

BRITISH VARIETY THEATRE:
POPULAR CULTURE, SOCIAL
CHANGE, AND LIVE
ENTERTAINMENT, 1945-60

Leo Bird

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of History, University of Sheffield

October 2024

Contents

Introduction: The Origins of Variety and Parameters of the Project	12
Variety and Popular Culture	12
Literature and Key Concepts	18
Histories of the Period	19
Victorian music hall and its legacy	21
Variety	26
Media and society	28
Comedians	34
Comedy Theory	36
Americanisation, Youth Culture, Place and Space	41
Permissiveness and sexuality	46
Primary Material	47
Sources and methodology	52
The Structure of the Thesis	55
1. Traditional Variety and Music Hall	59
The Music Hall	59
Variety	67
2. Variety after World War Two	77
The Period: 1945-1965	77
Ownership	86
The Variety Circuits	87
Production and Variety Bills	90
Commercial Strategy and Promotion	91
Key Figures	93

Prices	93
Wages and Conditions for Performers	95
Important Acts and Regionalism	98
Further Down the Bill	117
Conclusions	125
3. Radio and Variety	134
Variety on the Radio	136
A New Type of Entertainment for the Airwaves	144
Social Class and Snobbery	146
Radio and Radio Performers on Stage	148
Conclusions	162
4. Aspiration and Americanisation Until 1955	167
Early American Influence	170
Integrating American Acts	179
The Rise of American Music	182
High Culture	193
Conclusions	199
5. Youth, Rock and Roll and Variety	207
Skiffle	210
Rock and Roll from the United States	214
Impact on Variety	226
Conclusions	238
6. Television - the Transition from Hippodrome to Living Room	245
The BBC Years	250
Development of ITV	253

Initial ITV Services	254
Television as a Disruptive Medium	166
The Effect on Variety	261
Loss of Physical Space	267
Conclusions	273
7. Naughtiness, Knowingness, and Nudity	280
The Windmill Theatre	281
Paul Raymond and Variety Nude Shows	289
Nude Revues: Lifeline or Nail in the coffin of Variety?	299
Nude Revues and Variety Theatres: the Naked Facts and Figures	305
8. Conclusions	319
Appendix I: Moss Empires Top Takings and Profit, 1947-1964	335
Appendix II: Stoll Theatres Top Takings 1945-64	345
Appendix III: Yearly analysis of takings at Finsbury Park Empire and Birmingham Hippodrome, with radio acts highlighted in bold type, 1947	349
Appendix IV: Yearly analysis of takings at Finsbury Park Empire and Birmingham Hippodrome, with radio acts highlighted in bold type, 1952	353
Bibliography	357

List of Abbreviations

ATV – Associated Television

GTC - General Theatre Corporation

ITMA – It’s That Man Again

V&A-TPC – Victoria & Albert Museum’s Theatre & Performance collections

List of tables

Table 1.1: Composition of Acts in Victorian Music Hall	67
Table 2.1: Hylida Baker Weekly Salary, 1947-1948	96
Table 2.2: Randle’s Scandals 1951 Tour Takings	108
Table 2.3: Moss Empire Theatres Receipts and Profits	132
Table 2.4: Moss Empires Theatres: Weeks in profit	133
Table 3.1: Most Popular Radio Programmes 9th December – 15th December 1950	144
Table 4.1: Danny Kaye takings during the 1949 tour, and the current-day equivalent. Based on the Moss Empire Returns records for 1945 - 1964.	176
Table 4.2: A comparison of top takings and top profits at the Moss Empire theatres in 1951.	179
Table 4.3: Top takings at the Moss Empire theatres in 1952.	186
Table 4.4: Top takings at the Moss Empire and Stoll theatres in 1953	188
Table 4.5: Top takings at the Moss Empire theatres in 1954. Based on the Moss Empire Returns records for 1945 - 1964.	190
Table 4.6: Stoll Theatres- Top performing acts – ballet or opera	195
Table 4.7: Moss Empire Theatres - Top performing acts – ballet or opera	196
Table 6.1: Variety Theatres: Closure and Demolishment	269
Table 6.2: Moss Empire Receipts, Profit and Loss including comparison to	278

previous year and figures adjusted for inflation 1946 based on 1946

Table 7.1: Moss Empire (Sheffield) 1957 Takings and Profits	306
Table 7.2: Strip or Nude Shows in Variety Theatres 1957	313
Table 7.3: Theatres featuring Strip and Nude numbers shortly before closing down	314

List of graphs

Graph 6.1: Weeks in Profit for Selected Moss Empire Theatres 1946-60	276
Graph 6.2: Total Receipts and Profits Moss Empire 1945-1963	276

List of Illustrations

Illustration 4.1: Poster Bill 4 November 1957, Poster Collection Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive	194
Illustration 5.1: Bill Poster, September 24 1956, Poster Collection Glasgow Empire 1956, British Music Hall Society Archive	219
Illustration 5.2: Bill Poster, August 5 1957, Poster Collection Sheffield Empire 1957, British Music Hall Society Archive	219
Illustration 5.3: Bill Poster, September 23 1956, Poster Collection Sheffield Empire 1956, British Music Hall Society Archive	221
Illustration 5.4: Bill Poster, September 23 1957, Poster Collection Sheffield Empire 1957, British Music Hall Society Archive	224
Illustration 5.5: Bill Poster, July 29 1957, Poster Collection Sunderland Empire 1957, British Music Hall Society Archive	227
Illustration 5.6: Bill Poster, September 23 1957, Poster Collection Sunderland Empire 1957, British Music Hall Society Archive	227

Illustration 5.7: Bill Poster, February 11 1956, Poster Collection	228
Sunderland Empire 1956, British Music Hall Society Archive	
Illustration 5.8: Bill Poster, March 10 1958, Poster Collection	235
Sheffield Empire 1958, British Music Hall Society Archive.	
Illustration 6.1: Bill Poster February 26 1951, Glasgow Empire	272
British Music Hall Society Archive.	
Illustration 7.1: Bill Poster May 20 1957, Poster Collection	307
Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive	
Illustration 7.2: Bill Poster Monday 14 July, 1957, Poster Collection	308
Moss Empire Finsbury Park, British Music Hall Society Archive	
Illustration 7.3: Bill Poster Monday 11 August, 1957, Poster Collection	308
Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive	
Illustration 7.4: Bill Poster Monday 27 May, 1957, Poster Collection	308
Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive	
Illustration 7.5: Bill Poster Monday 2 December, 1957, Poster Collection	308
Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive	
Illustration 7.6: Bill Poster Monday 17 June, 1957, Poster Collection	309
Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive	
Illustration 7.7: Bill Poster Monday 1 July, 1957, Poster Collection	309
Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive	
Illustration 7.8: Bill Poster Monday 8 July, 1957, Poster Collection	310
Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive	
Illustration 7.9: Bill Poster Monday 9 August, 1957, Poster Collection	310
Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive	
Illustration 7.10: Bill Poster Monday 26 August, 1957, Poster Collection	311

Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive

Illustration 7.11: Bill Poster Monday 2 September, 1957, Poster Collection

311

Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive

Abstract

This thesis will examine the importance of variety theatre in the development of popular culture and how changes in the social and cultural climate in post-war Britain were reflected and influenced by this industry. It will assess how the performance spaces, performers, and structures were instrumental in the establishment of large-scale cultural industries. Music hall and variety were something of a prototype for modern popular culture and in turn a testing ground for new technological and entertainment ideas. The focus for this analysis will be records and materials from the major chains, Moss Empires and the Stoll Group, that exercised control of the variety business as part of a syndicate of powerful parties. There will be a particular focus on comedy and how comedians and comic performance were integrated into variety during this turbulent time for the industry.

The first section will examine the growing literature and historiography of the field. This will include using the analysis that Peter Bailey has applied to the Victorian Music Hall and specifically his concept of 'knowingness' It will also look at how variety fits into different concepts of media and cultural theory. There will be a focus on ideas of youth and Americanisation. Alongside an examination of key ideas about comedy and humour theory.

Then it will assess the origins of variety in the Victorian music hall. This will be followed by an evaluation of the relationship between these origins and the state of the industry in the post-war years. These years were still prosperous times that had strong links to the traditions of variety, but just as variety had handled the challenge and incorporated cinema into its marketing and format (cine-variety), there were new

technological tests. Radio had emerged as the dominant medium during World War Two, and variety had to harness this popularity and compete with cinema with resurgent audiences freed from wartime restrictions.

The second section will look at the challenges of increasing American influence that had been growing since the start of the twentieth century. This will include the demand for Hollywood glamour and the burgeoning influence of major record labels marketing their new individual acts as opposed to big bands to British audiences. This presented many challenges to the set format of variety. Record labels spent the early 1950s refining the modern pop star. This was followed by the rapid progress of the British recording industry. Variety adapted quite well to the innovations from record labels but then had to handle the demographic shift that followed, with musical styles aimed squarely at youth audiences, teen idols, rock and roll, and skiffle.

The third section will look at the cultural developments that undermined variety even when they were integrated into the marketing and composition of bills. Television provided a visual competitor to variety that used many of its performers and sometimes its format but was available at home. Conversely, the nude shows of the late 1950s were problematic for the family ethos of variety, despite being profitable for their promoters.

This thesis is 87,013 words.

Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to Professor Adrian Bingham for his guidance, support, and most of all patience with this project.

My parents have enabled me to pursue this path and provided unlimited encouragement and assistance.

My wife, Ioana, has helped me in innumerable ways to complete this thesis.

My thanks for the opportunity to work and collaborate with people in the department at the University of Sheffield.

David Reed at the British Music Hall Society gave me the chance to see the wonderful items in their collection in the safe storage unit in deepest north-west London. Although wearing Max Miller's jacket and holding Little Tich's shoes were memorable and unique moments, I hope a museum will be able to exhibit their collection in the future.

Introduction

Music hall and its successor, variety, were central to the development of modern popular culture. They were one of the first forms of popular entertainment for the urban working classes. This thesis will examine how variety theatre responded to various technological innovations and social trends. This thesis looks at the financial successes and failures of acts in variety, along with the commercial strategy, promotional materials, and press responses to variety performances. By using this evidence, it assesses the social patterns that emerge from financial records and other industry resources, rather than the received wisdom that has become accepted by some cultural commentators. For instance, the treatment of how the culture of young people and teenagers changed over this period has tended to follow a formulaic narrative that relies on the importance of major figures such as Elvis Presley and The Beatles. The evidence from the variety theatres in the 1940s and 1950s offers a more nuanced picture. The time parameters of this project will focus on the period between 1945-1960 to illustrate the decline of variety and the further development of youth culture. This thesis will pay particular attention to comedy within the realm of variety theatres, as it forms a core element of the entertainment, but is often overlooked by historians. This will not be a nostalgic look at variety theatre but one that gives it proper credit in the context of modern popular culture.

This piece will emphasise how the demise of variety has overshadowed its cultural importance. The unique cultural connections that occurred within its spaces demonstrated a diverse and layered picture of the social and cultural desires of the mainstream public in the 1940s and 1950s. The demise of variety was at least partially profit-seeking, and the loss of these spaces was part of a wider trend of working-class cultural erasure in the urban landscape of mid-century Britain. The role of variety in popular culture will be further analysed with specific reference to assumptions about

intergenerational conflict and aspiration. Variety has often been easily dismissed. Left-leaning academics have sought to explain the control of cultural consumption by larger forces (although not explicitly in reference to variety). The developments that lead to the dissolution of variety can be seen as a clear example where systemic changes were made to the cultural infrastructure without much forethought and without clear consensus from the wider population.

Variety and Popular Culture

For around 100 years, music hall and variety were major forms of popular entertainment. Originating in the 1830s and blossoming in the 1850s, music hall and variety provided professional live entertainment to the population of the UK. Almost every town had at least one variety theatre or hall and major centres had several. Every variety bill would have at least one comic and several acts that would be humorous and engage in comedy, dancers, singers, and more. Comedians played a central role in variety. This would mean that there were hundreds of comedians performing on any given night. Their labour was an essential component in the entertainment landscape alongside hundreds of other performers, theatre workers, agencies and writers, as well as providers of accommodation and transport. Variety and live comedy were an entertainment industry akin to the record industry in the mid-twentieth century.

Variety theatre was affected by dramatic changes in the social, cultural, and media environment in Britain in the two decades after the end of the Second World War. The end of the war provides a convenient starting point, as life returns to relative normality. The end of the period is governed by the decline and closure of theatres and, eventually, the sale of the major chains. The Stoll and Moss Empire theatre chains were the most prominent variety theatre chains in the country and had representation in nearly all the

major urban areas of England, Scotland, and Wales. The financial records of these organisations can prove a strong indication of the variety industry as a whole and the trends that were beginning to emerge within it.

This study will look at how variety responded to factors such as the legacy of the Victorian and Edwardian music hall, American imports, new music trends aimed at the young people, technological challenges from other media and attempts to exploit male audiences and the use of increasingly sexualised material in the theatres.

This will be a business history that builds upon the work of Peter Bailey to reveal how variety explains and reveals the growth and change of popular culture¹. These origins are working-class, but variety was driven by a desire to make money and a desire to offer the audience what they wanted, at the same time encourage its audience towards new areas rather than being merely reactive to outside trends. Variety, therefore, provides a framework for media delivery, and television, cinema, radio, and recorded music are all directly or indirectly related and influenced by its story. This is true both in terms of shared performers, hybrid formats, and business structures.

The nature of the music hall and variety and their influence and identity are essential to understand their importance and relevance. This is encapsulated by the concept of 'knowingness', explained so eloquently by Peter Bailey.² This concept focuses on the relationship between performers and audience who are aware of a sense of mischief or suggestion within the performance. This atmosphere is central to the experience of the music hall and consequently the variety theatre, a place where the cliché of Victorian propriety unravelled in a very controlled manner. It is Bakhtin's

¹ Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge, 2003), Peter Bailey, 'Conspiracies of Meaning: Music-Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture', *Past & Present* 144 (1994). J.S. Bratton (ed.), *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes, 1986).

² Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*. pp128–150.

'carnavalesque' contained in a public space.³ 'Knowingness' can be seen as something intrinsic in British popular culture but also to everyday conversation, where double meanings are constantly bubbling under the surface. *Double entendres* have been a common part of British literature and theatre, but in a modern sense music hall and variety cemented them into popular consciousness. Music hall had a distinct lack of seriousness and a rejection of the intellectualism that was present in its continental cousin, cabaret.

Variety entertainment was a world where matters were not solemn or serious. Everything existed in a state where it could be mocked or flipped to the light-hearted at a moment's notice. Pathos and sentimentality formed a component of the experience, but laughter was a thread running through the whole show. Laughter is not voluntary. It is akin to a cough or a sneeze, it is uncontrollable or spontaneous, although it is possible to create the correct circumstances in the environment and atmosphere. The audience can amplify and encourage laughter because comedy and humour are fundamentally collective. Laughter is a social activity; solitary laughter can almost be frowned upon or seen as taboo⁴. The heights of hilarity can be fostered in a live comedy performance. Once this atmosphere has been established by a compère or warm-up act, small gestures or asides can elicit great amusement within an audience. However, this atmosphere needs to be carefully handled and nurtured to avoid it being punctured.

Variety will be analysed against a backdrop of social change. There are three areas of focus at the heart of the study. The first is class, community, and locality. This encompasses the live experience, nature, and atmosphere of the theatres and the culture of knowingness and vernacular that runs from the Victorian music hall to the variety

³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, 1984).

⁴ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, (e-book, Urbana, IL, 2002), ch. 1, paragraph 3.

theatres. The theatres themselves provide unique spaces within the urban environment. The second major strand is media and technology changes. Key innovations were made before the period but technologies such as radio mature during this time. Cinema and recorded music continued to have a significant impact but, although television had been available before World War Two, it was not until the mid-1950s when it was widespread. Finally, the third theme focuses on the significant social movements in youth culture and interconnected changes in affluence and taste.

Many of the elements of popular culture that are considered important today were not as significant at the time. This project will look at the financial figures that reinforce the cultural importance of some acts, and rediscovers others that were headliners of the day but have since been side-lined in the narrative of popular culture.

Variety was one of the earliest forms of popular culture and therefore is deserving of historical attention. Most of the work to date has examined the pre-1945 period; where it has attended to the post-1945 period, it is preoccupied by the notion of decline.

Decline is an inevitable part of this thesis but during much of the period after 1945 variety tried to adapt to changing cultural, social, and technological environment. This was more successful in the early part of the period. However, the overall aim is not to offer a 'cause of death' for this industry but to investigate how its economic success and physical presence in the centre of British towns and cities shaped the consumption of culture amongst the British population. The abandoning of these working-class spaces was different to other cultural sectors that were given government support. Many of the major variety figures transferred their funding, contacts and expertise into the new television companies. The absence of variety theatres at the end of the period and the rise of television altered the culture available and marked a distinct shift away from the Victorian and Edwardian towards a new cultural outlook.

Variety was always going to be subsumed into other popular cultures but the contention here is that, rather than being a dying form, it was being used as a testing ground, a prototype for new forms. The variety chains and impresarios explored new innovations and fads, to see how they would perform. Variety can be viewed as the 'guinea pig' or 'drawing board' for television's new commercial multimedia format.

This study examines how working-class spaces were used as 'testing grounds' for new cultural trends, both out of economic necessity but also as prototypical experiments. The interaction between capitalism and working-class spaces will be examined. The modern music and 'light entertainment' industries grew out of the variety space and co-opted its language and performers.

Television could learn from the mistakes and successes to help to create well-integrated programming. Raymond Williams' analysis of television 'form' and 'flow' links the format of variety with the continuous stream of television programming⁵. Variety had inherited many of the performers, the sense of 'knowingness' that could be seen most evidently in performers like Eric Morecambe or Frankie Howerd.

This examines how working-class spaces were used as 'testing grounds' for new cultural trends, both out of economic necessity but also as prototypical experiments. The interaction between capitalism and working-class spaces will be examined. The modern music and 'light entertainment' industries grew out of the variety space and co-opted its language and performers.

The abandoning of these working-class spaces was different to other cultural sectors that were given government support. Many of the major variety figures transferred their funding, contacts and expertise into the new television companies

⁵ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (Glasgow, 1974), p. 64, p.80

Television could learn from these mistakes and successes to help to create well-integrated programming. Raymond Williams has used the idea of 'flow' to explain the continuous stream of television programming, and this was like the 'non-stop' nature of variety that had been pioneered in the early twentieth century. Variety had inherited many of the performers, the sense of 'knowingness' that could be seen most evidently in performers like Eric Morecambe or Frankie Howerd

The post-war period is one where the multimedia age truly begins. Domestic entertainment and opportunities outside were available. The pre-war years were when variety had adjusted to the changing market and seemingly staved off collapse and secured a future. American culture, technological innovation, and attitudinal shifts were altering the direction of the offerings in popular culture and the demands of the audience.

Demographics and which group had precedence in these spaces is a key theme, setting apart the older consistent audience that enjoyed traditional variety, versus younger audiences that did not need or want the old format. This included a tension between British and more glamorous American performers. The marketing to aspirational and rebellious youth was co-ordinated with similar trends from film studios and record companies. Permissiveness was also tested to its limits in variety theatres and the strip shows of the late 1950s were another experiment imposed upon the variety theatres.

Variety was a cultural bridge from music hall to modernity, and it helps us to understand the shaping of the television and music industries. Young people had been integrated, permissiveness and boundaries tested and the extent to which American culture could be utilised and then adapted. These formative years happened not in the 1960s but within the confines of variety theatres in the 1950s. It was a unique crossover point, between the Victorian and the cultural industries that would remain dominant until

the age of the internet. Variety theatres were treated differently to other forms that have been allowed to continue in different formats or within set cultural niches. Major businesses coalesced in the 1950s to use the spaces of variety and then swiftly abandoned them.

Literature and Key Concepts

Several different fields of literature are relevant to this research. Concepts of gender and sexuality, youth, and Americanisation are significant factors in the production and reception of variety performance. The physical space of the variety theatre is also an essential component to analyse. There is a clear distinction within these works between narrative and descriptive histories, more academic studies, and theoretical literature. The ideas within these works can overlap but sometimes these links require unpacking.

Histories of the period

There is a wide-ranging literature on the post-war period. This examines the political and social upheaval that followed the conflict, combined with analysis of sociological and attitudinal shifts that occurred in the population and broader cultural context.

Dominic Sandbrook assesses the role of music hall and variety in his work. His analysis stresses the decline of the industry but the persistence of its influence within popular culture. This fits with the general narrative of decline without more detailed insight into the business, its extent, impact, and offerings. Sandbrook offers a review of the last four years of the 1950s and draws it into a study of the long 1960s.⁶ He attempts a style of 'patchwork' history, slightly more ordered than Kynaston in terms of the

⁶ Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London, 2015).

discrete sections, offering a wide-ranging set of sources. Sandbrook offers what critics call an 'establishment' history but is nonetheless useful at examining the end of the 1950s.

Addison's book *No Turning Back* examines the '*Peacetime Revolutions in Post-war Britain*'.⁷ He looks at the socio-economic changes that occurred in the post-war period, including the changing demographic trends, economic aspiration, immigration, and ownership of electrical products.

David Kynaston's series of books on the post-war period provide a mosaic of insight and historical ephemera.⁸ It weaves together information and snippets of historical understanding into a patchwork that seems to represent its time, if not always providing a defined judgement on events. In *Austerity Britain*, Kynaston analysed the expectations and hopes of the population. The conservative individualism versus the grand plans of the Attlee government's 'New Jerusalem' are key themes in Kynaston's work. Ross McKibbin critiqued Kynaston's view of the individualism that persisted to point out that much of the life of a post-war citizen was collective, in football grounds, dancehalls, and holiday camps, as well as variety theatres.⁹

Kynaston includes comedy, including variety, in his summary of this period and is much less reticent than some historians who clearly have no interest in what they may view as low or less serious culture that comedy represents. In a particularly elucidating passage, Kynaston beautifully encapsulates the feeling of loss and nostalgia in the closing of a music hall in *Modernity Britain*. He describes a sentimental tale the closing of the Portsmouth Empire Theatre and the events of its last night, as Lilian Salmon, a former variety performer, who had made her debut on the stage and been in a group with Gracie

⁷ Paul Addison, *No Turning Back: The Peacetime Revolutions of Post-War Britain* (Oxford, 2010).

⁸ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945–1951* (London, 2010);
David Kynaston, *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box, 1957–1959* (London, 2013).

⁹ Ross McKibbin, 'Not Pleasing the Tidy-Minded', *London Review of Books*, 30.8 (2008),
<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n08/ross-mckibbin/not-pleasing-the-tidy-minded>

Fields wandered into the hall and led the stagehands in song.¹⁰

Song after song she sang, and before long there was a small gathering at the open side door, including a police sergeant and two constables. Their interest was not surprising, since it was long past midnight.

Eventually, a stagehand announced that everybody had to go home. The Singing Mill Girl led 'Auld Lang Syne', and the Empire Theatre was dead¹¹

This illustrates how many authors used the decline of variety as an allegory for Britain after the war or in this case as a poignant dénouement to a chapter rather than exploring the extent and influence of the industry.

Victorian music hall and its legacy

The variety period after 1914 is an emerging area of research. Music Hall has been given much more attention, both academic and otherwise. A combination of factors means that variety has been treated differently. Music hall is viewed with what Oliver Double calls 'a misty-eyed nostalgia' and it is seen as more 'vital', what Bailey refers to as almost 'folk art' imbued with *Volksgeist*.¹² Music Hall sprang from changes in society and was seen as an organic social response to this upheaval. Variety has taken on a pejorative connotation as a capitalist refinement of a working-class form, and thus its output is similarly seen as inferior, mass-produced, or manufactured. The Victorian music hall has received significant academic attention in the highly respected works of Peter Bailey, Dagmar Kift,

¹⁰ Kynaston, *Modernity Britain*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Peter Bailey, *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure, Popular Music in Britain* (Milton Keynes, 1986), p. xiv; Oliver Double, *Britain Had Talent: A History of Variety Theatre* (Basingstoke, 2012), p.38.

and Gareth Stedman Jones (amongst others), that provide a good deal of academic weight to the field.¹³

However, the post-war fate of variety entertainment has not been addressed by historians in great depth. Variety theatres were still the place where most of this new culture could be seen, certainly until the advent of popular television in 1955. If one wanted to see a rock and roll act in a live performance, then it would be necessary to venture to the local Empire or Hippodrome to see them. In fact, many of the older acts co-existed with these new movements and the old variety format remained unchanged in lots of theatres until the early 1960s. However, traditional music hall and variety, without making any concessions to the expansive changes in twentieth century popular culture, were very much in existence on the cusp of the 1960s. There is a tension during this period between the intransigent, backward-looking nature of variety entertainment and the resilience and adaptability of the form in many circumstances.

Material on the music hall is rich in comparison with the later years of variety. There are established works that were used when modern scholarship was more limited, these include works by Lawrence Senelick, David Cheshire and J.S. Bratton.¹⁴ Then there are highly respected works by Peter Bailey, Gareth Stedman Jones and Dagmar Kift that provide a good deal of academic weight to the field.¹⁵ Cabaret, café-chantant and vaudeville can be seen as similar or related forms in Europe and the United States.

¹³ Bailey, *Popular Culture*.

Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict* (Cambridge, 1996);

Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983);

Bailey, 'Conspiracies of Meaning', (1994);

¹⁴ Laurence Senelick, David F. Cheshire, and Ulrich Schneider, *British Music-Hall, 1840-1923: A Bibliography and Guide to Sources, with a Supplement on European Music-Hall* (Hamden, Conn., 1981);

David Cheshire, *Music Hall in Britain* (Newton Abbott, 1974).

¹⁵ Bailey, *Popular Culture*;

Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall*;

Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class Studies*;

Bailey, 'Conspiracies of Meaning'.

Vaudeville emerged later and was influenced by the success and format of music hall.

Peter Bailey's work on the music hall and popular culture are hugely important in this field. The way that we understand and conceptualise leisure and entertainment, particularly the music hall and how capitalist interests shaped working-class culture, are essential concepts for this piece. Peter Bailey's work has not thoroughly examined the world of post-war variety but does illuminate the performance dynamics of the music hall, the relations between patrons, performers, audience, and the authorities. Bailey's critique gives a picture of how the music hall acted as both a space for commerce and comedy. The halls were spaces where the understanding of acceptability and language were being negotiated and formed in uniquely working-class spaces. The concept 'knowingness' will be a consistent theme throughout this piece. This helps to provide a conceptual framework for many of the less tangible ideas presented in this thesis. The unique character of music hall and variety and their relevance to the formation of modern British popular culture.

Knowingness might be defined as what everybody knows, but some know better than others. At once complicit and discriminatory, this popular mode of expression was frequently noted by middle-class commentators as a distinctive – and objectionable – feature of comic performance in nineteenth-century Britain.¹⁶

Bailey's idea of 'knowingness' is useful in helping us to understand the performance dynamics and atmosphere of the music hall. This piece will attempt to trace the history in variety theatres' latter years, including how 'knowingness' translates to a multimedia age and how it shaped the audience experience within the variety theatres. 'Knowingness encoded a reworked popular knowledge in an urban world...'¹⁷

¹⁶ Bailey, *Popular Culture*, p.128.

¹⁷ Bailey, *Popular Culture*, p. 149.

Much of the 'knowingness' in the music hall emerged from the fact that most of the audience was familiar with the songs. Participation from the audience was the fundamental component in the Victorian music hall and rowdy singsongs were staples.

