like that, like one-man sketches and things. But in those days, an audience would come and sit in a club, and you'd got to realize that in the theatre they were sat there, and they'd come to see the show, and there was no bingo, and they had fifteen minutes in the interval for a drink. There was no drink on the premises when you were actually working, and you were on the stage, and they were in their seats. You had to be prepared to go on stage in a club, and people walking up and down and calling out, 'Two pints!' and you could hear them all over the place, and you learn to live with it. A lot of comedians used to take the mickey out of people that they know. But I'd never have a go at anybody unless they had a go at me. So you'd make a comeback, and you'd make a gag out of it, and come back at 'em. But I think the young comics today, they're good, they're very fast, but sometimes they're too fast. You've gotta give people a chance to think. Besides, some of these young comics today, they'll go through about twelve gags, whereas such as a bloke in my day would do five, or perhaps only all the way through one, until you got the tag line leading up to it. But if they're doing one-liners, they're getting through a lot more patter than what the old type of stand-up comic would.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think Irish jokes are so popular?

RON DELTA: Well, people like to...how can I put it? They can identify with the simpleness in themselves. For instance, if you said something to an English person, an English man or an English woman, they'd say something that you'd said, 'That's Irish', rather than saying, 'I think you're thick, you'. I was over in Dublin some years ago, and they told me before I went on stage, 'If you're gonna do Irish jokes, they're not about an Irishman, it's the Kerryman.' You had to do they Kerryman, because the people from Ireland thought the people from Kerry were thick anyway. You know what I mean? So if you didn't say it were a Kerryman you were talking about, they'd be waving their fist at you, 'Just watch what you're doing there, just take your time,' and that sort of thing. But I think, in the main,

with the Depression we've had, you know, with the pit strike and all that, it's gone that far now that I hope for the sake of the artists that are coming up in the business that it does alter, and it does get back on its feet, but at the moment, it must be very disheartening for these young comics and young entertainers that are coming up, to try and make a living out of it, because you don't do four weeks anywhere now, you've gotta get the odd summer season here and there, but it's not the same at all.

INTERVIEWER: You mention the Miner's Strike. Do you think there is a place for politics in comedy?

RON DELTA: Yes, if you're in the right place at the right time. I was once in Newark, not realizing at the time, or being very forgetful, that the Prime Minister herself, Margaret Thatcher, comes from Newark, I did a gag about Margaret Thatcher which normally gets a big laugh, which went badly, and I never got a laugh all night after that. I could still be talking to them now, it wouldn't make any difference. You've got to be careful, you know, in that respect. Somebody'll say, 'I took offence to that gag about so and so, and I've got my wife with me,' and I'll say, 'Well, you know where you are, and the situation, and you knew the comedian that was on, if you don't like it, don't take her out to see him.' Because I mean the bloke probably said a gag, and he hasn't meant to have upset that bloke's wife, has he? She's probably just taken it wrong, but instead of leaving it, she's told him, and he's gotta tell the comedian about it. I was once held up by a nightclub manager, near the door, I came off and I'd done a really good spot, I came off, and he came into my dressing room, and he said, 'I didn't like that,' said, 'you mentioned the word "pregnant",' and he said, 'My wife was very upset.' And I said, 'I haven't a clue what you're talking about, have you any children?' And he said, 'No,' and I said, 'Well, that's probably why your wife's upset,' I said, 'It could have been a pregnant silence,' I said, 'You can't take offence at saying a thing like that.' It's the same as people saying to you, 'You shouldn't take the mickey out of college, you shouldn't take the mickey out of postmen, leave the milkman alone.' If you did that, there'd be no humour at all. You can't walk on the stage and

talk about nothing for half an hour, there's got to be someone you can take the mickey out of.

**7. Interview with WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER, a club comedian from Mansfield, 26th September 1988**

**INTERVIEWER:** How long have you been a comedian?

**WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER:** Twenty two years professionally. I sing as well, of course.

**INTERVIEWER:** How did you become a comedian?

**WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER:** I've been doing it since I was 18, really. I was in the pits twenty six years, and I used to do concert parties, you know, from when I was 18 until I was about forty or forty five. Then I left my first wife, came up to Mansfield, and turned professional, and that's how I've managed since.

**INTERVIEWER:** How does working in the clubs differ from the work you used to do in concert parties?

**WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER:** Well, with a concert party, you've got six talented men, you see, mostly weekends, but you're only doing short spots then, which being six of you, and sometimes you'd work together doing sketches and things; and when you left, and the stage is a very lonely place on your own, specially in a bad club, bad audience. But I enjoy it on my own, you've nobody else to rely on, you're not put out if one is taken ill, or has to go to hospital.

**INTERVIEWER:** Tell me a bit about your comedy.

**WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER:** It's mother-in-laws, sex, wife, Sebastian my little boy I haven't got, marriage, Sebastian in school, which goes well. It's about my wife, which see, you use sometimes in your comedy, something that's really happened to you. You know, it happened to me about four years ago, my wife left me. I used to call her Blodwyn on stage, her name wasn't Blodwyn, but I used to call her Blodwyn, and I said: 'Well, I'd like to bring Blodwyn to see you tonight, you're such a good audience, but I had a bit of bad luck last year, she left me, she ran away with my best friend- whoever he

is. My mate said to me, 'She'll be back.' I said, 'No, not this time, she's taken her bingo pens.' And it goes on to when we got married: we went to Scotland for our honeymoon, Loch Ness, she wanted to be near her mother.

INTERVIEWER: Do you write your material yourself?

VEE GEORGIE WHEEZER: Yes, mostly, other than here and there, but we put them together ourselves, really. Some use scripts, but I never have. We put them together, you know.

INTERVIEWER: So you don't use scriptwriters then?

VEE GEORGIE WHEEZER: No.

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe your act for me?

VEE GEORGIE WHEEZER: Well, I start off with, 'Good evening, ladies', and they all say, 'Good evening' like, some of them, sometimes, and if they don't, I say, 'There's not many ladies in tonight.' I say, 'Good evening, gents', and when the ladies say 'Good evening', I say, 'Lovely sopranos and contraltos.' So I say, 'Good evening, gents', and you always get one going, 'Weeairrr!!!', so I say, 'Very good- 3 tenors, 2 baritones, and a queer.' So I go on from there, saying, 'Women think they're as good as men. You're not, are you?' and I go, 'We're better.' Most of them go, 'Oh no you're not', and I say, 'Oh yes we are' and all that, and I'm into a song then: 'Oh yes we are, Oh no you're not', and I string it along, and they all do it to a certain point, then give it a long piece, you know, which they knacker, a little laugh, it starts them going. Then I say, 'I shouldn't be here tonight, I should be in Wales, where today they buried my mother-in-law. Should have been in the funeral, but business before pleasure.' Then, get into the mother-in-law gags, do five or ten minutes of mother-in-law gags, then you go into, 'Any Irish in?' you know, and I say, 'Any Catholics in?' first, 'Any Protestants in?' if they don't answer, 'Any bugger in?' and I go into other jokes like, 'Any punk rockers in?' and some say 'Yes', I say, 'Punk rockers, not wrong puckers.' And then I go into, 'Any Irish in?' and then you get a series of Irish gags, that can take another five or ten minutes. Then you go back to mother-in-law's thicker than the Irish. Then goes to the wife, my wife, her daughter, was thicker than her mother. She works for the hospital,

my Blodwyn. She goes round making people sick. Then you do a line of hospital gags. That's the end of the first spot then, when we get to the end of the hospital jokes. I do a song before, which is a comedy song, 'Green Green Grass', I use my own words. And I sing this great song then, that's about twenty minutes to half an hour. My second half, I do saying, 'I've been all over the world, you know, South Africa, Holland, entertaining mountain climbers. I couldn't understand the language, nobody understands Hollish. Australia, Australia, met this Australian, he said, "I've only made love once in my life." I said, "Where was that?" he said, "Out in the outback, with an Emu." I said, "Did you enjoy it?" he said, "I did for the first three miles, then we got out of step."' Then it goes into France, brothels, and goes into Chinese, then goes back to London, when I was in London. Margaret Thatcher jokes- goes down well in Working Men's Clubs. Well, I say, 'I hate the woman, I detest her, I bought an old T.V., and when she comes on, I kick a hole in it. And what happened in Brighton was wrong. Not because they missed her, but because there was a funny side of it. Because when she came out of the bathroom, and into the bedroom, Denis said, 'Margaret, that's what I call a fart.' If she'd been having a shit, she'd be dead now. When she was in India, she was sacred. She's the only cow that won't give milk to children. When she was in the Falklands and she fired that big gun, the only trouble was, she was standing at the wrong bloody end of it. Then the wonderful Queen sent her son out to the Falklands to fight for us. If Margaret Thatcher had sent her son, he'd have got bloody lost. He'd have been in Falkirk, that bloody...' then you go onto the Royal Family- Prince Andrew, Prince Charles. Then go back to London- Chinese jokes: 'Chinese restaurant, there was a chink in the curtain. I goes across, I said to this Chinaman, "Are you Wan King, the waiter?" he says, "No, I'm Foo King, the cook ."' And I say, 'There's nothing dirty in that, because they're only Chinese names, straight out of the Chinese directory- yellow pages.' Then I finish off with them. One or two gags that I've picked up, like: 'Petrol, going for petrol, and there was a sign outside, it says, "Free sex with every five gallons", so I got my ten gallons, and I said, "What's this free sex with every

five gallons?" "Well," he said, "there's a room behind that curtain, if you say a number, and I'm thinking of the same number, you go behind that curtain and get some sex." So I said, "I'll try that," I said, "28," he said, "No, I was thinking of 31." So I said, "I'll have another go," I said, "17," he said, "No, I was thinking of 23." I said, "This is a bloody racket. You're changing your mind every time I say a number." Goes outside, and this bloke pulls in with this car, I said, "That notice there is a load of bull. It's rubbish." He said, "Oh, no no, that notice is genuine. My wife comes here regular, she's won 3 times." Sometimes you get a good audience, mostly, 9 out of 10 I get a decent audience.

INTERVIEWER: Is your act quite fixed?

VEE GEORGIE WHEEZER: Yes, it's fixed, been fixed for years really. You change little bits here and there really, as you go in. You add things in, topical gags, you fix in somewhere.

INTERVIEWER: Are there important regional differences in humour?

VEE GEORGIE WHEEZER: Not really. You take a Geordie comic, if he's a deep Geordie like one of these comics, he's dead now, seventy odd, died a couple of months back, Bobby Thompson, now he couldn't come over the border, because people couldn't understand him. The only time he came over the border is to a Geordie club. But he went to London, and he did well at the Palladium. I wouldn't alter it if I went to Geordie land, well, I've been up to Geordie land many times, they're hard audiences for comedy up there, they're one of the hardest, Sunderland. But I've found the worst audiences are Sheffield and Rotherham. Scotland are pretty good, Wales are very good, Lancashire are very good.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think your Welshness helps your comedy?

VEE GEORGIE WHEEZER: I think it does.

INTERVIEWER: Just in the sound of your voice?

VEE GEORGIE WHEEZER: I think it helps, but I do just as well in Wales. I do better in Wales than I do in England, because they're a better audience down there, really.

INTERVIEWER: I'm interested in different types of comedy. What would you say makes club comedy what it is?

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INTERVIEWER: I'm interested in different types of comedy. What would you say makes club comedy what it is?

**WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER:** Well, it's life really. You're talking to people, they've got the same life as your life, which you've been through before you've turned professional, or some are still amateur. But it's life. And they like stories about life, and they like a good joke. There's nothing really different with the both of them, only they're different types, each comedian has his own style. He can change his script as much as he likes, but he can't change his style.

**INTERVIEWER:** Is there any form of censorship over what you do?

**WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER:** No. No, you go on and you do your stuff, you sort of feel your way as you go along. You say 'piss' once, which mostly you'll get a good laugh, like the mother-in-law, I say, 'Don't stand there in the rain, piss off!' like that you know. But if they take that, they'll take 'shit' with it. Like one I do about the mother-in-law: 'A bloke comes from the council, he says, "We've had a report that you've got a toilet that's not functioning." She said, "I don't understand what you mean." "Well, we've had a report in your office that you've got a toilet that's not functioning." Said, "I don't understand you." He says, "Well, let me try and put it another way- have you got a shithouse that's not working?" She says, "Yes, but he's down the pub now."' So they'll take that. If they don't take 'piss', then you know they're not going to take 'shit', so you've got to try and cut that down a bit. There's no censorship, really. I was in a pub last Sunday, lot of youths there, youngsters, so there was about four people come from Scotland, on holiday. You can eff and blind. Same stories, practically, but you eff and blind, and the youths like it. I went and apologized to the old people after, and they said, 'Oh it's all right, you've got to please the majority.'

**INTERVIEWER:** You say that your comedy is about life, but there are certain types of joke that crop up again and again in the club scene: Mother-in-law jokes, Irish jokes etc. Where do these standard targets come from?

**WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER:** Well, it's life, it's life, every part of the world has got Irishmen. You take Scotland. They say Scotch people are mean, you go to Scotland, and they say a part of Scotland is

mean, they say they're very mean in that part of Scotland. Which we say in Wales, North Wales is very ignorant, and in some parts of Poland they say Polish people are thick, out there in some parts of the world. They've all got their different sections where they say, 'They are thick.'

INTERVIEWER: But why does that happen?

VEE GEORGIE WHEEZER: Well, it's human nature, I suppose. It's something to laugh at.

INTERVIEWER: But it doesn't reflect the truth.

VEE GEORGIE WHEEZER: Oh, no no, they're very intelligent the Irish are, and there are thick Irishmen as well, thick Welsh people, thick English people. The stories come out. Take my ex-wife. She was a hell of a girl. She was intelligent enough, but thick, you know. I was working for an agent in Wales, and he's paraplegic, in a wheelchair, and he 'phoned up to see if I was all right for the week, and she answered the 'phone, she was chatting with him, you know. And we go down for the week, we goes in this club, and he comes in in his wheelchair, and he waved to me like, and she said, 'Who's that?' I said, 'It's the agent.' She said, 'He's a cripple,' I said, 'I know,' she said, 'He didn't sound like a cripple on the 'phone.' I mean that's really thick. And things come out like that.

INTERVIEWER: What about mother-in-law jokes?

VEE GEORGIE WHEEZER: Well, it's a tradition, I think. I like my mother-in-laws, both of them, but I say jokes perhaps about my mother-in-law while my mother-in-law's there. And my wife.

INTERVIEWER: Are there things you wouldn't make jokes about?

VEE GEORGIE WHEEZER: Well, religion is taboo mostly in jokes. There are one or two religious ones, but they don't go down very well. People frown on them. Cripples. You don't talk about cripples, because it's not right. Some do, mind: Bernard Manning. They're the two things: cripples; religion. That's all. Sex is very popular. Irish are very popular. As I say, in parts of the world, they say Poland, they say the same jokes, they say them about Poles. In Canada, they say them about a certain type in Canada, one people that's come into the country, like.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you get Irish or Chinese people who are offended by your jokes about them?

**WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER:** No, not really. I've had one or two, you always get one or two, I've had one or two offended. I was in a nightclub in Cardiff years ago, I was saying this Irish joke about them being thick, and there was only about fifteen in the club, this bloody bi Irishman came, he caught me by the collar, he said, 'Am I thick?' I said, 'No, not at all.' But he came and bought me a drink at the end of the night. I've had Chinese in, I was in Wales, in my own village funnily enough, and I was doing Chinese jokes, and these two bloody Chinese walked in. They didn't mind. Coloured people are touchy sometimes. I don't do many coloured jokes. Pakistanis, some do Pakistani jokes. I don't really. Well, I do a few.

**INTERVIEWER:** Some Pakistani jokes are very savage, about killing Pakistani people. Why do people laugh at these?

**WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER:** Yeah, well, it's not funny. Yeah, well I don't know, cruelty in people, I think. Some people will laugh, and some people won't.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think that cruelty's an important part of comedy?

**WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER:** No, I don't think so. There's no cruelty in it I don't think. A sensible comic wouldn't do cruel stuff like that. You'd have to be a very, very rough comic to do a thing like that.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think the style of club comedy has changed much

**WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER:** No, not really. I'm an old comic, I've been going for a long time, and most of them at the end of the line, they get stale. But a lot of young comics coming up are very, very good. Years ago, I used to say, 'Nobody can be comic under 30 years of age, because they haven't had the experience.' But I've been proved wrong because there've been young comics who are very, very good comics.

**INTERVIEWER:** Has the delivery speeded up?

**WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER:** Every comedian to his own style. There are old comics, there's an old comic in Leeds, very, very quick, quick firing gags all the time, he's an old comic. A lot of these modern

comics go to slapstick stuff, you know. But I admire a young comic, because he must have had the experience in a shorter time.

INTERVIEWER: Has the subject matter changed?

WEE GEORGIE WHEEZER: No, well, I mean, you know, all the war jokes, then you had peace coming, and all that with the Russians. They make jokes about life itself, what's happening to your life. Same as I pick about my life, my wife leaving me, things like that. We invent people like my son Sebastian.

### APPENDIX III: Interviews with Alternative Comedians

#### 1. Interview with IVOR DEMBINA, Alternative compere, comedian, and promoter, 7th July 1988

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been a comedian, and how did you become involved in Alternative Comedy?

IVOR DEMBINA: To answer the first question last, I was originally a promoter, someone who ran a comedy club in London, and part of my job was to introduce the acts, and rather late in life, at the age of 33, I got stagestruck, I sort of decided that I enjoyed introducing the acts more than actually organizing the gigs myself, and I decided to have a go myself, so from that, I made the step of writing a little comedy act, a stand-up comedy act of my own, which I did for a couple of years round the clubs and pubs in London; not, to be honest, with a great deal of success. It was OK, but I never felt that I was gonna be a stand-up comic, so I decided to revert back to just compering, which is a form of stand-up comedy, but it has a particular function. And since then, which I suppose was about 2 years ago, I've just concentrated on compering, and tried to develop a specialism about that, which I'm now learning how to do.

INTERVIEWER: What are your comic influences?

IVOR DEMBINA: Well, anyone who's good. Now that could mean people a long way back in history like the Marx Brothers, Charlie Chaplin, through to current leading comics, Billy Connolly, Ben Elton, anybody who's good at what they do; or even the mainstream comics, who've recently died, like Tommy Cooper, Morcambe and Wise. Anybody who's good, I'm not influenced particularly by people with a particular type of comedy, but by anyone who's excelled in their particular field.

INTERVIEWER: Do you accept the 'Alternative' tag?

IVOR DEMBINA: I think it's become a bit obsolete now, I think what it means is, 'Alternative' is a term of convenience to describe acts which are essentially non-racist, non-sexist, but it's now becoming a bit obsolescent. If there's just the two kinds of comedy, Alternative/non-Alternative have begun to merge, and we're talking

more in terms of good comedy and bad comedy. Having said that, I would be described as coming from the Alternative tradition.

**INTERVIEWER:** What do you think is the relationship between politics and comedy?

**IVOR DEMBINA:** Well, I think anything you do is political, and anything you say on stage has a political meaning, and the way you are on stage always reflects *where you are* politically. To actually sit down and consciously write material that is political, i.e. that expresses a political view of the world, all right, and I know many of us find that hard. There's a difference between doing jokes *about* politics, and comedy material which is political which seeks to somehow portray a view of the world, and *maybe* to influence the audience.

**INTERVIEWER:** There's an argument which has emerged which I first came across about 2 years ago, that Alternative Comedy has just created a new set of predictable targets, so that whereas before you got Irish jokes, and mother-in-law jokes, now you get Tebbit jokes, and jokes about The Sun.

**IVOR DEMBINA:** Well, I think to an extent that's true, but I'm not sure that that should ever have been the aim of Alternative Comedy, just to make these kinds of jokes. Yeah, that's true, I agree with that argument, but good comedy is based on truth, it doesn't matter whether it's being practised by someone who regards himself as Left Wing, Right Wing, apolitical, or whatever. If it's true, it'll get laughs.

**INTERVIEWER:** But don't those old targets still get a laugh?

**IVOR DEMBINA:** Well, they do from a particular kind of audience, because if you take the mother-in-law joke, or the paki joke, or the Irish joke, if your audience *believes* that, that mother-in-laws are a pain in the neck, or Irish people are stupid, if they believe that anyway, and they get a performer who reflects their attitudes, then they'll laugh.

**INTERVIEWER:** But shouldn't good comedy challenge beliefs rather than confirming them?

IVOR DEMBINA: Yeah, well I should have thought that that challenge has now been made. I suppose that it *is* an ongoing battle, but at the moment, you know, it needn't.

INTERVIEWER: So why do you think that Alternative Comedy has produced such standard targets?

IVOR DEMBINA: Because basically, an Alternative comic, or a comic who wants to challenge a system of beliefs has a problem. On the one hand, how do they retain their integrity about what they're doing, while at the same time increase the number of people that they're reaching, and the level of recognition that they're getting for what they're doing. So you've got a choice: to stay, as you say, in the ghetto, just performing to people who're potentially sympathetic to what you have to say; or how to reach a wider, untapped audience, which basically comes down to telly. That's a difficult one, because we know that if you go on T.V., it's very hard, because T.V., which is basically the simplest way of reaching a large number of people, it tends to mould you to what it wants, to put you in *its* context. It's very hard to come out of the ghetto quickly, and not have the intrinsic qualities of the act ruined by what the medium does to what you have to say, because it edits you, or it puts you on after a rock band. That's why I'd just like to say that many of the performers that you see on Friday Live, Jongleurs, they look fairly ordinary, they look very unfunny. If you see them live, they're brilliant. They are. What television does, it tends to sanitize because it is controlled from above, so that's a very tricky one to play. So yes, it either tends to be ghettoized, or diluted. That isn't the fault of the comics, it's the fault of the system in which they're having to work.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that getting involved in the London scene tends to mould you in a certain way? I'm thinking particularly of the series of recurring jokes you hear, like the stupid characters in horror films, and people who live in certain areas of London (which, if you don't live in London, aren't very funny).

IVOR DEMBINA: Well, I just think that's just basically more a comment about the overall standard of the work. There *is* an insularity about it, I'm sure that if it was based in another part

of the country that there would be those local influences elsewhere. But I'd say, yeah, a lot crop up again and again: stuff about adverts, stuff about, I don't know, condoms, stuff about horror movies. I mean, I think that's more a critique of the overall standard of the work rather than any kind of political insight.

**INTERVIEWER:** I'd just like to finish by asking your opinion of a couple of comedians. Firstly, Ben Elton.

**IVOR DEMBINA:** I think Ben Elton is a very competent comedian, and he's talked some very funny stuff, and he makes *me* laugh. I think it's a pity that he has been labelled 'the political comic', which I think is a disservice to him. I think he's a competent comedian, a good writer, and a good performer, but I think it's misleading to regard him as the man who does political stuff, 'cos he has got some political jokes, some are funny, but in fact his other stuff about everyday life I think is more funny.

**INTERVIEWER:** The other comic I'd like to ask your opinion of is Gerry Sadowitz.

**IVOR DEMBINA:** I think he's brilliant. I think he's brilliant because he's very talented and very funny, but I think he is the person most responsible for, he will be when the history of Alternative Comedy is actually there, he is most responsible for dragging Alternative Comedy into the '80s, and doing the most to fight against this ghettoization which you've talked about, which does exist, and I think he is the only one who has seriously challenged the safety of it all: we're all vegetarians, we can all do Left Wing leg-pulls, but we all hate Thatcher, we all believe in how alternative to that we are, which may be the case, but he's exploded the safety of it all, and he's the one in my mind who's the most comic around at the moment.

## **2. Interview with TONY ALLEN, one of the original set of Alternative comedians, 30th September 1988**

**INTERVIEWER:** There's not much written about Alternative Comedy...

TONY ALLEN: There's a lot written about it as it happens, and it's all bollocks. 'Cos basically, they all use me, and I tell them a load of rubbish. And basically, it started off with me and Lenny Bruce and Ben Elton, who were doing a gig at the Hackney Empire, and Ben didn't want to do sexist stuff, and Lenny did, and there was a big argument... I wanted to be the Southern Billy Connolly, and I was really into Lenny Bruce albums, and I was in Rough Theatre, and Alexei Sayle was in the Threepenny Theatre, and Keith Allen was in Crystal Theatre, and Jim Barclay was in Mayday, and Andy de la Tour was in... They were all in these different theatre groups, and the grant situation was bad, and I'd always been against grants anyway. I thought that the economics should determine the style, and I wanted to find something that you could do in a pub, and I sort of laid out this sort of gambit to everybody, that: why don't we try and work in pubs and bars? And the Comedy Store had just started, and Alexei had just landed the job as compere; and Alexei, at the time, was doing a sort of Liverpool intellectual yobbo character, and they would hear these five-minute bits which were very funny, but they were very intellectual, but he was doing them as a yobbo, and he was doing those in between the acts at the Comedy Store. The Comedy Store was full of downmarket showbiz acts, and we all went down there, or I went down there, and as soon as I saw what it was like, I went the second week, and I'd just started doing it, I was a novice, I was a no one, and that's when I laid that gambit down, after that. And I got all Jim Barclay and Andy de la Tour, and Keith Allen. Keith Allen was the mainman, Keith Allen just took to it like a duck to water, he was absolutely outrageous, he was brilliant, I've never seen anything like it, and never probably will. And within a year, we'd taken over, it was like a Civil War in the Comedy Store for about a year, with all these mother-in-law-type comedians, I mean people like Les Dawson, Lennie Bennett, and those people came down to the Comedy Store to perform.

INTERVIEWER: Lennie Bennett?

TONY ALLEN: Oh yeah, there was bills on the Comedy Store that go Alexei compering, me, Keith Allen, Jim Barclay, Andy de la Tour, Les Dawson, Lennie Bennett, and about 10 others who didn't know what

they were doing. I mean, they weren't sure whether they wanted to be sort of Cambridge Footlights or stand-up comedians. And that went on for about nearly 2 years, and we finally won, and we won over the management, and then they decided that that was our comedy venue. Meanwhile, Alexei and me and Jim and Andy formed Alternative Cabaret, which was a group at the time, with other bands, and we were putting on shows at the Elgin in Ladbroke Grove, which was actually the first Alternative Comedy venue, and we started playing to the sort of Bohemian anarchists of Ladbroke Grove, which were my crowd, really. And I've never changed, I've always just carried on doing that sort of material. I made up for it, in various ways.

**INTERVIEWER:** How would you define 'Alternative Comedy'?

**TONY ALLEN:** What I do. I'm a post-Alternative comic. The way I dealt with that heckler was Alternative. [he had just been performing at a venue called the Madhouse, based in Rotherham Labour club, and had been plagued by a mentally handicapped, drunken heckler] 'Cos I actually know, I knew that that guy had a problem, and I had to be sympathetic then.

**INTERVIEWER:** It presents a dilemma, I suppose.

**TONY ALLEN:** Yeah, but it's acknowledging certain things, I suppose, things that are going on. But I mean, I'm a news junkie, lots of my friends are journalists and investigative journalists, and private dicks, and I try to get all that stuff out of them. You know, I'm not interested in jokes and all that, I'm more interested in truth, what's going on around me, and beyond.

**INTERVIEWER:** Have you worked on television?

**TONY ALLEN:** Well, the one for me was a show which became the forerunner of Friday Night Live, it was called Boom Boom, Out Go the Lights, and everybody was on it. And I did the first one, and I'd been cut to ribbons, and in the second one, I said, 'Look, I'm only going to do it if I know what's going to be edited', and I did it again, and I had this line, 'Get your ego out of my cunt' (which was a woman talking to a man after sex, and he said, 'Are you all right,' and you know, 'how was it for you?' and she said, 'Look, I'm all right, apart from get your ego out of my cunt.') And this guy Paul Jackson saw it and he'd seen me work, and he said, 'Don't cut

that bit, we'll just cut it out, you need it for the rhythm of the set, you don't need to cut it full out, there's other places to cut it.' And I was on stage at the B.B.C., with two or three hundred people listening, and I got to, 'Get your ego out of my...' And he cut the microphone, so the audience couldn't hear. So I thought, 'If you're gonna cut what the audience can hear,' I thought, 'I'm not playing this game.' I stopped doing television. Occasionally I do it. Two weeks ago I did television with Keith Allen. He slagged off what I did in Edinburgh, and I said, 'Can we go on the programme and sort of take him to task about it?' And I said, 'I thought it was outrageous that you had a go at me 'cos of my show, to make me out to be doing it just for the money, and you're putting me in the same bracket as Jeremy Hardy,' I said, 'That's not fair.' He said, 'You're right, of course it's not fair, it just came over like that.' This is Muriel Gray's show, and the edited version made Keith's answers look different. So Muriel Gray, whatever you expect from her, and Keith, are party to that sort of shit.

INTERVIEWER: I once saw a programme made by Keith Allen, specifically about that kind of distortion through editing.

TONY ALLEN: Well, he knows all that, but he's taken that route.

INTERVIEWER: You were saying that you're not really interested in jokes, but that you are more interested in truth and what's going on around you, and I certainly prefer that approach.

TONY ALLEN: I do, but I mean I didn't get to do it there [because of the heckler], but I mean that's a point, is that entertaining?

INTERVIEWER: Well, I always like watching good comedians, but seeing routine after routine getting spoiled by that heckler was disappointing.

TONY ALLEN: Yeah, at the moment I'm just getting a one-man show together, and I'm doing lots of cheap gigs like this, just to go out there and do the material, and find out what I wanna say, and I just didn't need that guy at all, and I just really didn't want to go into the mode, and it was disturbed for me really. Yeah, they are routines, sure, but they're my ideas.

INTERVIEWER: But it seems to me that Alternative Comedy has become more about neat gags and clever patter than people's ideas.