Enthusiastic participation that turned the audience into active participants was hugely beneficial for both the experience and, most markedly, maintaining the attention of a rowdy crowd. This interaction changed with the switch from table seating to stalls, but familiarity was still important. The songs of the music hall were replaced with familiar comedy routines, dances, and, later on, popular records. dances and later on popular records. The 'knowingness' often transferred itself to a shared language of understanding of coded meanings between audience and performer. Max Miller will be explored as the prime exponent of this style of performance.

Knowingness is seen as part of the urban experience by Bailey, a need for code and knowledge in the complex and sometimes dangerous cities. The 'knowingness' often transferred itself to a shared language of understanding of coded meanings between audience and performer. The use of pauses, hints and silences allowed audiences to decipher the performer's intended meaning¹⁸. Therefore, like forms of cant, rhyming slang, or Polari, knowingness is part of the language and understanding of the urban working classes.¹⁹ Max Miller will be explored as the prime exponent of this style of performance.

'Performers we may surmise, were applauded not just for their naturalistic recreation of a shared world, but their authority in the actual business of living in that world.'²⁰ Peter Bailey describes how middle-class and upper-class patrons began to frequent the music halls in the 1890s and 'By the turn of the century, music hall's

¹⁸ Bailey, *Popular Culture*, p. 184.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

knowingness was fast becoming a second language for *all* classes, as music hall itself became an agreeable national *alter ego*.²¹

Peter Bailey's *The politics and poetics of modern British leisure: A late twentieth-century review* is an erudite review of the different waves of analysis and changing academic attitudes to popular culture in British society.²² He examines both the historiography and theory of leisure analysis and weaves together how different theorists. It gives a clear picture of how they have tackled leisure and culture in a British context.

Dagmar Kift's comprehensive review of the Victorian music hall helps to place this cultural phenomenon in context next to French and German cabaret and American vaudeville and variety. Kift's *The Victorian Music Hall* studies the music hall industry in the nineteenth century and although this does not overlap with the period I am investigating, this is clearly a seminal work on the halcyon days of the music hall.²³ It charts the development of this form of popular culture, which amongst the working class was the dominant form in the years before World War One. This work is clearly contextual, but the importance and shadow of music hall is significant in understanding the development of comedy in the following 50 years. There are more recent additions from academics such as Steven Gerrard and Barry Faulk.²⁴

Former Prime Minister John Major's *My Old Man* recounts a personal viewpoint on the music hall and covers the life of his late father.²⁵ *Northern Music Hall* by Geoffrey

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

²² Peter Bailey, 'The politics and poetics of modern British leisure: A late-twentieth century review', *Re-Thinking History*, 3.2 (1999), pp. 131-175.

²³ Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall*.

²⁴ Steven Gerrard, 'The Great British Music Hall: Its Importance to British Culture and 'The Trivial'', *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* (2013), pp.487-513; Barry J. Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (Greece, USA, 2004).

²⁵ John Major, *My Old Man: A Personal History of Music Hall* (London, 2012).

Mellor gives details of the acts that performed in music halls around the north of the country, and the theatres and bills that were showing.²⁶ *Scotland and the Music Hall* by Paul Maloney covers the heyday of music hall from 1850–1914, in Scotland.²⁷ John Earl's *British Theatres and Music Halls* is a pictorial introduction to the history of music halls and theatres with particular attention to the Victorian era.²⁸ Michael Kilgariff is acknowledged as an authority on the world of the music hall in terms of both production and his ability to perform works and this is demonstrated with his work *Grace, Beauty and Banjos*.²⁹

Variety

Variety has less coverage in terms of literature because it does not fit as easily into the discourse of its era. Music Hall has become emblematic of the development of Victorian Britain and variety is seen as less important or perhaps is more difficult to categorise in an era where radio and cinema were seen as the technologies that were changing socioeconomic and cultural habits.

There are those that sought to investigate and highlight variety. In the academic world, Oliver Double has examined the history, performance dynamics, and techniques of performers and stressed the significance and legacy of variety.³⁰ 'Variety theatre was an energetic, important and extremely popular phenomenon that ran through the centre of British cultural life like the lettering in seaside rock.'³¹ Double has also emphasised how there has been an attempt to recapture the spirit of variety on Saturday night television

²⁶ Geoffrey Mellor, *The Northern Music Hall: A Century of Popular Entertainment* (Newcastle, 1970).

²⁷ Paul Maloney, *Scotland and the Music Hall, 1850–1914* (Manchester, 2003).

²⁸ John Earl, *British Theatres and Music Halls* (Princes Risborough, 2005).

²⁹ Michael Kilgariff, *Grace, Beauty and Banjos: Peculiar Lives and Strange Times of Music Hall and Variety Artistes*, (London, 1999).

³⁰ Double, *Britain Had Talent*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

but the communal experience and comic traditions have been fundamentally altered.

There are important works from outside the world of academia. Roy Hudd was a popular entertainer who began his variety career in 1957 and later took a personal interest in cataloguing and preserving music hall and variety history with the British Music Hall Society. *Roy Hudd's Cavalcade of Variety Acts* compiles the many acts that were on stage in the years 1945 to 1960.³² Hudd focusses on these years as variety theatres emerge from the chaos of World War. Commentator Roger Wilmut's *Kindly Leave the Stage* is a history of variety with an excellent array of sources.³³ It is a quite rigorous work, if not an academically written book, and it covers the story of variety from 1919 to 1960. There are several works that take a narrative or merely factual approach to variety. Clare Cochrane's *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* gives an overview of the general history of theatre and summarises the ownership structure which is laid out in detail in the Theatre Unions' *Theatre Ownership Report*.³⁴

The common theme with these works, and one that makes the world of variety challenging in terms of historical debate, is that they do not express distinct viewpoints on this industry. Much of the commentary can be boiled down to an analysis of the decline of variety and reasons why television could supplant it. Oliver Double was correct in his assessment that variety was once at the centre of British life. The post-war period was complex as it involved the integration of young people into these spaces, the juggling and adaptation of shows, and the eventual loss of the spaces. The documentary *London Nobody Knows* shows James Mason touring parts of London in 1967 before many

³² Roy Hudd and Philip Hindin, *Roy Hudd's Cavalcade of Variety Acts: A Who Was Who of Light Entertainment, 1945–60* (London, 1997).

³³ Roger Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage! The Story of Variety, 1919–1960* (London, 1985).

³⁴ Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Worcester, 2014); Federation of Theatre Unions, *Theatre Ownership in Britain: A Report Prepared for the Federation of Theatre Unions* (London, 1953).

development projects. This film, which shows the decaying interior of the Bedford Music Hall in Camden which closed in 1959, is an eerie evocation of the loss of the Victorian spaces and the disappearance of music hall.³⁵ Two 2011 BBC documentaries presented by Michael Grade sought to “tell the story of this lost world” of variety theatre and music hall.³⁶

Media and society

The relationship between media, culture, and wider societal patterns is a key theme in this work. The Marxist analysis of Gramsci and the Frankfurt School can offer a perspective on culture industries. Gramsci’s concept of ‘cultural hegemony’ links with Dagmar Kift’s ideas about the music hall. She sees the music hall as a place that reinforced conservative and nationalist tendencies within the audience (see the origin of the word ‘jingoism’ in a music hall song as evidence for this)³⁷. Gramsci’s idea that the ruling classes carefully controlled culture.³⁸ They shaped the ideas, moral values, and beliefs of the population.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer build upon this to form the idea of culture industry designed to create obedience and conformity. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they argue that the establishment use mass media to keep the general populace pliable and satisfied.³⁹ These ideas could be applied to the urban entertainments of Victorian England and the emerging technologies of the early twentieth century. They particularly focus on the passivity of radio as a format that does not give the audience any form of

³⁵ *London Nobody Knows* [DVD film], directed by Norman Cohen [originally released 1967, Norcon].

³⁶ *The Story of the Music Hall with Michael Grade*, aired Tue 25 Oct 2011, BBC FOUR Production; *The Story of Variety with Michael Grade*, aired Mon 28 Feb 2011, BBC FOUR Production.

³⁷ Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall*, p. 182

³⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York, 1992).

³⁹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, 2002).

interactivity. Adorno and Horkheimer believed that 'Amusement has become an extension of labour under late capitalism.'⁴⁰ Merely viewing this as a manipulation of the population removes the agency and shaping of culture of ordinary people. The blossoming of a more organic and youth-driven, popular music in the 1960s seems to counter the idea that of the 'culture industry' was merely a tool of the establishment.

It is possible to regard Adorno and Horkheimer's critiques as elitist and one that removes the agency of the working-class individual.⁴¹ It ignores the creative opportunity afforded by 'massification' of culture. Adorno and Horkheimer advance the idea that mass media stifles high art. These ideas fail to acknowledge the constant change that had been occurring in culture, both demographically and creatively, since the 1700s. Nostalgia may view the 1950s as a 'golden age', a unique crossroads in the development of popular culture, just as contemporary views would decry the decline of worthy cultural output.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' does become increasingly pertinent in the 1950s.⁴² Aspiration and a desire to distance from older Victorian entertainment forms drive consumers towards mass media but, in contrast to the views of Adorno and Horkheimer, there is a significant desire for many to engage with higher culture; this can be viewed as a factor in undermining the long-term viability of the variety theatres, as government and economic forces abandon them. Bourdieu encapsulated his ideas in the concept of class 'habitus' – educationally acquired or cultural and class-inherited characteristics. This is important when considering the changing habits of the population during this period. Aspiration and the eschewing of dated formats was driven by a desire for many to better themselves and shed Victorian traditions; whether this is truly possible

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁴¹ Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (London, 2009).

⁴² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans R. Nice (Cambridge, Mass., 1984).

or simply a way to get the working class to consume new and more profitable media, is raised by Bourdieu's interpretation of 'habitus'⁴³.

Media theorists have explained the changes that have occurred in popular culture and technology in the last century. New media, uses, and interactions between producer, performer, and audience are common themes in this work. The following theorists can offer conceptualisations of how the modern media can be accessed, encoded, and decoded.

Many of these writers were working in the 1960s when live entertainment had moved on from variety and music hall. This means that this form is once again overlooked as it falls between the social historians' explanations of the formation of working-class culture and cutting-edge theorists' desire to explain the modern world. However, the analysis of new innovations is vital.

Marshall McLuhan's understanding of media rested initially on his notion that the user experience is inextricable from the technology.⁴⁴ The electric light made theatrical performance possible, the cinema opened new visual worlds, just as radio offered a sonic journey into new imagined places and allowed music to seep into everyday life. Television altered this experience for its users, not only in terms of the location, but in terms of how the audience engaged with and felt about the media they were consuming, just as going to the cinema was and is an experience, television and radio were the experience, albeit a passive one. This had the potential to turn media into background noise rather than the centre of attention. McLuhan's 'tetrads of media understanding' (enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval, and reversal) can be useful in looking at how variety was shaped by the technological changes and new media around it. McLuhan's tetrads are

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 170

⁴⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London, 2001).

overly schematic and in a multimedia age it can be an interesting exercise to consider what each new technology brings.

Some of Peter Bailey's analysis concurs with Roland Barthes, who discussed the semiology of culture and media. This can be a useful tool in deciphering some of the important performers of the era: the straightforward double meanings of music hall performers, like Marie Lloyd, had been developed into a complex code of ciphers and gestures within the language and movements of the performer. There is a conspiracy at play between the proprietor, performer, and audience, in Barthesian language - a series of signs that can be recognised by the audience, perpetuated by the business owners, and employed by those on stage.⁴⁵ These are used to both influence and control the role of the authorities, in their cat and mouse game to monitor standards of decency in variety and music hall, as the performers and owners are aware of the conspiracy that exists with the audience but must pander to the moral authorities.

Stuart Hall's methods of analysis for popular culture have been applied within this thesis, including the concepts of encoding and decoding. Hall explains how media can be divided into production, media text, and reception. The methodology applied here will focus mainly on the production and promotion of culture, and the financial data gives a strong insight into the reception and economic imperatives that underlie the industry. Stuart Hall explains television's relationship with other media: 'Television is a hybrid medium. In part, this is because it is so extraordinarily heterogeneous content and subject matter. But, in terms of its formal properties, television also appropriates and cannibalises a variety of forms and techniques from other sources, including other media.'⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London, 2009).

⁴⁶ Stuart Hall, *Writings on Media* (Durham, 2021), p.224.

As we have seen, television subtly alters the form and message of its output. The producers of television content have moved from merely representing live material to trying to alter the offering to the audience both to ease production or move from dated forms to attempting to shift audience taste and perception.

Raymond Williams' work on television was crucial in shaping the modern understanding of media. His ideas run counter to McLuhan's 'technological determinism' and expand upon how media is shaped by the desire of the producer.⁴⁷ Variety was not subject to this analysis but Williams' critique is helpful for both direct and comparative evaluation of variety and the evolving media of the period. Broadcasters want to maintain an audience, one that stays tuned in. This is somewhat complicated by the role of the BBC, but the major idea is that commercial interests are driving the need to keep the television (or radio) tuned into one station and Williams' concept of 'flow' means that viewers experienced programming running into each other. A constant stream that requires little thought or engagement, one is merely 'watching television', an activity which had the potential to be controlled by the producers and broadcasting organisations.

The decline of live variety and the rise of television led to a retreat from Jurgen Habermas' concept of the 'public sphere'. The juxtaposition of the sterile, passive television versus the engagement of live experience is another key concept. The individualistic experience of the television has also been offered by Arthur Kroker and David Cook discuss the 'subversion of sociality' that television produces, where genuine human solidarity is replaced by televised representations of sociality.⁴⁸ Television is caught between the more personal, inert experience and its constant attempts to recreate a live ambience, that persists with the studio audience.

⁴⁷ Williams, *Television*.

⁴⁸ Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics*. *New World Perspectives* (Montreal, 1987), p. 274.

Asa Briggs' authorised history of the BBC had unique access to the broadcaster's material⁴⁹ It is a mine of information and has filleted great swathes of the archive, although the purpose of this tome appears to be accentuating the importance of the organisation. The BBC, under Reith, became a self-styled champion of morals and bastion of high culture available for the masses. This means it had an uneasy relationship with some of the broader elements of humour, although the existence of the corporation did spawn some of the more original and socially upwardly mobile comedies. This cannot always be said of independent television and the commercially driven radio stations, such as Radio Luxembourg, that often relied on game shows and talent contests (and still do). Briggs' Volume IV, 'Sound and Vision', has a chapter on variety, and it gives a good summary of major activity. Robert Silvey was head of Audience Research at the BBC and wrote a book called *Who's Listening? The Story of BBC Audience Research* about the habits of listeners and programmes produced.⁵⁰ This is a statistical and factual work.

There is increasingly broad literature on broadcasting and the BBC, and this is increasingly focused on popular entertainment and the social implications of broadcasting. Two recent works, Simon Potter's book *This is the BBC: Entertaining the Nation, Speaking for Britain, 1922–2022* and David Hendy's *The BBC: A People's History* look at the cultural impact of the BBC from a socio-cultural history perspective.⁵¹

Some of the key works on radio comedy are not academic. The book by Andy Furst and comedian Steve Furst catalogues the history of radio comedy over from 1938-1968 and offers excellent detail on the programming of this era.⁵² Barry Took's *Laughter in the*

⁴⁹ Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom: Volume IV: Sound and Vision* (Oxford, 1995).

⁵⁰ Robert Silvey, *Who's Listening? The Story of BBC Audience Research* (London, 1974).

⁵¹ Simon Potter, *This is the BBC: Entertaining the Nation, Speaking for Britain, 1922-2022* (Oxford, 2022); David Hendy, *The BBC: A People's History* (London, 2022).

⁵² Andy Foster and Steve Furst, *Radio Comedy, 1938–1968: A Guide to 30 Years of Wonderful Wireless* (London, 1996).

Air gives an insider's view of radio comedy.⁵³ Denis Gifford's *The Golden Age of Radio* was one of the first reference books on the area and provides a good guide to radio of the time.⁵⁴ Gifford has written articles and books on other areas of radio comedy, music hall, and its personalities.

A recent addition to the field is Martin Dibbs' book *Radio Fun and the BBC Variety Department, 1922–67*.⁵⁵ This covers the history of variety on radio and into the television era and relies on the well-developed archive of the BBC that tells the institutional story of the Variety department and how the corporation sought to capture the essence of variety entertainment and adapt it for broadcasting.

Comedians, Comedy and Humour

The biographical literature that exists about the comedians and writers of the period is often divided between documenting the creative process and the vagaries and idiosyncrasies that exist in the successful but dysfunctional lives of comedians. The very process of expressing humour is often borne of deep-seated insecurity or tragedy, and although this is a universal theme of many comedians there is a greater tendency in the expression of pathos that is required for British comedy. The nature of comedy could be to blame for the fascination with the flaws of comedians that fills TV documentaries, drama, and films. It seems essential for the British comic to have tragedy in their lives, whether this is an occupational hazard or a national obsession; comedians that do not appear to have a tragic back story are often perceived as more lightweight. Comedy needs to have a darkness to lend it intellectual merit, although we like comedians to be daft and

⁵³ Barry Took, *Laughter in the Air: An Informal History of British Radio Comedy* (London, 1976).

⁵⁴ Denis Gifford, *The Golden Age of Radio: An Illustrated Companion* (London, 1985).

⁵⁵ Martin Dibbs, *Radio Fun and the BBC Variety Department, 1922–67: Comedy and Popular Music on Air* (London, 2018).

unsophisticated.

There are many biographies that have some use in the investigation of this topic. Norma Farnes' *Spike: An Intimate Memoir* is a personal account of Spike Milligan's life from the perspective of his manager.⁵⁶ It provides an affectionate yet accurate portrayal of the temperamental writer and performer and other members of Associated London Scripts, such as Eric Sykes, Johnny Speight, Ray Galton, and Alan Simpson. *The Essential Spike Milligan*⁵⁷ is a collection of Goon Show scripts, Milligan's poetry, fiction and surreal autobiographical writings. Kenneth Williams' life is one which offers a good insight into a comic actor who was working across different media and achieving success in all of them to varying degrees. Kenneth Williams was a very important figure across media in 1950s comedy; there is the biography *Born Brilliant* and Kenneth Williams' diary that can shed light on his acerbic wit and fascinating and tragic personal life.⁵⁸ *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* by Roger Lewis is a controversial work, which was turned into a film but caused consternation amongst the Sellers family for the suggestions that it made about Sellers' personality and private life.⁵⁹ John Fisher's work on Tony Hancock, which has been given the title *The Definitive Biography*, is certainly weighty in terms of content, draws a fascinating picture of a much-conflicted man and gives a thorough history of his life.⁶⁰ The autobiography of Morecambe and Wise provides some good anecdotes about their time in variety and how the different circuits operated.⁶¹ There are many other biographies of key performers, including Norman Wisdom, George Robey, Gracie Fields,

⁵⁶ Norma Farnes, *Spike: An Intimate Memoir* (London, 2011).

⁵⁷ Alexander Games (ed.), *The Essential Spike Milligan* (London, 2003).

⁵⁸ Kenneth Williams and Russell Davies, *The Kenneth Williams Diaries* (London 1994);

Christopher Stevens, *Kenneth Williams: Born Brilliant: The Life of Kenneth Williams* (London, 2010).

⁵⁹ Roger Lewis, *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* (London, 1994).

⁶⁰ John Fisher, *Tony Hancock: The Definitive Biography* (London, 2008).

⁶¹ Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise, *Eric & Ernie: The Autobiography of Morecambe & Wise* (London, 1973); Eric Morecambe, Ernie Wise, and Michael Freedland, *There's no Answer to That! An Autobiography by Morecambe & Wise* (London, 1981).

Frank Randle, and Max Bygraves. Morecambe and Wise, Eric Sykes, Frank Muir and Harry Secombe.⁶²

John Fisher has written extensively about comedians in a semi-academic style. His work *Funny Way to Be a Hero* analysed their style, material, and influence and explains their relative cultural importance.⁶³ This provides a very useful account of performers in a field where critical scrutiny is difficult because of the ephemeral nature of variety and early broadcasts.

Comedy Theory

Comedy and comedy theory is one area that has informed this project. Variety comprises many different performance arts and one that is crucial is comedy. The nature of comedy as an absurd art form means that academic work on the subject is sparse when compared to theatre, literature, and music. In terms of theory and philosophy, it often relies on classical allusions to Greek theatre or complex psychological or epistemological notions of humour. Philosophers' views on humour are also subject to temporal, geographic, and paradigmatic constraints and shifts. Humour is inherently subjective, but there is a need to try and understand the motivation for laughter and how that would function in variety theatre.

⁶² Norman Wisdom, *My Turn: An Autobiography* (London, 2002); Peter Cotes, *George Robey: "The Darling of the Halls"* (London, 1972); David Bret, *Gracie Fields: The Authorized Biography* (London, 1995); Jeff Nuttall, *King Twist: A Portrait of Frank Randle* (London, 2022); Max Bygraves, *Max Bygraves: In His Own Words* (Derby, 1997). Eric Sykes, *If I Don't Write It Nobody Else Will* (London, 2009); Frank Muir, *A Kentish Lad* (London, 2012); Harry Secombe, *Arias and Raspberries: An Autobiography* (London 1997). Norman Wisdom, *My Turn: An Autobiography* (London, 2002); Peter Cotes, *George Robey: "The Darling of the Halls"* (London, 1972); David Bret, *Gracie Fields: The Authorized Biography* (London, 1995); Jeff Nuttall, *King Twist: A Portrait of Frank Randle* (London, 2022); Max Bygraves, *Max Bygraves: In His Own Words* (Derby, 1997).

⁶² John Fisher, *Funny Way to Be a Hero* (London, 1973).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

The major theories about the nature and origin of humour, comic and laughter are the Superiority theory, the Relief theory and the Incongruity theory, each with its prominent proponents (and, it must be noted, with significant overlaps).

The Superiority theory stems from Ancient times; In *Poetics*, Aristotle suggested that something that is comical depicts a flaw, a defect, or a negative trait: 'Comedy aims at representing men as worse ... than in actual life'.⁶⁴ This depicted 'ugliness' (physical or moral), makes us laugh as we experience a feeling of superiority: 'Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type - not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly.'⁶⁵ A similar view is expressed by Thomas Hobbes, who talks about the 'Sudden Glory Laughter', a type of joyous reaction caused by the awareness that we are superior to 'some deformed thing in another'.⁶⁶ We will see several acts that are weird and curious and comics like Frank Randle that will be both identifiable and grotesque.

Freud differentiates between tendentious and non-tendentious jokes; the former often deal with topics of sexuality, indecency or aggression. Freud notes that these jokes 'make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way'.⁶⁷ This obstacle, Freud believes, is none other than the 'repressive activity of civilisation'.⁶⁸ Thus, jokes allow us to express a sentiment, thought or impulse that would otherwise be socially unacceptable. This concept links heavily to the idea of the music hall and variety theatre as a 'liminal' space or place for 'carnival'. Laughter allows us to experience a discharge of psychical energy. Tendentious jokes,

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics*, (e-book, Urbana, IL, 1999), ch. 2, paragraph 2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 5, paragraph 1.

⁶⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (e-book, Urbana, IL, 2002), ch. 6, paragraph 42.

⁶⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, (Kindle edn, 2013), loc. 1622

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, loc 1637

Freud argues, produce more pleasure by lifting ‘suppressions and repressions’.⁶⁹ Bailey’s ideas ‘Knowingness’ and the shared code of these spaces will be discussed heavily and the need to have an outlet for repressed or taboo feelings. The energy that we would have otherwise used to stifle our socially undesirable impulses remains unused, and we then release this energy through laughter. The release theory of humour appears relevant to variety theatre, a form of entertainment that was acknowledged to have provided a valuable outlet of energy for its audiences. Notably at a time when ‘tableaux vivants’ numbers were included on variety bills, the Lord Chamberlain in his role as theatre censor called the Windmill Theatre a “national safety valve.”⁷⁰

Freud’s analysis further distinguishes between jokes ‘an economy in expenditure upon inhibition’ comic ‘an economy in the expenditure upon ideation’ and humour ‘an economy in the expenditure upon feeling’.⁷¹

Henri Bergson lists various conditions without which the comic cannot exist, including a sense of social connection: “You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. ... Laughter always implies a kind of ... complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary. How often has it been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience!”⁷² This observation draws a compelling parallel with variety, a form of entertainment for which the audience’s common understanding of the act and shared meanings ‘knowingness’ were crucial in creating humour. More recent studies have also found that laughter appears more readily when shared – Robert Provine noted that we are 30 times more likely to laugh when we

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, loc 2232

⁷⁰ Frank Mort, ‘Striptease: the erotic female body and live sexual entertainment in mid-twentieth-century London’, *Social History* 32:1 (2007), pp. 27–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071020601081256>, p. 30

⁷¹ Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, loc 3816

⁷² Bergson, *Laughter*, ch. 1, paragraph 3.

are around others, than when we are alone.⁷³

Bergson's theory overlaps and draws parallels with the Incongruity theory, which proposes that humour and laughter stem from something that contradicts our expectations, requiring an unexpected shift in perspective – this theory is particularly applicable to visual and verbal/play-on-words humour. Immanuel Kant notes that what elicits laughter is the 'sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.'⁷⁴ Bergson posits that laughter results from a contrast between a 'mechanical inelasticity' and the expected 'pliability of a human being'.⁷⁵ His examples focus primarily on physical humour; for instance, we might laugh at a man who stumbles and falls. Bergson believes this elicits laughter because his fall is unintentional, and because the man lacked the elasticity needed to avoid an obstacle/adapt his pace etc. It is this contrast between the rigid/mechanical and the mobile/human that we find laughable. This view has its applications when considering the large array of physical and nonverbal comedy employed in variety theatre.

The more recent Benign Violation theory suggests that humour occurs when a violation of a norm occurs, but one that is not truly threatening – for example, puns violate one verbal norm but adhere to another at the same time; tickling is a form of physical attack, but it does not actually harm. The authors note slapstick as another example (e.g. slipping on a banana peel is a violation and aggression, but it does not actually cause pain as it is all part of an act)⁷⁶.

There are numerous other theoretical perspectives on comic, humour and laughter to consider (such as Raskin's Script Based Semantic Theory of Humour or the

⁷³ Robert Provine, *Laughter: a Scientific Investigation*, (New York, 2000), p. 45

⁷⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, (Kindle ed., 2022), p. 123

⁷⁵ Bergson, *Laughter*, ch. 2, paragraph 3.

⁷⁶ Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren, 'Benign violation theory' in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (Thousand Oaks, 2014), pp. 75-76

ethological perspective that suggests laughter evolved as a form of play-fight in mammals and is a signal of non-aggression). However, comedy theory and the reasons and motivations behind laughter are not the primary concern of the thesis. I am seeking to investigate how comedy changes, and how this change reflects wider societal shifts, in terms of technological innovation and the socio-economic situation within the political and imperial power base of Britain. This thesis will explain how comedy responds and reacts to these changes, not why something is funny. This work will not focus too heavily on the theory of comedy, but the works of Bergson (*Laughter*) and Bakhtin (*Rabelais and his world*) will be referenced on occasion.⁷⁷ Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais shines a light on the concept of the carnivalesque, the concept that we wish to mock the norms and 'turn the world upside down'. The music hall certainly had this rowdy atmosphere, but quite a conservative moral compass despite its bawdiness.