TONY ALLEN: In London especially. Well, it's all merged now, that's why I call myself a post-Alternative comedian now.

INTERVIEWER: What makes people go for that slick approach?

TONY ALLEN: Well, if you took the Footlights or the Oxford Revue Company to Edinburgh, you got yourself a B.B.C. television series, you know, and that's not the case now. In the last couple of years, the Alternative comedians have taken over that limelight, and like, of course they're involved, but they were there all the time, Nick Revell went to Oxford. But I mean, I like Nick. There's been a few that are really stretching the boundaries.

INTERVIEWER: How has your material changed since you began?

TONY ALLEN: Some of it's still the same material, I don't mind telling you. I've just made a decision not to try and do new material the whole time, but to actually use old material which is funny.

INTERVIEWER: Where did the non-sexist, non-racist element of Alternative Comedy come from?

TONY ALLEN: Well, I started that, I mean you know I was really involved with the Women's Movement and all that sort of thing in the late 1970s.

INTERVIEWER: But how does somebody like Gerry Sadowitz fit in with the idea of non-sexist, non-racist comedy?

TONY ALLEN: He's the fool, man. He is the fool, he is Alternative, 'course he is, and the job of the fool is to come out with everybody's shit, and just blurt it out forever, you know, and some of it sticks, and some of it doesn't. That's what the fool does, just to tell the truth, and also to be very stupid and very outrageous, and some of it works, and some of it doesn't. The way I feel about Gerry is his hit-rate isn't very good. You know what I mean? There's too much silly jokes about Ethiopians, you know, and without going into *why* people have to laugh at that, and how they have to be serious about a very serious subject like that, and therefore, you know, it is very cathartic to laugh at a silly joke about Ethiopians. We could get into that, rather than just doing silly Ethiopian jokes in the same way that Bernard Manning does. So

I mean, I think he just doesn't go far. And like it's a pity you didn't see me do the set I wanted to do tonight.

INTERVIEWER: Why didn't you go into Working Men's Clubs to do your comedy, instead of actually setting up your own circuit as you did?

TONY ALLEN: Basically, because at the beginning I was playing to Ladbroke Grove, I was playing to an anarchist squatter's audience, and I just talked to them about things I knew. And I did try. Jim Barclay and me went round the pub circuit in London, where agencies run showcases, I'm sure they have the same sort of thing up here, and we tried that and we realized that you know... And of course, the Comedy Store was like that at the beginning as well. But it was not so relevant as it is up here.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned in your act that you went to see Ken Dodd. What did you think of him?

TONY ALLEN: Well, he's just an old pro really, you know, I mean they all are, the ones that are still going. They can go on for hours, you know. I sort of admire them in a way for doing that.

INTERVIEWER: I was quite disappointed when I saw him at the Rotherham Civic Theatre, because I'd read that he could reduce the audience to physical pain through laughter, but...

TONY ALLEN: ...it didn't hurt.

INTERVIEWER: It didn't hurt at all.

TONY ALLEN: It depends on the audience, doesn't it, I mean he was playing the Hackney Empire when I saw him, and it was like half the people were like me really, come along out of interest.

### 3. Interview with MARK STEEL, political Alternative comedian, 18th March 1989

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to ask you about politics in comedy...

MARK STEEL: Oh no, that's boring.

INTERVIEWER: No it's not.

MARK STEEL: 'Little bit of politics...' I got a mate, Mark Miwurdz, who comes from round here, he said that like Ben Elton, he's all trying to make out he's not political now, isn't he? 'Oh no, I'm not

political, I'm not political, I'm just a social comment,' and all that, and he [Mark Miwurdz] says it's like the Great Escape, it's like he's walking around going, 'Little bit of politics, get rid of it out there, there we go, little bit of politics...' that's Mark Miwurdz's joke, you mustn't credit me with that. He's from Sheffield, so there's a coincidence.

**INTERVIEWER:** You're in the S.W.P. Do you find it difficult having a clear political position...

**MARK STEEL:** It's a lot less difficult than if you're completely confused, isn't it? If you didn't know who the Prime Minister was, that'd be a lot harder, wouldn't it?

**INTERVIEWER:** Yes, but does it ever mean you have to exercise any kind of self-censorship, though?

**MARK STEEL:** No, if I think something's funny, I just do it.

**INTERVIEWER:** Is that your main impetus for doing things?

**MARK STEEL:** No, it's just like if I say or think of something that I think's funny I just do that. I don't think, 'Oo, I'd better do a joke about Ireland,' but if I happen to be talking to someone about Ireland, and I say something that I think's funny, I do that. I don't have any rules, you can't do, otherwise you end up like Ben Elton does really, who is useless politically, and useless as a comedian as well; and, I can give you advanced knowledge, as a novelist. A fine man, not only is he a complete imbecile onstage and offstage, even as a novelist.

**INTERVIEWER:** I thought your accents were really good, and I thought your performance was really versatile...

**MARK STEEL:** That's nothing, you've got to give them a bit of a song, a bit of a dance, a few impressions. Give 'em a bit of Variety, like we used to get in the old days.

**INTERVIEWER:** ...but what I wanted to ask was, have you ever done any straight acting?

**MARK STEEL:** I never did acting at first, I've never been in a play in my life, but I do the odd bit here and there, if it comes up, but not as a play usually. You know, I wouldn't mind doing it, I'd love to do it.

INTERVIEWER: Alternative Comedy, or whatever you prefer to call it...

MARK STEEL: Ah well, 'How did you first get started', 'What is Alternative Comedy?', 'Is there a sad face behind the clown...'

INTERVIEWER: No, not that...

MARK STEEL: That's what people ask.

INTERVIEWER: I don't want to ask that, I want to ask why nobody has anything important to say in Alternative Comedy any more, why has it become so safe?

MARK STEEL: Ah, well, now, this is the thing, you see. It's now possible to think to yourself, 'Right, I'm gonna make a career as a comedian.' And start, and do it quite quickly, which ten years ago wasn't the case. So, ten years ago, the only people who were really gonna become comedians other than the northern club comedians were the people who wanted to do it because they had something to say, and they used that to be funny in some way, and they had a real passion for what they were doing. Because like, it's a big thing now, I mean you'd never have got this [the Fools Paradise show in the Sheffield City Memorial Hall, in which he had just performed] like ten years ago. I mean, like four or five years ago, if I'd come up to Sheffield, obviously I'm a bit better known now, but there'd be twenty people in the audience. But now, people can think, 'Oo, I'll get meself a little act together, go and do it round some of the clubs, I don't know how many, I don't do cabaret gigs in London, done them for years but I don't know how many, there must be fifty or sixty of them, they can earn themselves two or three hundred quid a week just going round them, if they get on that circuit, and all the producers hang about around those places, looking for some acts, they've carved themselves a little niche. Now, if you're gonna carve yourselves out a little niche, the last thing you're gonna do is say something that might upset someone, or say something that might antagonize people, so they come up with the most bland bloody things possible, adverts, Star Trek... And then you see someone down these cabaret clubs, you think, 'That's a load of bollocks,' and a week later you find out they've got a bloody ten-part series on the telly. And that happens quite a lot. And also, of course, the media

and business, what they wanna do, they wanna put new people on, because they recognize that the old club comedians are dying away. Even Tarbuck and Cannon and Ball and people like that are feeling it now, they've been sacked from programmes. I think it's always been true really, but much more so now that it's finally hitting people like that. They will put new people on, but they wanna put the blandest of the new people. It's like when rock 'n' roll first started, wasn't it, they knew they had to do something with it, because it was popular, so they picked a white person to promote.

**INTERVIEWER:** So what do you think of Alternative Comedians going on Jimmy Tarbuck's television show?

**MARK STEEL:** Well, I think Tarby's quite specific, because he is known as a real nasty old bastard. A real Right Wing... He campaigns for the Tories. See like, I've got a mate who went on it, and I was just horrified because not only did he go on it, but he went on it and he was shit, which was terrible. And you know people are on the way down the pans when they say they want to get across to a wider audience. The reason they did a Mars Bar advert was they wanted to get across to a wider audience!

**INTERVIEWER:** Why did you go on Des O'Connor's show then?

**MARK STEEL:** Don't see any harm on doing that. I mean, you could say, 'Why did I do Sheffield City Hall?'

**INTERVIEWER:** But what's the difference between doing Des O'Connor and doing Tarby?

**MARK STEEL:** I'll tell you what it is actually, if you even say to people, 'I'm doing the Des O'Connor show' 'Are you?' Just ordinary people. If you say, 'I'm on Jimmy Tarbuck,' they say, 'Oh no!' Even somebody like my mother, you know, when I said, 'Oh, they asked me to go on the Tarbuck show,' ('cos I got asked to go on it, and I said no) and she said, 'Oh well, yeah.' Even me mother. Because people recognize there's something quite nasty and unpleasant about him. I wouldn't make a big issue of it, but...

**INTERVIEWER:** I think that's fine actually.

**MARK STEEL:** No, cut all the serious bits out. That's what Richard Nixon should have done, he should've just put the jokes in on his tapes, and then when they were playing it back in court: 'Hi there,

ladies and gentlemen, have you ever noticed the way that paper clips always bend in the middle?' and that, an American comic routine. I saw the president today, and I told him that. I forgot to do something tonight, I was going to do an impression of Simon Fanshawe, and I forgot to do it. But I don't know if people would've known him.

INTERVIEWER: Well, he was on here [in the City Memorial Hall] a couple of weeks ago.

MARK STEEL: Yeah, but would it've been the same audience, would they have known him?

INTERVIEWER: I don't know. What other comedians do you like?

MARK STEEL: Ain't many really. They're all shit. Who do I like? Billy Connolly, Steve Martin, Richard Pryor. Eddie Murphy should be killed, definitely should be killed and strung up and hung drawn and quartered and buried and thrown to sharks. Of the comedians that are from the present circuit, Jeremy Hardy and Kit Hollerbach and Mark Miwardz are the only ones I like really, and Arnold Brown. They're the only ones that make me laugh, really.

INTERVIEWER: What about this thing where Alternative comedians are starting to hark back to the old days of Tommy Cooper and Morcambe and Wise?

MARK STEEL: Bollocks. They were all shit. Tommy Cooper was brilliant, no, Tommy Cooper was brilliant. But they were all shit: 'Oo, yes missis, no missis, she did, do you know what I did, I got it out, and I put it...no no, me *sandwiches* I'm talking about missis, no ladies, no. I like a girl who's well/ I like a girl who's sick/ I like a girl who puts her hand/ And feels me...no missis, I'll tell you what, she did, *don't!* No!' Shit.

INTERVIEWER: But why have people started praising that stuff?

MARK STEEL: 'Ooo!' Rubbish! Because it fits the times. People can pretend to be radical by attacking the Left. 'Oh yeah, take the piss out of the bloody lefties, wanky old lefties,' and they pretend that there's something new and refreshing: 'At last, a refreshing change from those tired old lefty jokes. A genuine leader of a fascist party is doing a comedy tour here at the Old White Horse. It's good

to hear him having a go at some of those old diehards who think that black people shouldn't be mugged or killed.'

**INTERVIEWER:** A lot of the Alternative cabaret audiences are going to be middle class lefties...

**MARK STEEL:** No, that's rubbish though, that is nonsense though to say that. It always has been nonsense, but it's even more nonsense now, like 'cos you go...

**INTERVIEWER:** Because they're not middle class, or because they're not lefties?

**MARK STEEL:** They're not either. I mean, tonight was quite unusual really, but the audiences I do, when I start doing the political things, and it just goes really flat, and you get people afterwards saying, 'Oo, I didn't like some of the stuff you done about the police and fings,' and they're just ordinary working class people. Like, what are people here tonight? I mean there's probably a few middle class people, but I bet it wasn't. Don't tell me it was a middle class audience, and I could tell that, because the things that I did about things like work and stuff like that went down really well, and stuff like that was just about working class life went down really well.

**INTERVIEWER:** When Simon Fanshawe was on here, he made out that there couldn't possibly be anyone who wasn't middle class in the audience.

**MARK STEEL:** Bastard, he's a vile, despicable bastard that man. He's a fucking self-publicist, a fucking condescending careerist shit. Put it in [the interview]. Oh, where do I start with that bastard, I've got some fucking dirt on that scum. Because he's from that background, very wealthy background, he knows the mannerisms and the ways in which to impress people from similar backgrounds to himself who're in positions of some authority, whether it be journalism, in the media, and in entertainment, so he manages to cajole his way into getting certain jobs, like jobs where he just turns up on the news to make a comment about something, jobs where he'll be writing regularly in The Guardian. Facile rubbish about Comic Relief, I read it, I mean it wasn't rubbish, it was just nothing, it was just nothing. But he knows that, and he manages to cajole himself in this way, he writes a regular column in Time Out, which says *nothing*,

which will offend no one, it won't offend the Left, but it won't offend the Right, the Kinnock approach to life. And he is the most incredible name-dropper, do you know, right, I had an argument with him just before the last General Election, when he was telling me about the virtues of Neil Kinnock, and I said, 'Well, you're gay, right, and you've campaigned for Gay Rights, now the Labour Party have just said that they are going to refuse in future to campaign or to associate themselves with gay causes, because it's losing us votes amongst the pensioners. Now, how do you reconcile your support for Neil Kinnock with your support for Gay Rights?' And he said to me, right, and I wasn't expecting it, he goes to me, 'Yes,' he said, 'I've spoken to Neil about this, and he was very, very naughty, and...' I just walked off, 'You win, mate!' you know. He's the most extraordinary name-dropper, there isn't a person in the world you couldn't mention that he wouldn't claim he'd met: 'Oh, Jesus, yes, I spoke to him about his carpentry.' Tossler! I'll tell you what, if we have a fascist fucking coup in this country, that'd be the one fucking silver lining, is that bastard would get tortured.

4. Interview with KIT HOLLERBACH, an American comedian who began working on the London Alternative cabaret circuit in 1985, and JEREMY HARDY, a political Alternative comedian, 29th April 1989

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of Gerry Sadowitz?

KIT HOLLERBACH: The thing with him is, just like a lot of people, I think, like him, but for the wrong reasons, you know what I mean? I'd accept him as being, like, politically subversive, as some people claim him to be, some lefties claim him to be, but the only problem with this is that his biggest fans are Right Wing bigots, which makes me a little bit wary of, you know, if he is a kind of Left Winger, you know, interested in trying to raise the standards of the middle class and all that, he's gone about it all wrong, can he be that myopic? His audiences are like the most racist pigs, ugh! So that makes me nervous as well, I don't know. I find that he can be very, very smart, and very incisive, I think he's wasting his

time though, screaming. And besides, I'd like to say that in the States, they've done the yelling comedian bit, it's been done. You know what I mean, it's easy to scream, it is, it's been done, it's a very easy choice. People think it's innovative and radical and new, I hate to break it to 'em, it's not, it's not a new stance, people have done it, it's been done before. The angry young comic, it's easy to get mad, do you know that? That every one of us who has any kind of feeling at all in this day and age is very pissed off, and it's just bubbling underneath the surface. It's very easy to be angry. I mean, God, you exist through the day, get angry, that's easy. So I'm not that impressed with him. And I just hate the misogyny, I think if it were a time when everybody loved each other, and there was no sexism and racism, and yatter yatter, everything was fine, maybe we could tolerate something like that, you know what I mean, maybe we could *understand* the irony, maybe then. It's not that time, I don't think at all it's that time, in fact there's a real switchback to some very conservative and frightening values.

**JEREMY HARDY:** What'll happen is that somebody who's like Gerry Sadowitz, but a bit more palatable, will probably become very successful. 'Cos they'll take the style and water it down enough to get on television, then they'll have a *career out of it*.

**INTERVIEWER:** I agree with what you say about Sadowitz's fans being Right Wingers, I was at a venue with a number of comedians taking a Sadowitz-style approach, and the audience were just lapping it up, they weren't trendy lefties.

**JEREMY HARDY:** Trendy lefties don't go to Alternative cabaret.

**KIT HOLLERBACH:** They don't like him, they don't like his stuff anyway, you know what I mean, I've seen him die deaths in Islington and all those kind of trendy, conscientious kind of places. They fucking hate him.

**JEREMY HARDY:** People like that tend not to go to cabaret any more, anyway, I think. The people who go to cabaret now in London are people who've seen Saturday Live.

**KIT HOLLERBACH:** It's very mainstream now.

**JEREMY HARDY:** I speak to people who say, 'Oo I used to go, sort of a few years ago, and see John Hegley, and Andrew Bailey, and Roy

Hutchins, I used to love it, but I don't like it any more because it's so much what you were talking about, bland, samey, indifferent people with nothing to say, just doing the same sort of subjects.'

KIT HOLLERBACH: I mean, really, honestly, when I did start out, there was first of all a need, I mean I think because most people like Jeremy, like myself, there was no money in it, you know what I mean, there was fucking no money, so we weren't doing it for the cash, I can tell you. So there had to be some other motivation. Some guys did it, I'm sure, and I can probably name names, but I won't, did it just to get laid, and probably still do it for those reasons, some of the old guys [whispered:] Arthur Smith. But most people, you know, of us, just did it 'cos there was a need to do it first of all, it was a form that I think people could express themselves the best, I mean I couldn't be a musician and express myself, so I did another artform, which was humour and comedy.

INTERVIEWER: If the London circuit's gone very mainstream, and now that you're established, where do you perform now?

JEREMY HARDY: Well, I think you can do the circuit if it's to do it to try new material, to do places that you like. Like Kit was saying, if you know that you're going to enjoy a gig, and you're going to try something out, or it's a place that you really like, it's worth doing, but I don't think it's a way to spend your life trolling round the circuit unless you want to do an audition for television, which is what's happening on the cabaret scene. So it's a question of little theatres and Arts Centres and Colleges and travelling outside of London and playing things like this [the Fools Paradise season at the Sheffield City Memorial Hall], you know.

KIT HOLLERBACH: Yeah, it's tricky that, I think. I mean, most of the people who've been on it for a couple of years do the same old shit every day, you know, twenty-minute set, forever on the cabaret circuit, now I think there's not much mileage in that, you know, unless you are auditioning for a T.V. show. But I think that you can get around some of it by taking a bit of a risk. You don't make as much money, I mean I do, like, one woman shows, you know, like in Edinburgh last year I did something very different, I do plays. I

mean, part of it is sad, because I think that some of it is irretrievable, like the fact that the circuit is just not experimental any more, you know what I mean, too many people have made it something else, because it is a bit of an audition, and people are always, you know, with their Sunday best on, and there's no risks. As I said, they start with a twenty-minute set, they build to twenty, and fucking don't change an *inflection* for five years, you know what I mean? And I don't know that that's *entirely* their fault, because if you're always like in an audition situation, you're always gonna be... I remember the first day, I'm not kidding, at Jongleurs, I must've improvised for twenty minutes. I couldn't do that any more. The audience would cut my throat. It's sad, it's sad, but it's true. There's none of that experimentation. Some people, some acts, you know Jenny Eclair? Comedian? She used to play with me at Jongleurs, and then like last year, or the year before that, she couldn't get on at Jongleurs any more, they wouldn't let her. It's just changed that much. It's terrible. And she's funny, I mean she's not just a lard-type funny, where you know, she comes on, set-up, punchline, you know, that kind of conventional comedy, she's funny anyway, she's just a different kind of funny, a different type of thing, there should be room for that somewhere, I mean, not everybody has to be exactly the same way funny. But the audience puts that expectation, I mean, I've played the Comedy Store for what, three years almost every other week, and I can tell you, that if your set-up was longer than half a sentence, the joke was no good. The shorter the set-up, the better the joke.

**JEREMY HARDY:** Like traditional gag comics.

**KIT HOLLERBACH:** I'm telling you, they have no attention, which is sad, because you think of all the *good* comedy that wouldn't have worked there, and more and more they're becoming like that, it's revolting. It forces everything to be the same, and the comics are guilty of it.

**INTERVIEWER:** And the more you force the absurdity of comedy into a standard form, the less interesting it is.

**KIT HOLLERBACH:** There's no personality.

JEREMY HARDY: It becomes something you can become proficient in, doesn't it? In fact, most people could do a twenty-minute sort of comedy act.

KIT HOLLERBACH: I told a class, I was teaching this class, right, I said, 'You want to do ten-minute stand-up?' I said, 'Any one of you could, piece of piss, and do successfully on the circuit, it's easy, just get somebody to write your gags, there's good gag writers and they're desperate for work, get them to write your gags, pick a personality, deadpan, that's always a good one, especially if you're nervous and not very comfortable onstage, it works a treat, just act bored, it's really easy, I tell you, anybody can do it, 'cos then you just hide everything behind this kind of like I'm-so-bored demeanor, it's a piece of piss, anyway, and there you have an act. You've got an act, no problem. The problem with that is it's hard to carry after about twenty five minutes.

INTERVIEWER: It gets really boring.

JEREMY HARDY: That's right, there's a lot of people who are great for five minutes, you know, and some of the better people around, you know, are really good, but the dry one-liner comics, some of them are really good for five minutes, but you can't listen to them. You want to listen to somebody that you can listen to for an evening.

KIT HOLLERBACH: That's because there's no honesty in their personality. I'll tell you, the best comedians are themselves.

5. Interview with LINDA SMITH, Sheffield-based Alternative comedian,  
7th September 1989

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been doing stand-up comedy?

LINDA SMITH: I always find this a hard question, because I'm not very good on time. In a sense, because there's such a lot of difference doing this full-time and doing other things as well, I would almost say I've been doing this since May of this year, because that's the first time when I did nothing else except this, and it is so extraordinarily different. But I suppose, doing the

sort of solo stand-up two years, and then doing other bits and pieces, maybe another year before that. Well, actually, I did my first things during the Miner's Strike, which was '84.

INTERVIEWER: How often do you perform in London?

LINDA SMITH: It varies, really. At one time, I was going down quite a lot, organizing little runs, but then for a while I didn't bother, but now I've got an agent I suppose I'll be doing a bit more, really. London becomes a bit of a dilemma now, not exactly playing in London, but just living in London becomes a problem now.

INTERVIEWER: Where else do you perform, then?

LINDA SMITH: Well, all around the country, all around Britain in fact.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of the current state of the London scene?

LINDA SMITH: I'm probably not the best person to talk about it, because I'm not particularly connected with it, but from what I gather from other people, it's pretty dire. It's become very safe, it's become jaded. Yeah, generally, it's in a bit of a sort of poor state really, as far as I can ascertain.

INTERVIEWER: What you seem to be getting is a lot of sound-alike male comedians...

LINDA SMITH: Yes, comedy without the benefit of puberty.

INTERVIEWER: ...quite, yes, but there don't seem to be too many women stand-ups emerging. Why do you think this is? Do you think it's something to do with the structure of the cabaret circuit?

LINDA SMITH: Probably something to do with the structure of the world, really. For a start, it is much more geared towards young, male, really instantly forgettable comedians, because that's part of the popularization of so-called Alternative Comedy. The interest from television means that you turn out these, I don't know, Tarbucks of the future.

INTERVIEWER: But where does that encouragement come from?

LINDA SMITH: Well, I suppose it comes from the commercial pressure. Because at one time, before I started, but within what I would consider my sort of beginning time really, although it was before I actually started, it was not something that people saw as a career

structure, people did it not expecting to be seen by television producers, or what have you, they did it because they saw themselves in this tradition of Lenny Bruce and what have you, and it was more exciting and challenging. I mean, there was a lot of rubbish about, there is now, but people didn't have that kind of cynical or safe attitude, people actually saw themselves as doing it for the love of stand-up really, and developing their art, and I don't know if that's the case any more.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the interest of television has had something to do with that change?

LINDA SMITH: I'm sure it has, I'm sure it has. I mean, obviously, stand-up comedy, or Alternative Comedy, or whatever you might like to call it, (I don't think you'll ever get rid of the tag of 'Alternative Comedy'), it's very cheap, you see, from television's point of view. So obviously, T.V.'s interested in it. And also, these sort of old wankers that <sup>no</sup>one's interested in any more, you know, Tarbuck and all that, are all losing their jobs, and they're not getting the ratings, so they've got to desperately find Light Entertainment to follow it. So, you know, it's a cheap deal for them, really.

INTERVIEWER: Going back to the question of women in Alternative Comedy, what do you think of the current crop of female Alternative comics?

LINDA SMITH: Well, there aren't enough of them would be my first comment, and my main comment, and I don't find it possible to say much beyond that, because there are so few, and I think that they come under much harsher judgement than the men, because there are so few of them. They're much more under the spotlight. They have to represent more. I mean, like a black performer would, when you're talking about not many women, there aren't many black performers, virtually none. It's almost like people don't just see them as performers, they've got to carry all this thing of being one of the few women, or one of the few black women, or whatever, and I think it's just hard for people. I mean, I just have this attitude that, well, I just ignore it really, I just see myself as a performer, and that's it. And I tend to think that it's quite reactionary to talk

about women in comedy, I think until you get away from that ghettoizing, then they're never going to get a crack of the whip, really.

**INTERVIEWER:** What do you think of this comedy, exemplified by the likes of Gerry Sadowitz, which is a deliberate, provocative backlash against the liberalism of the Alternative Comedy scene?

**LINDA SMITH:** Well, I don't know. I think Jeremy Hardy has a good line on that, when he says that, you know, 'This Right Wing comedy, you know, the thinking people can see the irony, and the fascists can enjoy it, so everyone gets a good night out.' And I think that's a very good analysis of it. It's difficult really. I think a lot of it is the sort of comedy of arrested development, like when you're a sort of pre-adolescent, you get into a lot of sick humour, you know, concentration camp jokes and all that sort of thing go round the playground, and it's because you sort of can't cope with the world, and you're overwhelmed with the nastiness of it, and it's a sort of carrying on of that, really, well past the time when you should have grown out of it I tend to think. But having said that, there are bits of those people that I like, but the whole philosophy of it I find completely depressing, five minutes of it I can perhaps enjoy, but ultimately, just that relentless nihilism is just not funny. But I mean, all those people are talented, it's just a very simplistic idea, I think, it's very adolescent. And also, just egomaniac really, like, you know, one little joke is far more important than reinforcing all those terrible stereotypes. You know: 'It's worth it, I'm more important than all these issues,' and I think you've got to be mad if you think you're that important. Plus it's also, a lot of it, very craven, because they're doing all that material in front of audiences that they know they can get away with it, i.e. white liberals, or people who really do think that. You wouldn't catch them going to Southall and doing that in front of the Asian Youth Movement, or in Broadwater Farm, or whatever, they'd be absolutely crapping themselves, 'cos they wouldn't get out alive, they'd be beaten up. So there's that, you know, it's so-called dangerous, but actually, no, it's not dangerous, because they do pick their audiences a bit.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think Alternative Comedy has become less political, and if so, why do you think that is?

LINDA SMITH: It's not got less political, it's just got more Right Wing political. I don't know if that's true, you can get a false impression of that I think, because when you look at the really accomplished, really good people, they do very good Left Wing stuff. I mean, Arnold Brown, and other people do it *more* than they used to, Jeremy Hardy, Mark Steel, what have you.

INTERVIEWER: But the less established ones seem *much* less political.

LINDA SMITH: Yeah, some of it makes you smile rather, because often you'll get people who are often billed as political comedians, now they're just fashion victims really, you know, it's almost like, 'Good Lord, was I once a Bay City Rollers fan, oh dear,' you know, it's harder to find old nazis actually, than people who were once political comedians, you know, because they see it as a change in fashion, and it's unfashionable now, so really, they're only doing it because it was fashionable one time, they weren't actually committed, so good luck to them, that's their choice.

INTERVIEWER: But why do you think that's happened?

LINDA SMITH: Well, I suppose partly, it must be the times we live in really, I suppose, you know, as things get harder and harder, people find it actually might mean more to them careerwise if they're very overtly political, I mean, I'm sure people like Jeremy Hardy, who's brilliant, would've done far more television if it wasn't for his politics, and for the fact that he was known to be difficult, in *their* terms difficult. But partly I suppose it's that some people see it as a career move, some people see it as just a fashion thing, literally, and the fashion now is for this Right Wing comedy.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that there's pressure from promoters to be less Left Wing? You do sometimes hear quotes from people who say that their audiences don't like too much politics.

LINDA SMITH: Yeah, but I think that varies around the country, I mean once you get out of London, for a start, audiences are different.

INTERVIEWER: In what way?

LINDA SMITH: Well, I'm not talking about really *good* venues in London, and proper theatres and what have you, but a lot of the cabaret scene there is quite tacky, and you know, the audiences are very jaded, they've seen every possible act. So I suppose they're *fresher* the audiences out of London, they're fresher, you can be more adventurous with them, you can try things out, they're not just jaded consumers really, they're actually into the idea of that kind of evening and taking part in it, you know. Well, I suppose it means more to you if you live in Loughborough or somewhere like that, than if you live in London, really, where, you know, the world's your oyster, I suppose. So there's that, yeah, I think they're just fresher and not as jaded, on the whole. But I think this whole Right Wing thing, it'll fade for the fashion it is, really. You know, that's all it is, and I think people are gonna look pretty stupid afterwards. But you've got to do what's right for you, I suppose, you know, and just stick to your guns whatever you think.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that Alternative Comedy has become more stylistically conservative?