Because I Tell a Joke or Two, edited by Stephen Wagg, includes a selection of essays examining different elements of post-war comedy, many on film and television. The most relevant of these essays is an assessment of the career and language of Frank Randle, written by C.P. Lee. This gives a clear perspective on the regional relevance of this influential and controversial Lancastrian comedian.⁷⁸

Sam Friedman is a sociologist and his work on humour and British comedy is concerned with the cultural snobbery and hierarchies of modern comedy.⁷⁹ Friedman examines the concept of cultural capital in contemporary comedy and the class values that we place on comedy.

⁷⁷ Bergson, *Laughter*;
Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

⁷⁸ Christopher Paul Lee, 'The Lancashire Shaman: Frank Randle and Mancunian Films', in Stephen Wagg (ed.), *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics, and Social Difference*, (London, 1998).

⁷⁹ Sam Friedman, *Comedy and distinction: the cultural currency of a 'good' sense of humour*, (London, 2014);

Sam Friedman, 'The cultural currency of a good sense of humour: British comedy and new forms of distinction', *British Journal of Sociology* 62, 2 (2011), pp. 347–370;

Andy Medhurst presents a wide-ranging analysis of comedy in British popular culture in *A National Joke*.⁸⁰ His collection of essays focuses on different 'identities' – he looks particularly at national identity and sexual identity within British comedy; both these fields are rich veins. Camp and gay identities are a theme within British comedy that stretches back to the era of the pantomime dame. Medhurst also presents an intriguing insight into music hall and its importance in the formation of modern British comedy tropes. In terms of sexual identity, Medhurst looks at the differing personalities within British popular comedy and focusses on Kenneth Williams and Frankie Howerd as case studies.

The Cultural Landscape - Americanisation, Youth Culture, Place, and Space

This post-war period has been characterised as a period of rapid Americanisation. Richard Hoggart's influential analysis, *The Uses of Literacy*, originally published in 1957, presented the growing influence of a mass culture guided by American cultural industries.⁸¹ He offers a picture of a specific urban culture 'of the people' being undermined and displaced by newer cultural influences. Hoggart's analysis of young people listening to jukeboxes in milk bars seems almost quaint from a modern perspective but seemed to signal a worrying new wave of mass, American culture. Hoggart's view seems to ignore the continuum of cultural change that was kickstarted by the industrial revolution. The idea that working-class culture was more noble than mass culture seems odd to the twenty-first century ear. Music hall and variety were attempts to exploit the market of the urban working class, as much as an attempt to create a culture and space for them. Care needs to be taken to ensure that new forms and cultural change

⁸⁰Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (London, 2007).

⁸¹ Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*.

are not seen as a 'cultural bogeyman' but part of a continuous process. Variety was adept at adapting. Benedict Anderson's concept, originally applied to nationalism, of an 'imagined community' can be associated with a reactionary view that harks back to a fictitious, rose-tinted, bygone era.⁸²

David Fowler's has analysed and countered some of Hoggart's view. Fowler believes that youth culture developed in the 'ivory towers' of universities in the pre-war period. It is certainly not as commonly portrayed that youth culture emerged in the 1950s, but there is significant evidence of a growing marketing of material to this groups and a popular youth culture only took hold during these years. This was a gradual process though and the variety theatres were key mediators in both offering and marrying new American and youth material with traditional offerings. Unlike Hoggart's assessment, this process was gradual and welcomed by many in the variety audience. The emergence of native and distinct versions of Americanised culture also seems to run contrary to the view that a British urban culture was replaced with an aggressive and invasive new force. This interpretation is offered by Adrian Horn, that 'American cultural influences ... had been less influential than previously suggested' and 'the influences that *were* imported had been mediated through British social, economic and cultural conditions to create style fusions that were distinctive and particular to Britain at the time.'⁸³

Stanley Cohen's analysis about the concept of the intermittent moral panic and folk devils that emerged from time to time and is linked to innovations and youth movements.⁸⁴ Spivs, Teddy Boys and rock 'n' roll all inspired societal anxiety. This fear of the new, alien or misunderstood culture, is one that permeates the discourse, but it could

⁸² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006),

⁸³ Adrian Horn, *Juke Box Britain: Americanisation and Youth Culture, 1945-60* (Manchester, 2009), p. 4.

⁸⁴ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers* (New York, 2011).

be argued that the variety theatre was a space that embodied both tradition and staged the objects of fear. As music halls had been portrayed as transgressive spaces, a more nuanced and complex picture emerged.

Jon Savage has highlighted how the development of youth culture had grown from the mid-Victorian era and how internationally organised and more organic youth movements had grown during this period.⁸⁵ Jon Savage has explained that the post-war period had now become a 'target market' for industries.⁸⁶ Bill Osgerby argues that the 'silent majority' of young people have been ignored by many academic works. Variety does demonstrate wider perspective on both popular culture and developing youth culture. This study will be able to analyse some of the wider shifts in popular culture that does not focus on individual subcultures.⁸⁷ Selina Todd has highlighted the increasing affluence of the teenager and an increase in disposable income.⁸⁸ Selina Todd has highlighted the increasing affluence of the teenager and an increase in disposable income.⁸⁹

Youth and the development of the 'teenager' in the 1950s is a concept that seems to fit into the cathartic world of comedy and the irreverent young men demobbed from the military and constituted such an important part of the production and performance. Adrian Horn's work *Juke Box Britain* provides an account of the Americanisation of British culture and the development of youth culture in the period 1945–60.⁹⁰ Horn focusses on the aspects of an emergent youth culture, tracing it from the pre-war American influence

⁸⁵ Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (London, 2008)

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.xiii

⁸⁷ Bill Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945*, (Oxford, 1998), pp 40-44.

⁸⁸ Selina Todd, 'Breadwinners and Dependents: Working-Class Young People in England, 1918–1955.' *International Review of Social History*, 52.1 (2007), pp. 57–87. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44583539>. Accessed 31 July 2024.

⁸⁹ Todd, 'Breadwinners and Dependents'.

⁹⁰ Horn, *Juke Box Britain*, (Manchester, 2009).

on the GIs and Forces programmes of the Second World War and into the milk bars and age of the Teddy Boy. Horn tends to home in on the aspects of a developing musical culture and the growth of youth movements. He does not really examine comedy or the influence of American comic styles in his work. David Fowler's work *Youth Culture* includes an essay on the work of Richard Hoggart and the development of youth culture in the 1950s.⁹¹ The rest of this work looks at the development of youth culture through a series of case studies on youth culture in the period 1920-1970.⁹² This is underpinned by the growth of the USA as a cultural superpower and its far-reaching influence in comedy and music. American culture helped to drive popular culture, and, therefore the variety theatre managers, towards performers that catered to young people and towards new innovations, from teen heartthrobs to rock and roll and skiffle. Finally, as variety began to flounder, a change in attitudes towards sex and permissiveness led to nudity and sex shows dominating many theatres in the final years of the 1950s.

Douglas Kellner offers the idea that, as the twentieth century progressed, leisure and the consumption of specific cultural materials created specific subcultural groups, and that identity became more important. This process will be explored with the introduction of different musical genres targeted at younger audiences, but it was not complete. The late 1940s and early 1950s were a time of capitalist experimentation within the variety theatres and this can be seen as a microcosm for wider popular culture. Kellner's view is that 'A media culture has emerged in which images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping

⁹¹ David Fowler, *Youth Culture in Modern Britain, C. 1920–C. 1970: From Ivory Tower to Global Movement - a New History* (London, 2008).

political views and social behaviour, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities. communities through cultural style and consumption.’⁹³

The concepts of space and place will recur at intervals throughout this piece. Doreen Massey uses examples of globalisation to explain the changing relationship between time and space. Urbanisation had created the need for mass entertainment and the spaces that these required. Globalisation and technological advancement were now reducing the need or opportunity for these spaces. Massey uses the culture of the Brazilian favelas to exemplify this relationship, but this could be transferred to the British working classes. ‘At one level they have been tremendous contributors to what we call time-space-compression; and at another level they are imprisoned in it.’⁹⁴

The nature of the performance space linked to Bakhtin’s ideas of ‘carnavalesque’ and Bailey’s ideas of ‘knowingness’ is a theme that will emerge throughout this work. The liminality of the space on the cusp of transgression, a space that is allowed to exist but remains under scrutiny from outside forces. Bakhtin’s idea can be applied within the walls of a music hall: a ‘carnavalesque’ atmosphere was allowed to exist and the moral standards were different from conventional society. This links with the role of comedy in society generally but the physical space and its removal are nonetheless significant within the twentieth-century city.

Space and its loss are key ideas here and the effect on ‘communities’ will be analysed. Performance spaces were not interchangeable, and the loss of numerous theatres left the contributors at the whim of wider cultural change. They can create culture but cannot control its direction. This relates back to the idea that the culture industry was controlled by much larger societal forces and the decisions that were made

⁹³ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Post-modern* (New York, 2005), p. 1.

⁹⁴ Doreen Massey, ‘A Global Sense of Place’, *Marxism Today* (June 1991), p. 26.

about variety were not democratic Adorno and Horkheimer identified the culture industry as a form of control and the lack of a consensus apart from economic imperative shaped the post-war British urban environment in manifold ways. Just as the music halls had been products of the need for entertainment, the spaces were not thought of in a sentimental manner. The performers and audiences formed and participated in the creation of a distinct British urban culture but could not govern wider economic forces that controlled the implementation and future.

Permissiveness and sexuality

Frank Mort's *Capital Affairs* looks at the growth of the permissive society. He seeks to realign views on the development of permissive attitudes and their emergence in the 1960s. It seeks to offer a new interpretation of 'the shifting attitudes to sex, politics and society' in the 1950s and 1960s.⁹⁵ He takes issue with the 'progressive version of the 1960s' and argued that this process did not merely emerge in the 1950s and progress in a linear fashion in a 'socially beneficial', modern manner that differed from the 'public morality that preceded it'.⁹⁶ Like Fowler, Mort argues that the shift in attitudes was part of a 'longer transformation', one that had 'an extremely uneven acceleration of shifts that had a much longer period of incubation.'⁹⁷

Mort examines sex and politics and how various social and political issues crystallise to define London and major developments in British society. He uses the Windmill theatre and the relationship between sex and variety entertainment as a specific example of this.⁹⁸ *The Permissive Society and Its Enemies*, edited by Marcus Collins,

⁹⁵ Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (New Haven, 2010), p. 4.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 263

explores similar issues.⁹⁹

Primary Material

Unfortunately, variety, just like Peter Jelavich notes about Cabaret, “...was an ephemeral art, and its material remains are widely scattered.”¹⁰⁰ The disregard for variety theatre after the First World War means that material for research is scattered and often not kept in recognisable archives or collections but organised by collectors or voluntary societies; sometimes material circulates for sale on the internet. Material was brought into professional archival settings after the deaths of Roy Hudd and Ken Dodd and their collections were acquired by the University of Kent and the Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Archive. This will provide even more material for future researchers and a broader depth, although a lot of ephemera will be dispersed by internet sales.

This means that some lots The Theatre and Performance Archive at the Victoria and Albert Collection has been the most valuable source for this work. Through the Howard and Wyndham Theatre Group Collection, it holds financial records for the Stoll and Moss Empire groups, as the ownership held a shareholding in both.¹⁰¹

The key documents used will be the Stoll Theatres ledger from 1945 onwards, which normally excludes profits, and a more detailed Moss Empires ledger from 1947 onwards, which includes profits for each week and a comparison with the previous year. The material from these ledgers changed the direction of this work. Even though, at first glance, they were dry financial records, in fact they were illuminating and told a fascinating story. The ledgers include records of a weekly headliner, combined with

⁹⁹ Marcus Collins (ed.), *The Permissive Society and Its Enemies: Sixties British Culture* (London, 2007).

¹⁰⁰ Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), p.7

¹⁰¹ V&A Theatre and Performance Collections [thereafter V&A-TPC]: Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945 – 1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10

theatre location and profit. These can be used to ascertain patterns of cultural trends, the rise and fall of star names, the preferences of regions, and an empirical basis for a business history of popular culture. Cinema takings and music charts provided similar material, but the world of variety was often based on assumed trends rather than hard data. The analysis and recording of these records provided a huge basis for research. The Howard and Wyndham records have not been used in published academic works or academic literature to this point and this made them an intriguing starting point for this research.¹⁰²

Bernard Delfont, one of the leading theatrical impresarios of the time, has his ledgers and records in the archive and these provide a good view on how acts were being booked and handled by their representatives. The records themselves are a little difficult to contextualise and not as well-kept as the major theatrical chains.¹⁰³

The Windmill Theatre archive at the Theatre and Performance Archive at the Victoria and Albert Collection was used to access scripts submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office and promotional and press materials. This archive has lots of fascinating material, but this has been examined in detail in the past and it does not connect with a national or wider picture of the variety industry at the time.¹⁰⁴

The records of the Frank Matcham company at the V&A archive have fascinating original designs of the theatres mentioned in this work. The practical applications of these plans for a historian are more complex and are more relevant to a specific architectural school.¹⁰⁵

More significant though, the Moss Empire and Stoll financial records can be cross-

¹⁰² V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942-1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/71945;

V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, GB 71 THM/303/1/10.

¹⁰³ V&A-TPC, Bernard Delfont Ltd, Bernard Delfont Limited Archive, 1950-1993, GB 71 THM/300

¹⁰⁴ V&A-TPC, Windmill Archive, THM/422;

V&A-TPC, Revudeville Scripts, THM/257.

¹⁰⁵ V&A-TPC, Frank Matcham and Company, theatre architects: records, 1881-1972, GB 71 THM/2.

referenced against the Birmingham Hippodrome archive, which provides a detailed account of the bills for this theatre and, often, this can provide extra information on touring shows and their companies.¹⁰⁶ The digitisation of these resources has provided a depth, so that rather than assessment of mere headliners or incomplete bills, it is now possible to look at the whole roster of performers in variety, from the top of the bill down to those that were merely making a living in the industry.