LINDA SMITH: Hard to make a sort of sweeping statement like that but probably, I suppose probably. I do feel quite sorry for these sort of young male stand-ups, because in the way that women suffer from the lack of role models, they suffer from too many, in a sense, and it is quite hard for them, probably harder for them to be themselves than for women to be, I think, because they can get caught up in imitating, sort of hero-worshipping, and what have you. There is a form for them to go into, so it can be hard for them to sort of come across as individuals, in the same way I think women have more scope for that. Although, it's really weird, that. I had a couple of interviews in Edinburgh, and both of them said, like, 'What really struck me with your set is you don't do the sort of thing you'd expect women to talk about.' And I just thought, 'That's your problem really, isn't it, you imagine that women aren't interested in, you know, things other than just women's things, I mean do you expect men to come on and just talk about shaving for forty minutes, or...' Well, a lot *do* talk about wanking for forty minutes, probably got little else to talk about. Wanking and kebabs, if I hear another

wanking or kebab or I'm-really-crap-in-bed joke... I suppose it's difficult, because most of the really good comedians now don't really do the circuit in London, you know, they've sort of moved on from that, and nobody seems to really care about it much, it's become a kind of a cynical money-making exercise for a lot of people, not all people, but a lot of people who run venues, they're springing up everywhere, there's so many of them, you know, they can't all be good, how can they be when you've got that many? I do think, actually, I think a lot of interesting things are going to happen out of London. You know, I think that's going to happen. Yeah, definitely. I mean, Manchester is interesting, there's stuff going on there. I mean, people like Henry Normal. He's great. He's a really good mate of mine, and we work together a lot, and he's a real sort of anti-London, sort of miserable old militant northerner.

INTERVIEWER: And he's very different from a lot of the London acts.

LINDA SMITH: Absolutely, and he couldn't have grown up to that kind of act in London, it wouldn't have been possible, 'cos it would've been, 'Oh poetry, nobody wants to hear poetry, it's finished, you know, that's the old ranty thing, that's gone.' But he wouldn't have developed it, I really don't think he would develop an act like that in London. Because you wouldn't have the bottle, probably, to sort of stand out against the trend. And that's an advantage of being outside of London, is that you're not aware of all that fashion and trends around comedy, so people tend to be a bit more individual. Like Kevin Seisay, he's great, all sorts of people like that. And I'm really glad that I started working, although I'm from London, I'm glad I actually started developing my act as a comedian and just, like, learning my art *out* of London, because I think it's a liberating thing really.

6. Interview with HATTIE HAYRIDGE, Alternative comedian, 5th November 1989

INTERVIEWER: Do you perform in London much?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: Yeah, mostly, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of the current London scene?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: Well, it's expanding all the time, at one point it was expanding and you kind of thought it can't get any bigger, but then it did, so...[laughs] It's getting a more mainstream sort of audience in probably, because there's more comedy on the telly.

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been performing on the circuit?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: Three years.

INTERVIEWER: How has it changed since you started? Has the nature of the acts changed?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: Yeah, some have changed, probably. I don't know if three years is long enough, but from, you know, what I hear from folklore, sort of acts that were doing it, say, five years ago would not be doing it any more, either through choice, or because the style of people has changed. Yeah, people say generally so it's less political, but then, people who were around ten years ago said that a lot of those acts weren't the slightest bit political anyway. So you can only go on what people tell you.

INTERVIEWER: I do get the impression from talking to people that there is a general view that Alternative Comedy is less political. How true would you say that is?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: It wasn't that political when I started doing it, really. Some people are getting more political, actually, and it varies on the person. There are a lot of people coming in, even comics, who've come in because they've seen it on the telly, and thought, 'That's a quick way of getting famous,' and those ones probably haven't got their heart and soul in it anyway, so they're just gonna do whatever they think's gonna go down well and get them on the telly, in some pile of old shit on the telly.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get involved in stand-up comedy?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: Well, I wrote my first five minutes when I was in a particularly distressed mood, and just wrote five minutes, and then I kept it at home for a little while, and I kept looking through it and stuff, and then somebody else I knew said, 'Oh, well I'll do my five minutes if you do yours,' so we both went down to this club, and I had eight Southern Comforts, and then got up and did me five minutes, and somebody gave me a booking from that, and said, 'Oh,

I'd like to see your whole act,' and I thought, 'Oh yeah, so would I!' 'cos I didn't have one then.

INTERVIEWER: Another thing people talk about in connection with the London circuit is that people rely heavily on old material. How much of a problem is that?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: I think you go through phases. In London, you have to try new material quite a bit, because even if they haven't seen your act, you get this paranoia that in London they must've seen you before, so you've got to have some new things in. But I think that's true up here even, I mean, if there's one club in the town, you know that people have seen you, so you have to.

INTERVIEWER: Especially if you've been on telly, I suppose?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: Oh yeah, yeah. There's some that I've sort of like dumped, and I've put back in. The stuff I did on Friday Night Live I sort of didn't do after that, and then put back in, because there seems to be a new audience of people, so you sort of think, 'Well, I don't think these have seen it before,' so you just go and do it now and again.

INTERVIEWER: How do London venues differ from Northern venues? Do you play outside London much?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: More and more now, I quite like doing outside London, 'cos I like travelling about. The ones in London vary from each other anyway, so some Northern ones are like London ones. Some places outside London get more cynical quicker than others, you know, when the clubs first start, often it's the first Alternative Comedy they've seen live, so they're a bit agog, and then after a few months, you know, they're thinking, 'Oh bloody hell, I've seen this last week!' And 'cos it's the only club, they take it for granted much quicker, whereas people in London might go to a different club if they got bored with that one, perhaps.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of venues do you enjoy playing, and why?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: I suppose the ones, really, I like doing, because you know you're not going to get anything chucked at you or anything like this, is, like, old theatres. I mean, like, probably my favourite place is called the Hackney Empire, it's an old theatre converted back from a Mecca Bingo hall. That's really lovely, very

Victorian with all the boxes and stuff like that, that's great. But, you know, anywhere where the atmosphere feels right, really. It's the atmosphere that's more important than the room or whatever.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of atmosphere do you like, then?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: Well, I suppose a good atmosphere is just basically when people enjoy the show, and laugh.

INTERVIEWER: When they're receptive, then?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: Yeah, yeah. Some people's whole acts are based on an audience shouting at them, or something, which I don't especially like that, because mine isn't based on that!

INTERVIEWER: What are your comic influences?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: Well, I never really thought about it when I did it, I've never really thought who were my comic influences. I'd hardly seen any cabaret when I started doing it, so I dunno if it sounds arrogant, but I don't think there was anyone that was a specific influence on me. The only cabaret I can remember seeing before I did it was Joan Collins Fan Club, and that was in a little tiny room above a pub then, you know, with him in a little green nylon negligee, so [laughs] I wouldn't say that was a strong influence on me, although I did enjoy it. People I like around. I like Jeremy Hardy. I like that sort of comedy, rather than the anarchic comedy. I think he's got something to say, and he says it very wittily, I think. Clever, witty stuff I guess, rather than slapstick stuff. Something I feel's got a meaning in it. Yeah, Jeremy Hardy I'd say is my favourite.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of this so-called 'Right Wing Comedy' that's emerged, with comedians like Gerry Sadowitz, and so on?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: I like watching Gerry Sadowitz. I don't know if this goes for Gerry Sadowitz, because I think he just says what he thinks, so I don't think he's going in trying to get on any bandwagon, he just goes up there, says what he thinks, and that's it. But I think some comics assume too much that their audiences are Left Wing, so they feel they can make a joke about the Left Wing, and they're making it from a Left Wing point of view, but a lot of the audience could be Right Wing, so they're laughing at it from a Right Wing point of view. So I think that, you know, I've sometimes

been in an audience, and people on stage, and I think, 'No no, they're *not* Left Wing,' and you know, they're making jokes about the socialists, and all that sort of stuff, if they do do politics. They may be taking the piss out of the Labour Party, because they're assuming their audience is more Left Wing than the Labour Party, but the audience are more Right Wing than the Labour Party, so they're laughing at it because they're thinking, 'Wocourrr, stupid Labour Party, urr, fuck off.' [laughs] Rather than thinking, 'No, that's right, they're not Left Wing any more.'

INTERVIEWER: How do you think your career is going to progress from here?

HATTIE HAYRIDGE: I don't know, I suppose the only move is television, and after that, in America anyway, people go into films. I haven't got long-term career plans, I just like to see what comes up, and then turn half of it down, to be honest. I think I turn down about as many things as I accept to do, like James Whale and Jimmy Tarbuck Live Palladium, I've turned those two down, Sky Television, despite vast promises of money. So I think you just have a gut feeling about certain things, about whether you want to do them or not, you know, you think, 'No thanks!' and that's it. So if you keep that gut feeling, I think you don't go far wrong.

#### 7. Interview with FELIX, Alternative comedian, 18th January 1990

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been doing comedy?

FELIX: I've been doing comedy now since, what, '86? I mean, before that I did lots of open spots and things like that, but in any serious way since about '86.

INTERVIEWER: So how did you get into performing stand-up comedy?

FELIX: My background is, I've done a law degree, University College London, I did the course for the bar, I failed the bar. One night I was in Jongleurs, I'd been to America, and saw Richard Pryor, just got really excited about live comedy. I'd always been into performing anyway, doing singing and stuff like that, and Arthur Smith at the Jongleurs said, 'There's no-one to do an open spot,

would anyone of the audience like to do it?' So, I was with a girlfriend, and I suppose, you know, bit of a corny story, just really kind of thought, 'Hey!' you know, 'She's gonna think a whole lot of me if I get up there and be funny.' So that that made me actually stand up and go on the stage, and it was just giving expression to something I wanted to do anyway, and it followed on from there, because after that open spot they said to me would I like along and do some more stuff that I'd actually written; and it kind of like, not exactly snowballed, but it dribbled on from there.

**INTERVIEWER:** How has the Alternative Comedy scene changed since '86 when you started?

**FELIX:** Well I mean it's just been progression of a trend which was evident then, which is that it's almost become an 'alternative' profession. A lot of people have got a career structure about comedy, and they're thinking almost from the first time they go on stage about their future career in comedy, you know, they're looking to get a sitcom, they're looking to a television slot. Supposedly, the inspiration of it all initially was to be very creative, different, to say things that you genuinely thought about what was happening, socially, or politically, or whatever, and that was why it was so useful and compelling. What prompted it, the whole comic movement, was that people were genuinely interested in performing differently, and making some kind of social comment. That's all gone now, and people's main concern is about getting on telly.

**INTERVIEWER:** Had that trend started by the time you started performing?

**FELIX:** That trend was still continuing from the beginnings of what, 1980 or whatever, down at the old Store, I mean, the likes of Alexei Sayle and people like that. I mean, without wishing to be all precious and dewy-eyed about it, because there's room for all sorts of performance, I mean, if people don't want to say anything social or political, there's nothing wrong in that, but most people who started off in the early stages, if they weren't saying something socially and politically, they were imbued with some sense of being

different, or creative, or innovative. Whereas now, it's simply trying to be a laughter machine.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think about this so-called Right Wing comedy that has been emerging?

FELIX: Right, you're talking about people like the Diceman, and some of the United States performers?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

FELIX: Well, that is obviously a trend over there which is saying a lot about American society, I think, and it's also saying a lot about what comedy has become over there, it's become a commodity; in fact there are danger signs as well here, because what's happened is that comedy's become such a business, such a commercial thing, and there's just thousands of mediocre, ordinary comedians around, and performers get stimulated by the idea of, 'How am I gonna be special?' And a lot of people without any particular moral or political principle, will say, 'Well, the way to do that is to be totally outrageous, say the most sexist or racist thing that I can, and draw attention to myself.' That is actually what happened, and it's come out of the fact that comedy is become so commercialized that, you know, every man and his dog is a comedian. Therefore, how you get noticed now is be really, really sick. I mean there are people like that here, I mean that you will know of, but their inspiration is slightly different, I think.

INTERVIEWER: In what way?

FELIX: Well, I mean the likes of Gerry, for instance, Gerry Sadowitz, I think his inspiration is not so much to get noticed or to get over or to become a big star, I mean, I might be wrong, I mean this is the impression I get, I think that he's motivated really by a kind of cynicism, a kind of hard-edged cynicism. In a way, this Alternative circuit, or this type of performing needs that kind of critique, or critic. He's got a kind of cynicism about the fact that we're all supposedly really enlightened, and the kind of middle class white liberal values; how sincere are they, how real are they? I mean, how much are they just a cosmetic thing, and even though he doesn't say that overtly, and the way that he performs is capable of being misinterpreted, that's certainly something that, if

he were saying that unequivocally, I would agree with, it's certainly the view that I have, there is a danger just as much in being Right Wing as being almost patronising and ineffectual by virtue of being so smug: 'Oh, we're all a little enlightened group of white middle class liberal-minded people,' you know, when in fact there is an immense amount of hypocrisy in that, on all the issues, racism, sexism, the lot. And to sort of have the established view that, 'Oh well, you're OK, you're right on,' 'cos you've got a culture in terms of your entertainment, which is enlightened, could just be a form of confusion, you know, how really do you live your life, what are your real principles, I mean, it's not enough to say, 'Well I'm right on because I go to Alternative Cabaret,' whatever that means.

**INTERVIEWER:** Talking of which, one of the things that people have defined 'Alternative' as is anti-sexist anti-racist comedy, yet it's remained an almost specifically all-white phenomenon. Have you noticed racist pressures or things that might've caused that within the structure of Alternative Comedy?

**FELIX:** Well, for a start, I mean, in Britain obviously the population is mainly white, so I mean that's gonna be represented in every form of activity. A lot of different factors affect the presence of black people, or lack of 'em, in the audience, and the lack of 'em as performers. It's a social thing, it's quite involved, it's a social, cultural thing, because black people are not totally immersed or integrated into British society anyway, in any sphere; and a lot of black people would prefer to go to music concerts or to other forms of entertainment. The notion that you go to a special place to get your laughs is one which I think is not easily absorbed by us, because I mean, I have funniest times when I go to the barber's shop, I mean, like the comedy comes out of people just being real together, rather than like a performance. But, I mean it would be presumptuous of me to assume, and I'm not saying that there isn't an interest, of course there is, in comedy, in the black community; because people like Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and Lenny Henry are black heroes. But I mean, I think it is relevant to look at the cultural aspect. The lack of the performers, I mean, I

think the factors are innumerable there, but I think there is an element of racism, in that in British society, the impulse is to say, 'Well, well, we've got Lenny Henry, we've got one black comedian, what do we need another one for.' And also, there's a particular kind of vogue in comedy, the people who kind of decide who gets on, who's successful, who is presented to the public, are mainly a kind of Oxbridge set, the vogue is a kind of persona comedy, which comes out of a kind of white middle class person speaking to his own constituency about his own values. You know, that's the trend, although there will be differences there, I mean there will be exceptions because there are some women, you know, and there's myself, as a black person, and you know, there are one or two gay performers about, but I mean look at someone like Simon Fanshawe who is a very good comedian, who is gay. I mean, he hasn't, in a sense, received I think as much acclaim as his performing standards might've led you to expect. So I think that even within the so-called right on establishment of performing, in terms of who decides who gets successful, there is a lot that needs examining.

**INTERVIEWER:** You talk about comedy arising out of everyday life, and you say that black people don't seem to feel the need to go to a special place to be made to laugh, but the Black Comedy Club has just started up, so there does seem to be a need for formalized comedy entertainment in the black community.