The safe storage unit in Stanmore where the British Music Hall Archive is based is in some ways an appropriate location for a weird and wonderful collection of costumes and ephemera. The fact that some of these materials are not in proper collections is indicative of the treatment of music hall and variety in many serious studies. Prior research on variety bills has tended to analyse isolated examples of variety bills; utilising the British Music Hall Society's extensive collection of variety bills and programmes, it is possible to build a more comprehensive picture of the composition of variety acts, the role that comedians played in this arrangement, and how tastes changed. The focus in this area will fall on the most complete set of variety bills that is held for the Sunderland Empire, and an analysis of the Finsbury Park Empire and the acts that topped the bill. The Metropolitan in Edgware Road will be used as an example of a second-tier theatre. These materials are also normally only collected on commercial websites and scattered amongst different sources. The collection held by the British Music Hall Society is unparalleled and provides a national picture of the different variety bills and provides colour to the listed headline acts in the ledgers.¹⁰⁷

The Stage magazine provides many details and debates from within the variety and theatre industry. The magazine offers listings and engagements along with adverts

¹⁰⁶ 'Chronology of performances', *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, http://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/

¹⁰⁷ British Music Hall Society Archive: Poster collection.

and deliberations on the state of variety and how various influences affected it. It is a very useful tool in cross-referencing tours and appearances against the financial ledgers. The rise and impact of television can be traced through the period, as specialist sections were given over to the magazine.¹⁰⁸

The *British Newspaper Archive* provides further substantiation of financial data and ephemera but also reports on the implications of variety in local communities and wider news events that arose from major tours and artists.¹⁰⁹

The British Library has a series of interviews as part of the *Theatre Archive Project* that were conducted by Sue Barbour. These interviews provide valuable resources, as they provide primary evidence from across the industry. These first-hand accounts give extra insight into the workings of the industry from established performers to technical staff.¹¹⁰

The Hylda Baker archive provides an interesting, if overwhelming, catalogue of the minutiae of a performer's contracts, fan mail, agent's letters, press clippings, and correspondence from theatres. This gives a good insight into the affairs, finances, and activities of a successful performer and how she managed her own career, secured the best wages and consistent work. It shows her ascent and then her subsequent exploitation of this position with work from broadcasters but also appearances at smaller theatres.¹¹¹

The VAF (Variety Artistes' Federation) archive at the National Archives contains the documents of the major trade union of variety performers. This archive has lots of dense material regarding industrial relations, but it is rather technical and does not reveal

¹⁰⁸ *The Stage*, The British Newspaper Archive, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/the-stage>.

¹⁰⁹ The British Newspaper Archive, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>.

¹¹⁰ British Library: Theatre Archive Project, <https://www.bl.uk/collections/theatre-archive-project>.

¹¹¹ Lancashire Archives: Papers of Hylda Baker (1905–1986), Business papers, DDX 1683/3.

wider patterns within the industry.¹¹² There is scope for more research in this archive with a specific focus on the working conditions of performers.

The BBC Written Archive has an excellent collection on variety, and this has been used by lots of academics studying broadcasting and comedy and variety, such as Martin Dibbs and Morgan Daniels. I have been able to make use of a lot of primary material from BBC producers, performers, and management. Much of this material regards how to adapt variety for the radio and reveals clear class attitudes towards the vulgarity and suitability of old-fashioned music hall. Although I was able to collect much material on radio for this project, my work on television coincided with the Covid lockdown and has prevented further access.¹¹³

Mass Observation materials have been used in places. These were used to examine the public's responses to many different aspects of daily life, including new developments and changing attitudes in popular culture.¹¹⁴

The London Metropolitan Archives has a collection of information on London theatres; it includes some ephemera and records and lots of official documents, such as theatre plans and proposed designs.¹¹⁵

The National Fairground Archive has an extensive collection of material on music hall, variety, comedy performance, and many related fields such as circuses. It is particularly useful as a repository of books that are not widely available in other academic libraries. Much of the Cyril Critchlow collection focuses on Blackpool and has many resources for the Victorian and Edwardian music hall.¹¹⁶

¹¹² National Archives, FS 27/159, Variety Artistes' Federation, 1907–1967.

¹¹³ BBC Written Archive in Caversham.

¹¹⁴ *Mass observation online*, <https://www-massobservation-amdigital-co-uk.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/>.

¹¹⁵ London Metropolitan Archives: London Music Halls, LMA/4237.

¹¹⁶ University of Sheffield: National Fairground and Circus Archive, <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/nfca>.

Sources and methodology

The disregard for variety theatre after the First World War means that material for research is scattered and often not kept in recognisable archives or collections but organised by collectors or voluntary societies; sometimes material circulates for sale on the internet. Material was brought into professional archival settings after the deaths of Roy Hudd and Ken Dodd and their collections were acquired by the University of Kent and the Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Archive. This will provide even more material for future researchers and a broader depth, although a lot of ephemera will be dispersed by internet sales.

This thesis will be able to use financial records to test some of the theories, particularly those related to youth, Americanisation, mass culture, and permissiveness. The Stoll and Moss records show each theatre in the chain, the date, the headline act, the takings, the equivalent for that week the previous year, and the profit or loss. This gives a very deep picture when multiple theatres and shows can be cross-referenced and patterns of profit and loss can be analysed.

On a surface level, one can see the names at the top of the bill change and this can show what was being used to attract audiences; one can also see how successful these were and where different acts performed across the country. One can also see how new attempts to attract audiences fared. The variety theatres were being used as a testing ground for popular culture, the interaction between more traditional music hall acts and those aimed at younger demographics.

The methods used in this thesis will employ a combination of financial records, ephemera, and promotional material to analyse the patterns of change in both popular

culture and society. These records are rich in both the story they tell about individual performers, genres, and theatre performance. A national picture can be extrapolated from these records. The Birmingham Hippodrome and the British Music Hall Society material which can provide a deeper picture of complete bills rather than merely focusing on stars and headline acts.

The recordings of performers, box office takings, music charts, promotional materials, records from the BBC Written Archives Centre, newspapers and *The Stage* amongst other sources can then be combined with the Stoll Moss records. This builds up a picture of how variety both shaped and reflected the trends that emerge from the immediate post-war years until the 1960s. This is a period that has been characterised by concepts of Americanisation, youth, and affluence but the variety theatres can be seen as mediators that demonstrated a more nuanced and complex picture. Youth movements arrived more gradually and there were various experiments that arrived in waves both in wider British society and within the theatres. This was not an overwhelming invasion of American or youth culture but a calculated plan to see which genres would work. There was a definite feeling at the time that all of these could be potential fads, like early twentieth century roller-skating or ragtime, and monetising these before returning to the core material of variety could be seen as a clear outcome for many of those booking for variety theatres. However, the flexibility of variety was evident and the assumptions about how groups interact with new mass cultural movements, particularly those based around age and class, can often be seen to be naïve and easily disproved. This study omits pantomimes. They were amongst the most popular performances of the variety year and often featured comedians and other major variety performers. However, pantomimes have been around before variety and outlasted it. Pantomime is such an important and extensive area of British culture and theatre history that including it would impinge upon

the findings of this study. This is a separate field of research. Similarly, any dramatic theatre or musicals that appear in variety theatres have not been discussed. Summer seasons, which were another form of variety, have generally been discounted as they ran parallel to the staging of conventional variety. The summer season, and seaside entertainment in general, is a part of the variety industry but one that, like pantomime, requires a separate study. Northern Ireland will also be omitted, as it did not form a part of the major variety networks.

There are some themes that require further research, including interesting avenues to explore about race and identity within the variety field. American vaudeville often included blackface performers and there were examples in Britain with performers like G.H. Elliott, minstrel shows and *The Black and White Minstrel Show* which began on the BBC in 1958. However, there was increasing diversity both from the British Empire and with American acts in variety. Numerous Jewish figures are also represented on and off stage. Similarly, sexuality and permissiveness are discussed but LGBTQ+ identities are not investigated heavily and there is more research to look at with how these groups are represented. Gay performers but also those appropriating gay culture and using camp elements in their acts are numerous from Frankie Howerd to Max Miller. A deeper investigation of the popularity of performers impersonating the opposite sex is also necessary although it is referenced here. The entertainment and theatre world has often provided a harbour for those outside the mainstream to more readily express their identities and I believe that a study on these issues would be highly rewarding.

The Structure of the Thesis

This first chapter will describe the historical context of the variety industry. It will examine the influence of music hall in the dynamics and economic structures of the variety circuit. Chapter 1 provides the historical context by examining the long-term evolution of music hall and the transition to variety; this is important because variety, much more than radio, cinema or television, was shaped by cultural traditions dating back to the Victorian period.

It will examine the impact of war on comedy after 1945 and how the closures of theatres and the importance of the BBC had altered the industry. The attitudes of the population after the war and the influence of demobbed soldiers that had served in entertainment corps provided a new pool of talent for the industry. This chapter will look at the popular forms of entertainment in general, the film industry and radio, and how this was reflected in the make-up of acts that were booked to perform at the variety theatres in the mid to late 1940s.

In chapter 2 there will be an examination of the ownership framework, production, promotion and commercial strategies of the comedy industry during this period. Chapter 2 provides a broad overview of the organisational and financial structures of variety after 1945, including a discussion of some of the key acts, and an overview of some of the bills; this shows that, although under pressure and subject to challenge, variety still had some vitality, and was still making money. This chapter also investigates the popularity of more traditional performers that still formed the majority of most bills. The different circuits, comedians, agents and management will be assessed. The changing nature and format of variety bills will also be analysed. I will utilise the Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Archive along with the British Music Hall

Society archive, *The Stage* magazine and newspaper archives to gain sufficient information.

Chapters 3 to 6 look at the key cultural and technological challenges that emerged in this period: radio, aspiration and American celebrity culture; rock and roll; television. In each case promoters sought to adapt to these challenges by incorporating or connecting to key elements of the challengers; there was some innovation, and money to be made by drawing on stars of the other formats, but this was, to some extent, weakening the core ethos of variety and conceding that the alternative formats were more appealing than variety's own stars.

Chapter 3 will examine how the changing interests and tastes of this period were linked to the social and economic shifts in society. The traditional humour of the music hall began to look dated. Teenagers were more interested in the burgeoning culture of pop music. Older adults sought more aspirational entertainment, rather than material that harked back to the Victorian industrial cities.

This chapter will utilise the financial accounts of the Moss Empires chain of theatres to analyse the changes that occurred in the line-ups of variety theatres. The emergence of popular music and pop culture that was centred on individual singers and then rock n' roll bands moved away from popular singers, the comic-singers of the music hall, and the popular big bands. The effect on the dynamics of variety bills and the role of comedians in this new set-up will be examined.

As the 1950s progressed, popular music expanded its reach. Chapter 4 will analyse the success of marketing individual singers that then developed into music that appealed to teenagers. Rock and roll had been a huge commercial success in the United States and early pop-rock hybrids gave way to true rock stars. Rapidly, young British teenagers both influenced by the American stars and already intrigued by jazz and blues began to develop

their own styles of music. The variety theatres offered a home to all these performers but the more successful moved to other venues whilst the British skiffle and Larry Parnes' teen idols were mainstays on the circuit. This created a unique period where youth and tradition both clashed and complemented each other. This was a challenging time for variety; it was flexible to changing tastes, but major industry figures were more sceptical about variety's role in popular entertainment.

Television was pivotal in the development of modern popular culture. It dealt a severe blow to variety. Chapter 5 will look at the relationship between these competing media forms and how performers bridged these gaps. A bigger question will tackle whether television destroyed variety or secured its legacy.

The BBC was keen to move away from variety and music hall style entertainment. In fact, it was independent television that translated variety away from the local stage and onto the screen by beaming Sunday Night at the London Palladium. The role of impresarios, the Grades and Val Parnell were instrumental in this shift.

Chapter 6 intends to reveal the relationship between the comedy of the variety theatres and how this was shaped by changing cultural and social patterns. As part of this an examination of the role of the Windmill Theatre will demonstrate the specific set of post-war moral values about both comedy and nudity. It will then analyse the prevailing attitudes to rude and suggestive material, homosexuality, and gender. This will include analysis of the archival materials from the Windmill Theatre, the BBC and the Moss Empires chain of theatres.

The concluding chapter will seek to draw out the important patterns that have emerged from my research. Chapter 7 explores an alternative, and ultimately unsuccessful strategy to adapt using nudity/ sexualised material. It will seek to demonstrate that comedy reflects much wider trends in society and that it is a valuable

source for historians to base future research on. I hope that my work will be a piece in the jigsaw that will tie together the disparate works and provide valuable original research.

This approach will examine the economic dimension of this industry, and will be distinct from the previously philosophical or media-based studies. I regard the changes in the variety industry and the loss of the music hall tradition in this period as highly significant. Many commentators claim that this merely migrated onto television, but it extinguished a cultural experience that has not been recreated on television or rekindled in comedy venues.

Traditional Variety and Music Hall

Context and traditions of music hall

To understand the position of variety within popular culture, it is essential to place it within its historical context. The fact that variety theatres disappeared over 60 years ago can make it difficult to comprehend the influence and cultural pervasion of music hall. The origins of variety theatre grew from the Victorian and Edwardian music hall. It is necessary to explain these areas to understand the shape, atmosphere, and entertainment available in the variety theatres. Peter Bailey has described music hall as 'the prototype modern entertainment industry, the music hall was a yet larger and more spectacular palace of the people, charging admission for nightly professional entertainment.'¹

In the 1830s, British cities grew rapidly and had millions of people to entertain. Often such entertainment started as singalongs in the backrooms of pubs. Then publicans used to put on shows in rooms upstairs or in the bar. These eventually grew and ambitious publicans began to attach halls or small theatres onto their premises. Sometimes the entire pub would be demolished, in favour of the more profitable music hall. There were simultaneous developments in 'song and supper rooms' and pleasure gardens that catered to a more affluent audience.²

By the 1850s, 'publican entrepreneurs' had set up a system of halls, which was distinguished from the conventional theatre by the 1843 Theatres Act, which did not allow the staging of theatrical drama but allowed the sale of alcohol and other

¹ Peter Bailey, 'Leisure, Entertainment and Popular Culture', *19th Century UK Periodicals* (Gale, 2008), <https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/peter-bailey-leisure-entertainment-popular-culture> [accessed on 5th October 2021].