**FELIX:** Well, I mean, the interesting thing was that the Black Comedy Club was actually started up by a white council, I mean it's not a white council, it's a white lady, Jenny, she's got some very good ideas, but the impetus for that came from a white liberal source if you like, and the response to it has been very good, it's been very encouraging, and there've been a lot of black performers gone along, I haven't actually been there myself, I'm gonna go. I'm doing a gig for them some time later in the year. So the response has been good, so yeah, there is some kind of apparent need amongst a lot of the black performers to go to such a place, but I mean there is also an issue of, you know, how patronising is it, or how much is it a case of saying, 'Well, you know, you're allowed to do this,' and being given permission. You know what I mean? You see, there are a lot of

black performers who are around who are funny, but they might be doing rap, or they might be actors or whatever, you know, it's not a good idea to discount the idea that there are black people who are around who are funny, you know.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think that Alternative Comedy's got more conservative on an artistic level, with a very rigid joke-based structure?

**FELIX:** Oh yeah, I mean in most of the gigs around town and most of the gigs that you will do, as a stand-up, there is a pressure on you, because it's become like a career, so many people doing it. And also, in terms of audience response, there is a pressure on you to get laughs. If you wanna be experimental, expand on a topic, talk about something without necessarily a big gag at the end of it, then it's slightly difficult. But I mean, it's worth working towards. I mean, I, and a lot of the people that I admire, have an impetus to do that sort of comedy, but yeah, the first expectation in anyone who's running a club, and in terms of the audience is, you know, 'Get the audience laughing', and if you die at a gig 'cos you're not doing that, you know, it's sort of like, 'Well...dunno if we can book him again, we need people coming through the door, man.' I mean, there are some places that encourage that, I mean C.A.S.T. has got about three or four gigs around town, and they encourage it, and I think the student gigs actually allow that, because, you know, without wishing to patronise you, as a student, I mean I think on the whole students are amongst the most intelligent people in their age group as Emo Philips would say, no, amongst the most receptive audiences that there are around. But you have to have the technical ability to, to get them to listen sometimes, because you know, you do get the pissheads. But once you've actually got through to them they want a bit of comedy that's challenging. The funny thing is, they also are quite happy to accept terrible stuff, like you saw from the joke competition. You know, I mean, I've been around most of the universities and colleges in this country, whenever there's been a joke competition, you just would not believe the jokes, the paki, the coon...

8. Interview with SIMON FANSHAWE, Alternative comedian, 20th January 1990

INTERVIEWER: Are you familiar with the London Alternative Comedy scene at the moment?

SIMON FANSHAWE: Yes, I mean a couple of things I suppose I'd want to say first is, one is that I think that even from an academic point of view, the notion of 'Alternative' needs to be examined. Yeah, because I mean I'm not sure any longer that it means anything. I never thought it was political to start with, I didn't feel that was actually the definition, I think that's become something that people look back on now, and say, 'Oh, it was always political,' actually if you think about it, it wasn't always political, it was alternative to a particular British strand of comedy which was exemplified by the Jim Davidson, the Jimmy Tarbuck, the Bernard Manning, the fact that they also did racist jokes was an aspect that Alternative Comedy was an alternative to, only an aspect of which it was Alternative, because if you think of Dawn and Jennifer for instance, French and Saunders, they were not particularly political, if you think of a lot of the stuff that even people like Ben [Elton], Alexei [Sayle], who were very political, an awful lot of what they do is Alternative in the sense that it's personally-based, and that's what I think's crucial to understand about the development, it's something we got from America. It's something we picked up from the sixties and the satire boom, and then from America, and it was about writing comedy which came from your experience, and what you actually did, and if you trace it back in America, you trace it back through George Carlin, what's his name, Klein who did, I mean, Klein for instance was the first person to do what's now become a complete generic routine, which was he did the racehorse commentator coming home at night, right. So that kind of comparative comedy, and all the structures, I mean you can see it, right the way back through that American strand, Woody Allen, the whole lot, so I think it's important just to say that, I suppose; because I would no longer say that we're Alternative, I mean I

seriously think if Ben Elton's doing Wogan, if Alexei's got a top-running series on the B.B.C., Ruby Wax has got one, Dawn and Jennifer's got one, if That's Life think I'm the right kind of thing for them, then I think we've moved in now, and I think there's a change in comedy over all, and what's interesting is that Thames at the moment are doing a series of concert shows with Jim Davidson, and Neil Shand who was Jasper Carrott's script editor is the script editor, and you know, the script editor, the script writers, people like Punt and Dennis I think are working on it, people like that. So I mean, in a way what I'm saying is the ground has been moved, and I think that's just an important thing to say. The other thing is that I made a decision about, I suppose about three years ago, I dunno, four years ago? Not not to perform in London, but to perform in London only occasionally, and to perform in a place which I felt developed me. Because I feel there's a trap, I mean it was crucial to me to start with, and it's crucial to all of us to start somewhere, so you have to have a circuit to go round, but I left it, about three years ago, and basically, Jenny Lecoat and I went off on tour. Yeah, and that's how we managed to make our living really, by going to colleges and Arts Centres and stuff. So my experiences of that scene are quite out of date now.

**INTERVIEWER:** But do you still go to the Alternative Comedy clubs?

**SIMON FANSHAVE:** I go when I can, yes I do, I mean I love it.

**INTERVIEWER:** So how has the circuit changed since you used to perform on it?

**SIMON FANSHAVE:** It's changed I think because the world's changed. And I think it's changed because when we started, there was an area of danger, there was a feeling of difference, that it was all rather new, that it was all rather exciting. I think it's less exciting now, but I think that's inevitable. How can something go on being exciting for ten years? I mean, there are exciting moments now, and people like, oh I dunno, all sorts of people provide them, I mean Jeremy Hardy does, I do, Kit Hollerbach, you know, we all provide exciting moments, Kevin Day, Nick Revell, Gerry Sadowitz, you can go on and on and on, Jenny Lecoat, but it's not exciting *per se* any longer, so I think that's one way it's changed. I think the other

way it's changed is that rather in the way that punk allowed people to be 'in a band', the Alternative Comedy thing allowed people to be 'a comedian', it became possible, quite literally possible, you know, and that's how I started, I mean it was possible for me to do it, so therefore I could, so I went and did it. And I think that's quite interesting because it means that an awful lot of people like impressionists and special acts, and people who were actually quite 'middle of the road', that's not fair, what's a good word? People whose material is strong and down the centre, by which I mean that it's not Gerry Sadowitz, but equally it's not 'jokes', you know what I'm saying, but stuff that is not 'performance' as such, you know, I mean in the way that Gerry I think's performance in a way that one's almost used to dance, you know I mean, Gerry's like a thing that happens, Gerry's an event, there are lots of comics now working who are perfectly good comics, who are doing good competent material, right, and they can be comedians, and they can earn a living, and they can, you know, and they can develop their own end. And to me that's important. Again, the reason I think it's important is that I don't see that as a problem, or a sell-out, or a change, you know, I think that it's a natural development because there are more voices now. The important thing is that people can be comedians.

**INTERVIEWER:** But don't you think that audience expectations have meant that comedians now have to have a gag-line every couple of lines, and so the possibilities of experimentation have been reduced?

**SIMON FANSHAW:** There is, but I mean, let's face it, if you're going to choose comedy as your way of communicating, you have to basically accept that audiences are going to come to see you because they want to laugh, and you're going to have to earn the right for those periods where you don't laugh. Secondly, I think what's important, therefore, is that you get put under pressure to make people laugh about things that are challenging, so in other words, you write really good jokes, and you know that everything you say is actually funny or tells or is useful or is important, you know that it all contributes to a show, and the other thing is people are paying money now, and they've got to the stage where they're saying,

'Bugger it, you know, I'm paying a fiver now, at Jongleurs or wherever, six or seven quid at the Comedy Store, I don't want shit, you know, excitement's not enough, fuckin' entertain me now.' So I think there's an element of that. If somebody said to me, pick one thing around the young comics that you would want to have, that you would want them to be challenged to do, I would want them to be challenged not to be more political, I would want them to be challenged to find their voice, so they could be funny about anything, that they can be funny about the safety light, they can be funny about the shape of that lightbulb, that light fitting, because they have a way of being funny, and I think ultimately that's the challenge of being a comic, and it's what stops you being generic and makes you be just Simon Fanshawe or just Jeremy Hardy or just Phil Cornwell. I mean I think Phil is an extraordinary impressionist. Because there's no-one else really who does what Phil does, with a possible exception of Phil Cool, in the sense that they're quite similar. But Phil doesn't do the faces, Phil does voices, it's all focussed around the voice, and Phil doesn't even very often do words, he often just is doing sounds. But what he does is I mean he can make you think that Jimmy Saville is a child molester, which he probably is, frankly, you know, I mean one hears stories about Jimmy Saville and nurses, but Phil can make you do that without saying it. Now I think that's wonderful, but what I'm saying is that he's found his voice as an impressionist. So to me that's the key thing is finding your voice, that would be the phrase that I would use, if you want a poncey phrase.

**INTERVIEWER:** I saw Felix on Thursday, and I thought he was great from that point of view.

**SIMON FANSHAW:** Oh that's good, because I must say that when you said that, I thought you were going to be more critical than you are, because I've often felt that Felix is trying to be a black comedian. I mean that's what I feel about Felix that he's trying too hard to be a black comedian, and that's what you do. When I started, I remember John Dowie coming up to me and saying in a very sarcastic voice, but kindly, 'It'd be much better if you didn't use Woody Allen jokes, really.' [laughs] And I was trying too hard to be a

comedian. You know, actually what you need to do is be yourself. Because if you're funny then you'll be funny, if you're not, well fuck it. [laughs] You know, I'll go and be a civil engineer or whatever it is, you know, if you can build bridges. So I mean that's the key thing. I just think that's interesting about the way it's developed, those are the changes.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think about this new taboo-breaking comedy?

SIMON FANSHAW: Ahh, you're not talking about Dice-Oxley [he means Andrew 'Dice' Clay], you mean the American?

INTERVIEWER: No, not just him. I think there's people in this country that do it as well, I mean people like Jack Dee, who's very talented...

SIMON FANSHAW: Oh, I love Jack.

INTERVIEWER: ...but the point is that a lot of his humour is based on reversing liberal values, being gratuitously sick.

SIMON FANSHAW: Isn't that funny, I don't find Jack sick, but I do find other people sick, I mean I know what you mean, he's always doing death and Masons, and you know, Elephant Man and stuff, but you see, why I like Jack, why I think he's funny, is that he's got charm. Underneath that, Jack Dee has got what Jack Benny had. He's a mean bastard Jack, but he's got a lot of charm, now I would say watching Jack, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but that's 'cos he's only been doing it for two or three years. I don't know how other people work on it, I mean I don't know Jack at all well, I know him a bit but, you work on different things. You know, I worked on my audience improv. for a few months. That would be what was in my mind, and then I work on getting gags really tight, then I work on loosening up again, then I work on my movement, you know, and you go through, and it goes on through your career, you know. At the moment I'm obsessed with camera technique, obviously, because I've just started a twenty two weeks on That's Life. But I think the thing with Jack is that I mean he's still kind of working on the morbid, ha ha, you know, and actually I think what he needs to do is polish his charm. Because when he gets the balance right, we're all gonna howl, what we're gonna do is we're gonna walk out and say, 'God, isn't it wonderful the way he can make jokes about such sick

subjects.' That's what we'll be walking out and saying. That's what Jack needs to achieve. So that we don't mind. We still remember the jokes, so it still has the reverberation, but we don't mind. And it's all about that kind of permission, I mean, that's the deal. You have a contract with people, 'cos you have to get their permission. See, I failed tonight with the N.A.L.G.O. guy. [a heckler in the audience in the show at the Sheffield City Memorial hall, who had corrected Fanshawe in response to a topical joke] He's in N.A.L.G.O., I was talking about N.A.L.G.O., I didn't get permission to talk about N.A.L.G.O., because I said something that was wrong. So he challenged me, it was a moment of tension. I broke the contract: I didn't know what I was talking about, he did, I offended him, because I encroached on his territory, without knowledge. If I'd said it with complete knowledge, he would've fallen about and laughed.

**INTERVIEWER:** But couldn't this 'charm' that you say Jack Dee has be rather dangerous? I mean, couldn't it be used to make some really fascistic jokes seem acceptable?

**SIMON FANSHAW:** Dice-Oxley is the classic example. Dice-Oxley's technique and charm are way up there. That is why men stand in the audience and do that [gestures]. I mean have you seen the tape? I mean, it is just the worst. The big line that he's famous for is he does this whole line about hispanic taxi drivers at New York airport, and he does this kind of 'nnnn' voice of them. Now, there's a lot of funny stuff to be said about taxi drivers who don't know their way 'round town, I mean it's a very funny idea, that you get in the cab, and you ask the cab driver to drive you home, and he doesn't know where it is, I mean that's funny. Right, that's like going to your accountant, and your accountant saying, 'Could you do these figures for me?' You know what I mean, there's lots of jokes in there. Dice-Oxley doesn't do that, all he does is the fact that they can't speak properly, i.e. 'properly'; and the tag-line is, he says, 'They should have a sign at the fucking airport that says, "If you can't speak the language, get out of the fucking country."' And people stand up at these gigs and they do [gestures], which he waves his hand. And it is *frightening*, and it is, yes of course. But I

mean Arnold Brown has a lovely line, he comes on and when people clap, he says, 'Don't clap too much, that's how Nazism started.' And he's right. He's absolutely right, and that's the problem for us, 'cos you have to balance ego against politics.

INTERVIEWER: One interesting point connected with this is that club comics are often very Right Wing, but they're not putting forward a coherent Right Wing comic argument, they're just telling a series of learnt jokes, which are based on Right Wing prejudices. I couldn't believe how crudely put together Bernard Manning's act was when I heard a recording of him.

SIMON FANSHAW: It's very crude, I mean I hate Bernard Manning, he's just awful for his content. I mean, I would say that by making himself the big bad wolf, he's sort of developed a persona which he actually begins to bounce off. Bernard Manning can't improvise. It seems to me. I mean, I've only seen him once in a club in Manchester, but it seems to me he doesn't improvise, he uses pre-scripted put-downs. Les Dawson, have you ever seen Les Dawson? Well you should, try and see Les Dawson in concert in a club somewhere. He is *so* funny, I mean *so desperately, deeply* funny. I mean, you laugh 'till your bottom falls off, I mean you really cry with laughter, the reason he's so funny is that it's just this dour, world-weary, tired, kind of trying sort of person, and oh... I did a thing with him, a sort of radio show, I mean they started off, Patti Coldwell, 'How are you, Les?', he said, 'I woke up this morning,' he said, 'the *cumulo nimbus* was scudding across the azure sky... I looked up, and I thought, "I must get a new roof on this lavatory."' And we were just on the floor, and I mean I know he went on, and he did do a joke, you know he said, 'I was going to bring the mother-in-law in,' he said, 'I've lost the keys to the boot of the car.' He did all that, and he was quite funny when he did that, but when he was really funny was when he started just going off, and beautiful language, he's got a hysterical story which he tells about a bordello in Barnsley. Now, the use of the word 'bordello' is just beautiful. I mean he does that the whole time. Now he, I think, is a classic example, you see, of somebody who has found his voice, and

he says himself that when he started, everybody said, 'Oh, you're not funny, you don't do jokes.' 'Cos he told stories. So I mean, you know, you begin to see the different kind of things. I mean I think he's just truly magnificent. What would be really interesting would be to look at Les Dawson and Jack Dee. Because in a way they come from the same place-ish. I mean Jack's middle class, and Les Dawson's very particularly working class, you know, there's all those differences, but it's where they position themselves in relation to us the audience, and therefore the world. They're downtrodden, you know. I wanted to do it at Brighton, I will do it one day: we programme comedy in Brighton, and I want to try and do this thing at the races, 'cos they've got a big dining room at the dog races, I want to call it 'Comedy Goes To The Dogs', and I'm trying to get Dawson, you see, but he can't do it because of various other things, but I wanted to put on Les Dawson and Jack Dee. Now Jack'd have a real problem for the Dawson audience. I said to Jack, 'Let's see if we could make this work.' We'd have to actually go through it, and negotiate with them, but it would be interesting 'cos it's the same kind of gig.