² Bailey, *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure*, p. ix.

refreshments.³ By the 1860s, figures like Charles Morton had established some of the earliest major halls, such as the Canterbury in Lambeth and Oxford Music Hall in the West End. By 1870, there were 31 large halls in London and 384 in the rest of the country.⁴ These halls became more professional in their provision of food and in decoration. At this time, performers could try and move rapidly between halls to ensure that they gained the maximum amount of pay in an evening. In London, this encompassed multiple appearances. Some of the most famous performers from this period were George Leybourne, the Great Vance, and Dan Leno. The proprietors of the halls at this stage wanted the government to appoint an official censor because they were not subject to the same rules as 'theatres of spoken drama' and were not at the behest of local authorities and magistrates.⁵ This was denied by a Select Committee in 1866 and music hall continued to occupy a space outside conventional theatre, whilst dramatic theatres began to poach music hall stars for their pantomimes.⁶

In music hall, tables were set around the stage, as in a cabaret style. This did not maximise seating capacity but provided a convivial atmosphere for the consumption of alcohol. The necessity of a table or bar in a drinking establishment to hold drinks prioritised the revenue from beer and other liquor.

The music hall has been simplified into a form of 'folk art' and the patrons characterised as a 'joyous, hard-working class' and as expressing the soul of the working-class. Bailey says that the stereotyping and romanticising of the music hall came from authors as varied as T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Rudyard Kipling, and George Orwell.⁷ Bailey

³ *Ibid.*, p. ix

⁴ *Ibid.* p. x

⁵ Derek Scott, 'Music Hall: Regulations and Behaviour in a British Cultural Institution', paper presented at Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade, *The Future of Music History International Conference* (28–30 September 2017), <https://victorianweb.org/mt/musichall/scott.html> [accessed on 1st November 2021].

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Bailey, *Music Hall*, p. xiv.

notes that, to the nostalgic and idealistic commentator, 'An institution which for much of its history had been represented as an agent of moral and cultural degeneration became part of the World We Have Lost.'⁸

The music halls were not exclusively for hard-drinking urban working males, though. The clientele was young and old, rich or poor, and they provided drinking songs and broad humour to this broad church. In the rapidly growing industrial cities, the halls provided collective entertainment for the masses. This growth of entertainment to serve the industrial workers, encompassing pubs, music halls, football grounds, and later greyhound stadiums and cinemas shaped the modern urban environment. In the Victorian city, the music hall was one of the main venues that catered for the entertainment needs of the urban populace.

The entertainment in the music hall put an emphasis on multi-talented performers. Music hall comics did not just perform simple stand-up routines. A performer was expected to be able to sing and dance or perform a monologue or skit. Music hall had been designed to hold the attention of audiences in the backs of pubs, which then morphed into larger halls. These crowds could be rowdy and much of the material was aimed at selling more alcoholic drinks to the already inebriated with sing-alongs, catchphrases, and recognisable characters and situations all important. This bawdy atmosphere had even employed promotional songs for champagne, ale, and other drinks. This entertainment was designed for short attention spans and was aimed at making the audience feel included and providing them with something they recognised. The working-class stereotypes that resembled local archetypal characters or the frequent

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

use of the conspiratorial stage whisper were designed to include the audience, and the settings were often domestic, the situations familiar, and the performers identifiable.

The music hall was well-known as an important leisure space in the Victorian city. It had been created by the industrial socio-economic situations that amassed increasing numbers of working-class people into cities. They required entertainment and an outlet from the drudgery of factories and other tough or tedious labour. It provided a liminal space for people to feel liberated and comfortable and was not bound by stiffer conventions of more formal entertainment venues that catered to the middle and upper classes. These backroom theatres grew and became more ornate but retained their ability to offer what Bakhtin has called the carnivalesque, a space where the normal rules were suspended, and pleasure and frivolity could flourish. This atmosphere was imbued into variety performance, just as football stadiums have been increasingly sanitised and become grander, from football grounds designed by Archibald Leitch to all-seater stadiums; they never lost their sense that they existed outside of some of the normal rules of society, a place where people could scream and shout without censure. The music hall became the variety theatre through the work of another great architect, Frank Matcham, but the sense that an exotic gaiety and sauciness lurked behind the curtain was always present. Andy Medhurst explains the atmosphere evoked within the halls:

Music hall must never be thought of as identical to carnival – the historical, geographical and economic contexts are far too dissimilar, and music hall looked at how to manage and find joy in the everyday far more than it yearned for utopia. Music hall and carnival come from very different places, and sometimes display conspicuously different aims, but there is also an overlap zone between them of shared attitudes, ontologies and structures of feeling. Anne Hole has said that music hall was ‘carnival brought small, penned within a saloon’.⁹

⁹ Medhurst, *A National Joke*, p. 70.

The legacy of the Victorian music hall remains etched onto the cultural landscape of British culture just like the railways and canals. The language of music hall comedy, both verbal and physical, remains in the comedy canon of many performers. Music hall is still an important cultural touchstone, even though the theatres and nearly all the performers are gone. Most people under the age of 70 will have never seen a functioning hall but the songs and catchphrases have a resonant echo. Marie Lloyd, Gracie Fields, Max Miller, and Dan Leno may not be household names in the twenty-first century, but their influence can still be seen in the work of contemporary performers. Peter Kay, Reeves and Mortimer and Micky Flanagan amongst others all have elements of their acts that would be recognisable to variety audiences.

The music hall had been a bastion of working-class entertainment and with the loss of the variety theatres it severed a link to these industrial roots. It is questionable that it was ever adequately replaced by television comedy and variety. After World War Two, there were expectations for an improved standard of living and changes in the patterns of working-class life. This had a gradual effect on the types of entertainment that most people wanted. Home comforts and appliances made entertainment a less communal experience.

The music hall and its position in the Victorian and Edwardian class and political structure is a much-debated topic. Peter Bailey has challenged the clichéd evocation of the music hall and its romanticised notion of the working class. Oliver Double and Dagmar Kift have both stated that, despite being working class in composition, the music hall was not radical or left-wing. As Peter Bailey reminds us in his work, this was a capitalist enterprise designed to profit from the urban audience. However, Sam Friedman still starts his sociological study of British humour with the 'lowbrow' of the music hall. The

music hall is complex in its nature and the class relationships of music hall and variety cannot be stereotyped.

Peter Bailey has performed an excellent analysis of how the commercial interests of this music hall intersect with theoretical constructions of class. It is possible to analyse music hall and variety through a Marxist lens, that the workers in the halls who had created a form that was successful were exploited by the owners and impresarios. However, this ignores the fact that music hall was driven by commercial interests from its inception. Music hall was not an ideological collective but a post-work entertainment for urban dwellers. Bailey notes that 'Music hall also deployed an extravagant and insidious style that exercised its own determinations both within and beyond the sub-culture ... it is necessary to get behind the gush and glitter of music hall hyperbole to reveal the politics of profit and control'.¹⁰

From the late 1870s onwards, the halls became grander and became recognisable as what would be called variety theatres.¹¹ There were more opulent theatres and improvement in stage design and equipment and more concern for safety. Theatres increasingly became syndicated under men such as Sir Oswald Stoll and Sir Edward Moss and others. There was a great expansion of the Empires and Hippodromes all around the country. This led to standard circuits of acts that toured the country in the major theatres and a network of minor halls.¹² Figures like Oswald Stoll wanted to move away from the 'disreputable' music hall to 'respectable' variety. This drive for respectability was justified by the licentious behaviour in the halls, as there were areas in theatres where prostitutes openly solicited trade. The London County Council started to deny licences to new theatres to discourage some of the licentious behaviour. A strong opponent of the

¹⁰ Bailey, *Music Hall: Business of Pleasure*, p. xviii.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. xi – xii

‘immorality’ and innuendo that occurred in music halls was Laura Ormiston Chant, a prominent feminist and social reformer who led the campaign. She did not like the nature of performances or costumes worn by suggestive singers like Marie Lloyd or the soliciting by prostitutes that was occurring in the promenade at the Empire Theatre of Varieties that she visited in Leicester Square. She voiced her concerns at a London County Council licensing meeting for the Empire; a screen was subsequently put up around the promenade, and the sale of alcohol was prohibited.¹³ She was mocked in songs and the screen protecting the promenade was pulled down by protesters, including a young Winston Churchill, who viewed the measures as prudish.¹⁴ This did provide figures like Stoll with the impetus to push ahead in systematising and sanitising more music halls, leading to the introduction of variety. Many patrons complained about the lack of beer and the sanitised surroundings, and this did lead to a drop in audiences.

The new licensing regulations and a desire by some of the major theatres to further disentangle music hall from its ‘boozy’ reputation meant that Oswald Stoll did not apply for a licence for many of his halls.¹⁵ The Variety Artistes’ Federation was founded in 1907 that year, and a two-week strike took place (also known as the Music Hall War). This drive to improve the condition and decoration of theatres was expensive; the cost of refurbishment and the loss of revenue from alcohol sales were beginning to bite. Major music hall owners began to squeeze the pay of performers, stagehands, managers and other employees, and the doubling of performances and added matinees added to their workload.¹⁶

¹³ London Metropolitan Archives: London Music Halls, LMA/4237.

¹⁴ Richard Toye, *Churchill's Empire: The World that Made Him and the World He Made* (New York, 2010).

¹⁵ Bailey, *Music Hall: Business of Pleasure*, p. xi.

¹⁶ Co-operative Printing Society, *Music Hall War. In Distress, 1907*, illustrated flyer with an engraved image by Roy, Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1257802/music-hall-war-in-distress-flyer-roy/> [accessed on 28 September 2022].

Music hall began to move further towards the dramatic in the form of sketches. Peter Bailey paints a picture of slow decline and 'premature obituaries' in the years after 1912 but the final 50 years of what was variety theatre are complex.¹⁷

The significance of comedy performers in the Victorian Music Hall is outlined by Lois Rutherford. According to her figures, in 1899 54 percent of performers in the variety and music hall profession were comedy acts. 20 percent of this number were comic singers or comedians; there were also comic duos, trios, male and female impersonators, sketch troupes, blackface acts, serio-comics, and comediennes or pantomimists.¹⁸ A further 20 percent were speciality acts, including animal acts, wizards, ventriloquists, jugglers, 'continental acts', child acts, illusionists, marionettes, and even early cinema demonstrations. 14 percent of the acts were acrobatic, involving gymnasts, dancers, cyclists, comic acrobats, and strong/boxing acts.¹⁹ A further 11 percent were singers or musicians. In 1878, 64 percent had been comic acts and in 1868, 59 percent. This shows a clear dominance of comedy performers within the context of Victorian music hall.²⁰ There had been a steady growth in the numbers of speciality acts, to create the more diverse and exciting variety. However, according to these figures there was a decrease in the numbers of serious singers whilst the numbers of comic singers remained steady.²¹

¹⁷ Bailey, *Music Hall*, p. xiii.

¹⁸ Lois Rutherford, 'Managers in a Small Way: The Professionalisation of Variety Artistes, 1860-1914' in Peter Bailey, *Music Hall*, p.116.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 116.

Table 1.1: *Composition of Acts in Victorian Music Hall*

Type of Act	1868	1878	1899
Comedy acts	58.5%	64%	54%
Sentimental singers	20%	13%	-
Vocal and musical acts	-	-	11%
Speciality acts	4%	9%	20%
Acrobatic acts	17.5%	13%	14%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Lois Rutherford in Bailey, *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure*, p. 116. (Numbers rounded down)

Overall, this demonstrates the strength of comedy in the music hall. The dominance of this form was persistent. Although there was clear diversification with the changes being pushed by owners and promoters in the late nineteenth century, comedy was the mainstay of variety performance. It could be theorised that the audience should be in an 'amused state' or laughing for at least three-quarters of the performance. Many of the speciality acts were absurd or openly designed to make the audiences laugh. They would have had a comedy element: a ventriloquist or animal act would be designed to surprise but also amuse.

Variety

The changes made at the start of the variety era were designed to maximise profit, to take power and wealth away from performers, and to sanitise and reorder the more chaotic elements of music hall. However, these changes were not unpopular, and audiences filled the new theatres and enjoyed the diversity and professionalism of variety. Similarly, later changes can be credited to an aspirational and innovation-hungry public that desired new, slick, and exciting entertainment. Although to the purists variety sold out to the

major chains and sacrificed the edginess and liminality of music hall that made it exciting and invigorating, these elements excluded a family audience. Just as modern family comedians and comedy will be described as bland and regressive, they are often the most profitable. Likewise, as popular music is sneered at, so variety was seen as catering too much to broad demographics but it enabled more people to enjoy professional entertainment in a clean and safe environment. Music halls did not provide that space.

There was a significant concentration of wealth and power in popular culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Before cinema was dominated by prominent chains and studios and the music industry was controlled by labels, major chains of theatres were dominated by powerful entrepreneurs like Oswald Stoll and Edward Moss.