**9. Interview with JIM BARCLAY, one of the original set of  
Alternative Comedians, 1st February 1990**

**JIM BARCLAY:** [discussing a book called Wit as a Weapon:] What it's about is, a lot of it is devoted to this Jewish guy who played in cabaret, and he worked this cabaret in Berlin, and the S.S. used to come to arrest him every night, and he was so good the audience wouldn't allow them near him, you know, and then they'd smuggle him out at the end of the evening. Really great book.

**INTERVIEWER:** The reason I'm interested in you is because your act is openly political, and you were one of the first Alternative comedians, and I'm quite interested in what the early Alternative Comedy scene was like, and how the modern Alternative Comedy clubs are different.

JIM BARCLAY: Well, the first thing is that the audiences, because they've broadened, because the venues have got wider, and therefore there are more people from more social stratas coming in to see the shows, the acts I think have got perhaps more coarser, to meet a sort of demand for something slightly different to what the original Alternative Comedy was. What seems to be in demand now is a kind of wacky novelty, which is either manifested by sort of pseudo-circus things that can fit into *cabaret rooms*, or *kind of street comedy* which is not necessarily political, but is shocking for the sake of being shocking. So you've got those two, and there's less and less responsibility, I think, on the part of the performers, not that there's ever been an enormous amount really, I mean everybody just goes out and does their own thing, you know, but there's less of that feeling. I think it's now become mainstream comedy, in the same way that American comedy was sort of ten years ago, in that anybody can come and be a comedian, like anybody can go and form a rock band. And when it started, it was actually fugitives from the political theatre who thought, 'We're not getting anywhere through political theatre, maybe this is the way forward, to go through political comedy,' you know. So I mean, that's how it's changed, I think. And I don't know whether that's for the better. I think what's for the better is that more and more people are coming and watching it. And that's terrific; but, their expectations, I think are lower, and they're met by a lower common denominator, really.

INTERVIEWER: When you started, what was the audience like at the Comedy Store?

JIM BARCLAY: Well, it was a very fashionable place to be, I mean for a long time it was like *the club*. And it was also a very kind of witty audience, and it was different every Saturday night, it just really was the first two hundred people who got there to get in and go up in the lift; but the great thing about it was a lot of the performers were discovering stuff for themselves, everybody watched everybody else's act, and it was just exciting to see how people developed and what they did, week in, week out, 'cos you played it every week. There was only one other venue, that was the Elgin, so that's where you did, you worked at the Comedy Store and the Elgin,

you worked them every week, and you had a new act every week, to see how you were getting on, you know. So it was a very, very exciting place.

**INTERVIEWER:** Is it true that there was a kind of split between the Alternative comedians and the more old-fashioned downmarket showbiz acts at the Comedy Store?

**JIM BARCLAY:** Yeah, that's what it was originally, in that every comic act who'd been touting himself around the clubs, and still wasn't breaking through, like all those people that advertize in the back of The Stage, for example, they'd turn up, and they'd say this is the way forward, and for about six months there was a tussle between what they were doing and what we were doing, and it became clear that what we were doing was what the audience wanted, and this is very generalized, but what they were doing wasn't what the audience wanted, you know, and eventually they went away, and went back to the back page of The Stage.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was it like going round the pubs of London with Alternative Cabaret?

**JIM BARCLAY:** Well that was good up to a point, because it was great to see it mushrooming.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think that was the start of the circuit now?

**JIM BARCLAY:** Oh yeah. I mean more and more people got the idea this would be a good thing to do upstairs above a pub, till it's got to what it is now. I mean, it's just a very sort of, what's the word, organic thing, you know, that was the lovely thing. I like to think that it wasn't people on the make, it was people who lived in, say, Crouch End, or wherever, you know, and said, 'Oh I'd like to have something like that here,' you know, and finding a pub, and doing it, making it happen, which was great.

**INTERVIEWER:** When you first started going round pubs and so on, how did the audiences respond, because what you were doing was very new wasn't it?

**JIM BARCLAY:** Well, it's always been like Fringe theatre, in that you pay your money and you go in and you sit and you listen in another part of the pub, so I mean there is a certain amount of commitment

on the part of the audience, they've actually paid, it wasn't like literally standing up in a pub, and doing it. But it still can be tough, I mean the Tunnel Club was always tough, you know, places like that. But that's the thing, I mean you actually have that commitment from some of the audience, and you can unusually enlist their aid, to say, 'Well this person getting at me, you've all paid.' So it wasn't totally awful.

INTERVIEWER: These people who you mentioned earlier, who shock for the sake of shocking, I suppose you're talking about people like Gerry Sadowitz, and on the other hand people like Jack Dee; what do you make of that tendency?

JIM BARCLAY: Well, I like Gerry's act 'cos I think he is funny. And I think as long as you're actually funny, and that your attitude behind that joke is clear, then that's fine, it's where you get an act where the attitude is a received attitude, it's not the person's attitude, it's not really what they think, it's actually them manipulating a kind of sense of what they think the audience wants to hear, in order to make an impression, that's the dangerous kind of area that I dislike.

INTERVIEWER: Is that what you think Andrew 'Dice' Clay does?

JIM BARCLAY: Yeah, the Diceman I think is the classic example of that. But I do think there's a kind of feeling: 'I can get on the telly, or I can get noticed, or I can get a video made of my act, or somehow I can break through, if I'm more outrageous than the previous act,' and I think that's a very unsound way to go about it really. I mean it's really difficult for me to talk, 'cos I mean, I can quite see the problems, if you want to break through, you start from the beginning, you know and, 'How do I make it happen for me?' And I don't know, you just have to keep doing it. 'Cos I haven't broken through, I mean I just like doing it, anyway. And I can do it because I want to to keep my sanity, and I think we live in a mad world, and this is the best way of keeping my sanity, by constantly reminding people how daft it all is. See what I mean?

INTERVIEWER: Do you see much cabaret now on the London circuit?

**JIM BARCLAY:** Not, not an enormous amount. I mean, occasionally I go down the Comedy Store and see stuff, but I have lost touch to a certain extent.

**INTERVIEWER:** When did you stop doing stand-up comedy regularly?

**JIM BARCLAY:** Well, I sort of petered out in the kind of mid-'80s, 'cos I got involved in various long-term straight acting jobs. And so it became more and more difficult to keep it going. And then I got very depressed, really, with the whole prevailing attitude of people in Britain, with the way Thatcher constantly got returned, and I got to feeling, 'Well, if it is one in three that voted for 'em, then there's always going to be a good section of those in every sodding audience, and there's only so many minds you can change,' and I just got very depressed with the people of Britain, all right, it was only that less than that one third, but because they actually held that balance of power, I thought, 'Oh sod it!', you know, 'Why should I bother?'

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think it's more difficult now, because in the late 1970s, and early 1980s there was a big protest culture, with Rock Against Racism etc, and this kind of comedy was more Left Wing, so it was easier then, because you had the feeling of belonging to a larger movement, to a protest culture, and now that's gone, so that when you go out and do an act now, there's more a feeling of standing alone against the rest of the world?

**JIM BARCLAY:** Yeah, there's no tradition of that, the audience doesn't come with a kind of an accretion of social criticism in the theatre and in the music, and in the general lifestyle, which certainly prevailed in the '70s, there isn't a mood for social criticism. What is there is a mood of sullen resentment. I don't know how we break out of that.

**INTERVIEWER:** What did you think of the act that was on before you tonight [at the Rub a Dub Club in Sydenham]?

**JIM BARCLAY:** I think he'd be quite good, but I think he hasn't got an act yet, I mean, if he was playing in a large venue, I think he'd've had serious problems, 'cos he'd have to like become a bigger person. I think he'll get there, he'll probably do it, but I just get the impression that he's not actually sure how to feel funny,

you know what I mean, if it doesn't feel funny, then you're not gonna be funny.

INTERVIEWER: I thought that he was being very cynical, and ridiculing the very protest culture that we were talking about, and it seems people are more ready to relate to that than to the genuinely subversive stuff.

JIM BARCLAY: Yeah, I think it's convenient to be nihilistic. You know, you don't have to kind of make too much effort. No, I think there is a sort of cultivated nihilism, that sort of suits people, you know, 'Fucking laid back, and fuck 'em all,' you know.

INTERVIEWER: So how do you tackle that?

JIM BARCLAY: I don't know. I mean if I knew that, I wouldn't be a stand-up comedian, I'd go and be a politician I suppose. All I do is do what I do. I mean, I'm a bit pissed off about tonight [he had just had a difficult performance], but I know that everybody in that audience takes something away from it, you know, it's like Lenny Bruce said: 'There, you got eleven minutes material, and nobody laughs once. But nobody talks. You've probably got a good act,' you know; and I mean it's that sort of thing about it. I like being given the right to talk to people. And just working off a whole lot of stuff that I just wanna say, and I like the challenge of sitting at home and thinking how I can make this, if not funny, then at least listenable to.

10. Interview with ALEXEI SAYLE, one of the original set of Alternative comedians, 5th April 1990

INTERVIEWER: You've given up stand-up comedy now, haven't you?

ALEXEI SAYLE: For the moment, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Why was that?

ALEXEI SAYLE: I just sort of got fed up with it really, and I think that it was seriously getting in the way of other things that I wanted to do, and I'd also reached a point where I wanted to, kind of regenerate, you know, I wasn't somebody that could regenerate myself by keeping doing it, if you know what I mean. Also, there was

people coming up who were kind of imitations of me, or based on that. You know, I mean I didn't want to be seen as just one of that kind of comedian, so I thought I'd stop it for a while.

**INTERVIEWER:** When did you stop playing the London circuit?

**ALEXEI SAYLE:** Well I mean I invented it, I mean there wasn't a circuit, really. What happened was that briefly, I was just in a theatre group, me and this other guy were just doing shows on the kind of fringe.

**INTERVIEWER:** What was that called?

**ALEXEI SAYLE:** We were called Threepenny Theatre. But it was the opening of the Comedy Store where I started to meet other people, I mean me and Tony Allen set up this group called Alternative Cabaret. Which was kind of the basis of what happened subsequently.

**INTERVIEWER:** So what do you think of the way that it's developed since you started it?

**ALEXEI SAYLE:** Umm...sorry about that. Have to apologize to everybody for inventing it. I mean I think that it's only a sub-branch of showbusiness. Obviously the stand-up comedy boom, it's not something that's just happened in Britain, it's something that's happened all over the world, if you go to any city in the United States, it's got six or seven kind of comedy clubs, although the milieu that those people have come out of is different, they're still nevertheless the same, it's true in Australia and New Zealand, you know, there's a kind of comedy boom all over kind of the English-speaking world. I think it was inevitable really, because you can't do anything without an audience, I mean you say that you invented this new form of comedy, but it can only exist if there's an audience out there, essentially the audience created the comedy, you know what I mean? I mean the reason that I started doing the kind of comedy that I do is because I had the sense that there was an audience out there, that wanted a kind of rock-orientated comedy, you know what I mean, because all the humour before that, like even Billy Connolly and Jasper Carrott were old folky farts, you know what I mean, they didn't have a rock sensibility. So I mean that's all it was, you could see that people were sick of music, you know, and wanted to go

out and have a laugh, you know. The same as they'd wanted to go in the Victorian Music Hall, but the contemporary humour had kind of died, had withered into this kind of rump of whatever that other stuff was, you know what I mean?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, so what sort of people was it who went to see all the early Alternative Comedy?

ALEXEI SAYLE: Well, I mean it varied really, they were very mixed. Because the owners of the venues was a very 'Hooray' kind of person, you got a lot of, you know, posh people, you got people from showbusiness, who were interested in a new sensation, Pamela Stephenson would come down, a lot of people like that, Americans, you know, David Bowie...sensation seekers; but you also got the hipper end of people that live round here, you know.

INTERVIEWER: How did people take it when you first started doing this new comedy, because it was different both stylistically and politically from what had gone before- were they a bit nonplussed by it, say at the Comedy Store?

ALEXEI SAYLE: Not at the Comedy Store really, I mean apart from the ones who were drunk, or whatever. Not at the Comedy Store because they were aware of American comedy. But certainly, outside, yeah, I mean a lot of the gigs I did before the Comedy Store would end in kind of fights and stuff, because people didn't actually have a perception of what it was I was attempting to do. There was quite an interesting thing that when me and Tony Allen went to the Edinburgh Festival in 1980, there was a review in the student paper that said, 'I don't know what these people are doing, you know. I can see it's not a sketch show, and I can see it's not a play, it's not a revue and it's not a play, but what it is, I've no idea.' Which is kind of ironical given that Edinburgh, the Fringe seems to be wholly stand-up comedy, which is in the space of nine, ten years. People didn't have a perception of what I was attempting, so a lot of my energy started going.

INTERVIEWER: It seems the whole thing has stagnated to an extent, that a lot of the newness of what you were doing, both the politics and the style haven't been advanced, it's become much more consumerized and packaged.

**ALEXEI SAYLE:** So people say, I mean I don't take an interest in it that much, but I mean I'm not going to kind of criticize it anyway, because you just sound like some old fart saying, 'It isn't as good as in my day.' I mean, I think that the attention of television is not always healthy really, I mean we were picked up by television very quickly, and I mean certainly with something like The Young Ones, you know, we used the medium very, very excitingly. British television has a kind of voracious appetite for performers, I think the performers are perhaps encouraged, I would imagine, to kind of get a good ten minutes, and be seen by Paul Jackson or somebody, you know. I mean, I don't think we went into it thinking of it as a career, you know, for the pension plan, we genuinely did want to do something that was very... I think obviously now there is more of career-structure.

**INTERVIEWER:** How have you found the move into television? I mean I really liked the bits in Stuff where you took your old routines and put them on film.

**ALEXEI SAYLE:** Yeah, I mean it worked there well.

**ME:** Was that your main contribution to the series?

**ALEXEI SAYLE:** Yeah, and the songs. Some of the sketches. But generally, yeah I mean that was obviously my contribution- putting out my old routines. [laughs]

**ME:** So, do you think you'll go back to stand-up at all?

**ALEXEI SAYLE:** Well I might, I mean if we do another series of Stuff I'll have to really, because I've used up all my material. I mean I'll have to if we do more series of Stuff, because I'll have to work with the material live, you know.

**ME:** So you'll do another tour, you reckon?

**ALEXEI SAYLE:** Well, I'll have to I suppose. I don't know, I mean I'm not, I'm not that keen on it.

11. Interview with JENNY LECOAT, Alternative comedian, 21st April 1990

**INTERVIEWER:** When did you start doing stand-up comedy?

JENNY LECOAT: I started doing cabaret in 1982, towards the end of '82. I'd been doing folk clubs before that, and I actually started doing cabaret venues, that was when the first cabaret venues had just started picking up and had just started opening, sort of 1981, 1982, that sort of time.

INTERVIEWER: What was it like then, what sort of things were going on, what were the audiences like?

JENNY LECOAT: Well it was very different, I mean it wasn't anywhere near as popular in those days, the listings magazines in London didn't even have a listing for cabaret. And certainly outside of London there was absolutely nothing at all. So it was quite a new thing, and also promoters and performers were all experimenting as well, so it was fairly chaotic. It was usually rooms above pubs, mostly small places that would get maybe fifty, sixty people a night would be probably a fairly good night; and it tended to be very much P.L.U.s, you know, People Like Us, it was sort of people from about twenty to forty, pretty much middle class, lefty, pretty much of the same opinions, same sentiments, and that's where all the sort of the stripped pine and scatter cushion jokes came from, because that was the first time that people actually heard jokes about themselves, and of course they loved it, 'cos this wasn't the old Working Men's stuff which was nothing to do with their lives. Suddenly someone's talking about them, but the performers tended to come from, not all, but quite a lot of them came from that sort of background, or were starting to move into that sort of background, so they did those sort of jokes.

INTERVIEWER: And how long did you stay on the London circuit?

JENNY LECOAT: Well, I've sort of dipped in and out of it ever since, I mean I've been doing the London circuit for the last six months, for the first time in about two or three years, and it's very different now.

INTERVIEWER: Was the twenty minute set still standard when you first started?

JENNY LECOAT: Yes it was, it wasn't as formalized, everything's much more uniform across the clubs now, but yeah, I mean, yeah twenty

minutes was average, you'd have a couple of twenty minute sets, and a couple of twenty minutes in the second half, I mean that hasn't changed dramatically.

**INTERVIEWER:** So what has changed?

**JENNY LECOAT:** The audiences have changed a lot. It's much more popular, and it's much more across the board. You still get a few of the trendy lefties coming, but because it's been on television, and because people understand Ben Elton and Julian Clary, and they think, 'Oh, we'll go and see that live,' so you get a much broader spectrum of people, and it varies in different venues, but you get a lot of sort of company outings, you get big parties of people who go to the comedy club, whereas once they maybe would've gone to the disco; you get anti-Thatcher jokes and stuff like that are not necessarily going to get support. Although most of the performers are still fairly lefty.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think the material has changed then?

**JENNY LECOAT:** I don't know if it has really, I mean there's a lot of stuff talked about, oh, the good old radical political days, and the fact that everything's got very bland, I don't think that's actually true, I mean I don't think it's necessarily true that it was very radical in the old days 'cos I've listened to old records and stuff from that time, and stuff that we thought was being written about at the time as very radical is ridiculous, I mean there's whole tracks of albums where everyone is doing Volvo jokes, Reagan jokes, cruise missile jokes, I mean it was very much par for the course, and it was all really rather safe, but the one thing that has changed in terms of the risk-taking, I think, is that the level of performance is much better, and people will now only book people that they trust, open spots aren't so common, so the standard is much higher. So people are less likely to experiment, so you get less of the crazy, wacky performers, who were great, I mean the first time I ever went to the Comedy Store to perform was in October 1982, that was the old Store, and there was David Rappaport who, of course, went on to do Time Bandits and become a big star in America, and Andrew Bailey who worked on the circuit for years, and they were rehearsing this act, half an hour before the show opened, they were

actually going to do that night, with Dave Rappaport who was, you know, a little guy, in a bird cage, and Andrew was his master, and he was talking to him in the bird cage, and I just walked in and thought, 'Fucking hell, this is a mental hospital', and you don't get stuff like that happening any more, because it's much more formal, you have to get the laughs, and because the audiences are not as friendly, it's much more of an industry now, and people expect to be entertained, they expect to laugh otherwise they're going to fuck off, and so there's not room for the indulgence that there was perhaps.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that's a shame?

JENNY LECOAT: I think it is up to a point, I mean I think, I mean also you used to get a lot of wank as well, I mean you'd get terrible performance artists coming on, you know, with white faces and cricketing whites going 'Mm-mm-mm', and I mean that's been cut out because people won't book them, but with that you've also lost some of the great, inspired moments of prattling about which tend not to occur so much, but then you have got improvisation which has grown up to maybe fulfil that role.

INTERVIEWER: I get the impression that in the early days there were far fewer women than men.

JENNY LECOAT: There still are.

INTERVIEWER: I know, but with the very first generation, Alexei Sayle and people, there wasn't really a big feminist comedian, there was some radicalism, but it was socialist rather than feminist.

JENNY LECOAT: I think, I think generally that's true although a lot of the men would do sort of right on women's stuff. I mean, I think I was probably the first one that was perceived to be a feminist comic, which is a label I've been trying to drop for the last few years, and I probably sold myself on that basis then as well. I mean the first lot was like the Comic Strip brigade, and Andy de la Tour, Jim Barclay, Tony Allen, that lot, and I mean really out of that lot there was only Pauline Melville, apart from French and Saunders who were in a slightly different group anyway, it was only Pauline, and then there was me and Helen [Lederer], Jenny Eclair, who's still

working, and that was about it, I mean there's not, there's only out of probably a hundred and...fifty, God knows how many, a hundred and fifty, two hundred stand-ups on the London circuit now, there's probably only twenty women. I mean we're still very much a minority, so although there's more of us, proportionally it's probably about the same amount.

**INTERVIEWER:** Do you think you've changed your image quite a lot?

**JENNY LECOAT:** I don't know if I've changed my image so much as grown up, I mean I've changed, and what I do changes, I mean when I started doing the cabaret circuit, I'd just come out of a year with a very radical theatre company. It was also in 1981, it was the time of Greenham Common, Cruise, anti-Reagan, Thatcher before the Falklands, the height of Thatcher's unpopularity, it was a very different political climate, and it was a time of enormous feminist politics, and people were having very serious discussions about political lesbianism, and all this sort of stuff, which we tend to snigger at a bit now, but at the time it was all taken very seriously, so what I was doing was only a natural development of what was going on socially, and there was a market for that, because it was going on all through that London culture of the kind of audiences who were coming to the gigs, were the kind of audiences who were interested in that kind of subject. So although the more mainstream papers said, 'Oh God, shocking, radical,' and what have you, I mean it was only part of what was happening at the time.

**INTERVIEWER:** Did you dress in a way that identified you as a feminist?

**JENNY LECOAT:** I dressed sort of quite, in quite a masculine way, that was because that's what I thought comedians wore. And a lot of the aggression was just fear. As it is with any comic who's inexperienced, they tend to sort of overdo it with the toughness, so the nerves don't come through. And then I went through a sort of a very glamorous phase, a sort of a ridiculous, you know feminine costumes, and I don't really bother much now.

**INTERVIEWER:** You say that there's only about twenty women on the London circuit at the moment, and that certainly seems to be the

case in my experience. Apart from the wider social pressures which make it more difficult for a woman to become a comedian than a man, do you think that there are any pressures within the circuit which make it more difficult, and did you find yourself being compromised in any way?

JENNY LECOAT: When I started, it was much easier to be a female comic, because people wanted to hear women on stage, the bookers wanted to book women, and the kind of people who were coming to it would be very kind, and I got a lot of chances to develop, much more so than a lot of the men probably did. Now I think there are certainly some London venues it's actually positively a disadvantage to be female, and in that sense it's probably veering slightly more towards the situation for women in the Working Men's Clubs, I mean there's no way that I could work in the Working Men's Clubs, because as soon as I got on stage, my first swear word, I think half of them'd say, 'My wife's not listening to this,' and they'd be off. And there's an element of that now creeping in because there's stuff that wouldn't have been shocking a few years ago which now people do find shocking, because they have a different kind of sensibility.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of thing?

JENNY LECOAT: Well sort of stuff that's rude and raunchy, naughty, and people just going, 'Urr no, that's horrible, you know, I don't want to hear about that.'

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the pressure in those venues where it's harder for women is purely an audience thing?

JENNY LECOAT: Yeah. I mean venues like Jongleurs in London is a pig for almost everybody, but it's particularly difficult for women. Somebody summed it up very recently, saying that the trouble is with Jongleurs is that there aren't any women in the audience, there's only girlfriends. And that is very, very true, that's where you get the stag parties, you get the lads, it's all stripey shirts and braces, and bottles of champagne and birthday cakes, and leather jackets and Swiss watches, and it's, you know, lots of blonde hair, it's all that stuff, and they don't have any loyalty to you. Quite often the women will hold it for you if it's getting a bit dodgy,

but I mean they'll just go along with whatever the men say, and that's becoming more common, I think, but I mean the good thing is that there's not so much fuss being made about female comedians, which is nice, we're now just being treated as comics. A lot of people will still try and put a woman on the bill if they can, and it's usually only one, that's still the same, but there's not so much issue made, and people've stopped writing those magazine articles about, you know, 'Girls stand-up to be counted', and all that bollocks which a few years ago, I was getting 'phoned up for interviews about every fifteen minutes, every magazine had to write one, you know, whereas now, it's just comedy, which is important, and we're accepted as part of the whole thing.

INTERVIEWER: Have you done some adverts recently?

JENNY LECOAT: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Because I thought I saw you on a Yorkshire Electricity advert. That's a bit strange, isn't it?

JENNY LECOAT: No, not at all really, it's a way of paying the mortgage, and a lot of comedians do 'em, an enormous amount of comedians do 'em.

INTERVIEWER: But the weird thing about it is that adverts were once a big source of inspiration for Alternative comedians, who built many routines which ridiculed them, and now it's become a cliché, so people don't do it so much.

JENNY LECOAT: Yeah, it's because advertizing agencies have realised that comedians are very good people to use for commercials because they have a sense of comedy which a lot of straight actors don't have, so if you go to the casting for a commercial now, the chances are, I'm going to know at least five other people there. And I can sit at home in the evening, and see half my friends during the commercial break, so I don't actually have to go down the pub any more.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of the adverts you've done?

JENNY LECOAT: Oh, I think they're rubbish.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think they're bad adverts?

JENNY LECOAT: Well, most of them, yeah, I mean I think there's the occasional good commercial, but I think most of them are rubbish.

But I mean as long as they're not actually compromising, or saying something utterly atrocious or offensive, or as long as they're not selling something which you consider to be offensive, I mean like I was asked to go up for one for the Water Board a few months ago, and I knew that was a privatization ad so I said, 'No I won't do it,' and you draw your lines as to what you'll do and what you don't. But I mean, sort of supermarkets and soap powder, and stuff like that, and stuff that everyone uses, then...

INTERVIEWER: Even if in a much more general way, it's promoting a role? I mean, I think adverts are really going back to what they were like in the 1970s, where sex roles were strongly enforced.

JENNY LECOAT: Yeah, I think it's true, I mean you get an idea of what an ad is like when you go for the audition, and if you decide you don't want to do it on that basis, then you can say, 'No, I'm not interested in that,' and I have done that, but you know we've all got mortgages to pay.

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Various artists, Laugh With The Comedians, Granada Television Records, MONO GTV 1002 (1971)

Various artists, Let the Children Play, Panic Records, PEACE 1 (no date)

Various artists, Music Hall Favourites, Ditto/ Pickwick Records, DTO 10210 (1985)

Various artists, Music Hall to Variety (Volume Three- Second House, World Record Club/ E.M.I., SH150 (no date)

Various artists, Play Another Before You Go, Topic Records, 12TMH781 (1984)

Various artists, Playing the Halls, E.M.I. Records, SH 350 (1979)

Various artists, They Played the Empire, Decca Records, RFLD 23 (1982)

Various artists, Your Own...Your Very Own..., A.S.V./ Living Era Records, AJA 5004 (1981)

Wager, Johnny, Screw You: Johnny Wager Live (Cassette sold by Wager at his performances)

#### IV. VIDEO RECORDINGS OF COMEDIANS

Sadowitz, Gerry, The Total Abuse Show, Virgin Video, WD 442 (1988)

Various artists, The Comic Relief Utterly Utterly Rude Video Live, Virgin Video, VVD 196 (1986)

Various artists, Laugh With The Comedians Granada Video/ Vestron Video International, GRA 16797 (1987)

#### V. TELEVISION PROGRAMMES

Arena, 'Oooh er, missus!- The Frankie Howard Story', B.B.C.2, 1st June 1990

Ben Elton: The Man From Auntie, B.B.C.1, 15th February 1990; 22nd February 1990; 15th March 1990

Bobby Thompson: The Little Waster, Channel 4, 6th April 1988

Cabaret at the Jongleurs, B.B.C.2, 25th February 1988; 7th April 1988

Combing the Fringe, B.B.C.2, 29th August 1987

The Comedians, Granada Television, 12th June 1971; 26th June 1971

The Comedy Store, Yorkshire Television, 30th December 1989

Edinburgh Nights, B.B.C.2, 6th September 1989

40 Minutes, 'I like the girls who do', B.B.C.2, 10th February 1989

4th Dimension, Channel 4, 1990

Friday Night Live, Channel 4, 26th February 1988; 4th March 1988; 11th March 1988; 8th April 1988; 15th April 1988

Hysteria 2, Channel 4, 1st December 1989

In on the Act, Yorkshire Television, 14th April 1988

Just for Laughs, Channel 4, 3rd September 1988

The Late Show, B.B.C.2, 30th April 1990

The Les Dawson Show, B.B.C.1, 19th October 1989; 26th October 1989

Open Space, 'Have you heard the one about the Englishman...?', B.B.C. 2, 9th July 1990

Paramount City, B.B.C.1, 28th April 1990

Signals, 'Only joking', Channel 4, 10th January 1990

Wogan, B.B.C.1, 23rd March 1990

## VI. RADIO PROGRAMMES

Aspects of Max Wall, Radio 2, 5th July 1990; 26th July 1990

The World at One, Radio 4, 22nd May 1990

Wot'cheor Bobby, Radio 2, 12th October 1988

## VII. ADDITIONAL MATERIALS

The Comic, programme for the London International Comedy Festival, presented by Holsten Funny Business, 24th February-11th March 1989

The Long and the Short of it, Dave Allen tour programme, 1988

Bootleg cassette of Alexei Sayle at Nottingham Theatre Royal, 1983

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