Stoll and Moss built new, larger-capacity, decorated theatres designed to attract well-heeled clientele and provide a space for family entertainment. Those who had desired 'dramatic theatre' all along got stalls rather than tables arranged around a stage. These were theatres not taverns, and were richly decorated, with plush carpets, gilded adornments, and balconies. These theatres were often designed by Frank Matcham, who was responsible for the design of 90 theatres and the refurbishment of 80 more.²² The ticket prices increased in line with this. The capital investment in these theatres indicates the amount of money that could be procured from these premises. Although the construction of these 'Palaces' and 'Empires' may have been medium-term speculation, at the time these buildings had a clear, profitable future. Theatre syndicates also wanted to clean up the acts too and make this true family entertainment. One way they could help

²² Frank Matcham Society: 'List of Theatres', <http://www.frankmatchamsociety.org.uk/about/list-of-theatres/> [accessed on 1 November 2021]; *Ibid.*, 'Later Theatres & Other Works' <http://www.frankmatchamsociety.org.uk/about/theatres-other-works/> [accessed on 1 November 2021].

to maximise their margins was with the twice-nightly system. Some music hall bills would feature long bills of many different acts, that enabled performers to quickly travel and perform at other neighbouring theatres. This was soon increasingly prohibited through barring clauses, which halved the number of acts from more than 20 to around ten. There would be two sittings, featuring the same acts, and this could potentially double the number of spectators. The artistes would not need to be paid twice though, so unlike a hall that would be entertaining the patrons, who would move in and out of the performance space, there were now two clear performances that were strictly timed. These changes helped to lead to the 1907 Music Hall Strike. The changes around this time were a ruthless systemisation of the industry.²³

The time constraints of the twice-nightly system did lead to the departure of music hall chairmen (compères), who would fill in between acts and provide a thread to the whole night. They were replaced with numbered cards, which obviously was not as seamless and disrupted the fluidity of the performance. The cardholders were often heckled. However, the performances could now run precisely on time without the ad-libbing of a compère. Comic songs became less important during this period, too, and the exotic 'variety' of acts became more significant. There were acrobats, dancers, magicians, and a wider array of musical acts.

Oswald Stoll also introduced a minimum wage of £5, as opposed to the £2 or £3 that was common.²⁴ The justification was to try to procure better performances, but it had clear business benefits too. It secured artistes for the entire theatre chain, in case there was a problem elsewhere, and it froze out smaller 'single-house' owners. This along with the barring clauses helped to put the squeeze on independent operators.

²³ Dave Russell, 'Varieties of life: the making of the Edwardian music hall' in Michael R. Booth, and J. H. Kaplan (eds.), *Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage* (Cambridge, 1996).

²⁴ Lois Rutherford in Peter Bailey, *Music Hall*, p. 106

In the nineteenth century, local policing was enforced by boroughs and not on a national scale. This was governed by local Watch Committees. These committees were involved in governing safety and the sale of refreshments and, despite its not being within their legal remit, they would sometimes police moral content of theatrical shows and were successful in bringing some of these to court.²⁵ Some MPs, such as Samuel Smith, the Liberal MP for Flintshire, were champions of social purity, in both theatre and variety. In a speech to parliament in 1900 he sought to curb 'the growing tendency to put upon the stage plays of a demoralising character', maintaining that 'a stricter supervision of theatrical performances is needed alike in the interests of the public and the theatrical profession.'²⁶

Oliver Double explains that 'unlike legitimate theatre, or pantomime and revue, a variety show was not bound together by a narrative or even a theme.'²⁷ Nevertheless, some promoters would insert a theme or a narrative to their shows that were performed in variety theatres, often because of a show that had been produced elsewhere or because they had a particular specialism.

Variety was still a vibrant form of popular culture at the start of the twentieth century. Dave Russell explains the strength in attendance throughout the country, although it is important not to confuse capacity with ticket sales. Russell estimates that there were 350 dedicated theatres and hundreds more offering cine-variety (simply put, integrating variety shows in-between films) in cinema settings.²⁸

²⁵ Oliver Double, *Stand Up: On Being a Comedian* (London, 2014), pp. 79–80.

²⁶ 'London Theatres - Supervision Of Plays, Etc Volume 83: debated on Tuesday 15 May', UK Parliament (1900) <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1900-05-15/debates/6fb9411a-fe18-4fcf-96ec-b840af688982/LondonTheatres%E2%80%94SupervisionOfPlaysEtc>

²⁷ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 12.

²⁸ Russell, 'Varieties of life', p. 65.

National attendance statistics do not exist, but variety clearly attracted large numbers. In 1912, for example, the London County Council licensing district contained fifty-one full blown variety theatres with a total seating capacity of 76,370, many, probably the majority, operating twice nightly and giving at least one matinée a week, for fifty to fifty-two weeks of the year. Obviously, they did not always run at full capacity, but even a moderate estimate would suggest annual admissions in the LCC area alone of some 25 million and perhaps considerably more. The provincial situation was equally propitious, with managers assuming about one-third of the local population could be deemed potential customers.²⁹

Variety had experienced slumps in the 1910s and 1920s, due to competition from cinema and overexpansion into the new theatres that led to a surplus of seats. The most important variety theatre in the country was the London Palladium, the brainchild of Walter Gibbons, a man who had made his money in the cinema.³⁰ He took over a chain of music halls that were mainly bases in the London suburbs, apart from the Holborn Empire.³¹ Gibbons wanted a flagship theatre in central London to compete with the Stoll and Moss Empire theatres (that had merged in 1898), and created the London Hippodrome and the Victoria Palace.³² He commissioned Frank Matcham to build the Palladium at the cost of £250,000.³³ Gibbons failed and the theatre was taken over by Oswald Stoll, but with the advent of talking films the chain was sold back to Gibbons and his new partner, Charles Gulliver.³⁴ A young man in Gulliver's office, Val Parnell (the son of a famous ventriloquist) took over the selection of variety acts. They then took over a Northern chain of theatres run by the Black brothers (George, Alfred, and Ted).³⁵ They had had success with cine-variety and a new company was formed, the General Theatre

²⁹*Ibid.*, p.65

³⁰ Richard Anthony Baker, *Old Time Variety: An Illustrated History* (Barnsley, 2011), p. 58.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Corporation (GTC), on the proviso that George was given a job in London.³⁶ After a failure with the controversial film *Dawn* and a commercial failure, Gibbons was forced to resign and George Black took over at the Palladium.³⁷

Black had announced that variety was making a comeback.³⁸ He had successfully fought back against both cinema, radio, and revue.³⁹ The imminent threat of 'talkies' was on the horizon, and this challenged one of the main selling points of variety.

George Black had begun his career in cinemas. He had operated two chains; one he sold and the other amalgamated with the General Theatre Corporation (GTC).⁴⁰ He was then the director and thus inherited control of their flagship theatre, the London Palladium.⁴¹ The Palladium was able to command a large audience and consequently considerable takings. Black was instrumental in modernising the variety theatre. He introduced 'high-speed variety', which did not have tedious gaps between acts and only had one intermission.⁴² Any gaps between songs and any other waiting times were to be minimised in favour of quick changeovers.⁴³ Other measures that Black introduced included encouraging performers to be innovative rather than repeating old material and encouraging comics to write new jokes, singers to avoid 'pluggers' who might be pushing their latest songs, putting pressure on agents to employ new talent, improving the set design and surrounds, and generally improving the fabric and facilities of the theatres. George Black's son, Alfred outlines the measures that had been taken to try and improve the state of variety.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 51.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴³ Klaus Nathaus, "All dressed up and nowhere to go"? Spaces and conventions of youth in 1950s Britain', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 41, (2015), p. 47.

It was a dead duck – they'd done everything – it had circuses: it had had films, it had had operettas – but it never had any pattern; and Dad latched onto the idea of modern Variety. Instead of people doing an act for, say, twenty minutes, he gave them twelve minutes, which cut out all the padding and got down to the nitty-gritty.⁴⁴

Black had accelerated a process of standardisation in the variety theatre⁴⁵ A performance would start with an overture from the orchestra, the first act would often be a couple of dancers, then there would be a specialised act (a juggler, a musician, or magician, or some other novelty).⁴⁶ The first half would end with a stand-up comedian and then a singer. The second half would open with the comedian from the first, then the main star would arrive. The final act used a smaller star, and the audience would leave during the final act.⁴⁷ In the 1920s, the main act might get £200, and the smaller acts might receive £20.

George Black originally banned broadcasts of performances from the Palladium but realised that it forced comics to find new material and reversed it.⁴⁸ He changed his mind again when he realised that this meant that people were not paying to see these artistes. The Variety Artistes' Federation was also opposed to radio and stated:

The artiste who is in demand and who is identified with material of an original and distinctive manner would be most unwise to broadcast such material. Since, by doing so, he would not only shorten the life of his material, but also lessen the value of his act.⁴⁹

The fate of vaudeville in North America followed a similar trend, in a space where radio was more developed, and cinema was more advanced. The distances between

⁴⁴ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 64.

⁴⁵ Hunter Davies, *The Grades: The First Family of British Entertainment* (London, 1981), p. 69.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Baker, *Old Time Variety*, p. 64.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, *Old Time Variety*, p. 65.

vaudeville theatres in the United States made it logistically more challenging and arduous for performers and their support to reach audiences.⁵⁰ The US embraced mass media more readily and live entertainment venues were absorbed by cinema chains. Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. (father of John F. Kennedy, who later became the 35th President of the USA) played a role in this. His commercial interests lay in film studios. Kennedy was keen to gain control of the existing network of vaudeville theatres in the USA but only in order to dismantle them, and to transform them into outlets for motion pictures. Kennedy is reported to have often used unscrupulous methods in the process.⁵¹

Vaudeville had links to art's avant-garde intellectual and satirical approach and had crossover with significant figures in the Dadaist and Futurist movements.⁵² Political upheaval in Germany and France in the mid-twentieth century, combined with the challenges of new technology, sidelined cabaret and music hall in Europe. It lived on in a limited form, as it did unexpectedly in some communist states of central Europe.⁵³

Radio could provide a great opportunity for performers to further their careers and new radio shows like *Band Waggon* and *Music Hall* made stars of comedian Arthur Askey and bandleaders like Billy Cotton, Henry Hall, and Jack Hylton. However, the variety theatre would still provide the best form of remuneration.

Oswald Stoll felt similarly and said in the *London Evening News* that when broadcasting was of a good quality, then 'the best singers, actors, lecturers and orators will be listened to by ten million people at a time, but all the lesser fry in artistry will be wiped out. No one will have any use of them.'⁵⁴ George Black relaunched the Palladium

⁵⁰ John Kenrick, 'Musicals101.com', 2004, <https://musicals101.com/> (accessed 17 May 2010).

⁵¹ Anthony Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Westport, Conn., 1994), p. 280; Frank Cullen, Florence Hackman and Donald McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old & New: an Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* (New York, 2007), 630-631

⁵² Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, p.8.

⁵³ Lisa Appignanesi, *The Cabaret*, (New Haven and London, 2004), p 206; 223

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

with quicker shows. He advertised the new shows with the phrase 'Variety is coming back' plastered all over London.⁵⁵ The opening night had Ivor Novello and Gracie Fields.⁵⁶ Wearing a 'magnificent new gown', Fields said to her audience 'Ee, ba gum. It's all too grand for me.'⁵⁷

Black made acts introduce each other and ended the waits between the acts where the orchestra would play the last chorus over and over. He improved the costumes and smartened up the acts and the sets, which the American performer Sophie Tucker had criticised.⁵⁸

Cinema had been the first major challenge to variety and with the help of key figures like George Black, variety had coexisted and developed since the 1930s. It had presented cine-variety (an amalgamation of the two forms) but then began to offer a distinct format that was able to attract customers despite the massive popularity of film. Comedians were a key component in the distinct appeal of variety. They provided the live and interactive novelty that was absent in the passive cinema and later radio. George Black was a significant figure in the revival of music hall in the 1930s.⁵⁹

There was a distinct change in the style of comedy from the character comedy and song-based comedy towards unstructured, more free-flowing patter from comedians.⁶⁰ This process began in the 1920s but accelerated into the 1930s, although there was still an element of exaggerated costume and comic songs still formed a part of the act. However, the patter became the focal point rather than filler between songs.

Revues were a threat to variety. 'The revue, with its emphasis on coherence, in

⁵⁵ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 51; Baker, *Old Time Variety*, p.63

⁵⁶ Baker, *Old Time Variety*, p. 63.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-4.

⁵⁹ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, pp. 51-5.

⁶⁰ Oliver Double, 'An Approach to Traditions of British Stand-Up Comedy', PhD thesis (University of Sheffield, 1991), pp. 55-7, <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/1873/1/DX182554.pdf>.

comparison to the rag-bag of acts that comprised variety, appeared in the early twentieth century but its challenge was less serious than claimed at the time'.⁶¹ Revues provided a set cast that would tour and perform different sketches, dances, and songs with a finale.⁶² There were some that were grand spectacles and others touring more minor theatres that could be disappointing.⁶³

Variety was more refined, diverse, and family-friendly than music hall. Many comedians of this era retained a sensibility that a 'saucy' sense of humour was acceptable in the confines of the variety theatres; indeed, most parents would have been aware that a performance by Max Miller or Frank Randle was firmly adult in its outlook. Innuendo and suggestion were utilised, and this ensured it remained as a family-friendly environment. Despite this reputation for saucy humour, many acts had to pay careful mind to the Watch Committees.⁶⁴ Variety had adapted and refined the form, but the character of music hall remained an important part of the experience and performance dynamics.

⁶¹ David Taylor, *From Mummers to Madness: A Social History of Popular Music in England, c.1770s to c.1970s* (Huddersfield, 2021), p. 222;

'Music Hall and Variety Theatre', *Victoria and Albert Museum website*, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/music-hall-and-variety-theatre#slideshow=15664669&slide=0> [accessed 23 November 2021]

⁶² James Ross Moore, 'An Intimate Understanding: the Rise of British Musical Revue 1890-1920', PhD thesis (University of Warwick, 2000), pp.1 -27 http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/4012/1/WRAP_THESIS_Moore_2000.pdf.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Mike Huggins, *Vice and the Victorians* (New York, 2016), p. 48.

2. Variety after World War Two

It is important to explain the position of the variety industry after World War Two. In the first years after the war, it was in good financial health and the network of theatres was represented in cities and towns throughout Great Britain. The legacy and influence of music hall has already been discussed but the state of variety and structures of variety need to be examined too. Variety was a sophisticated operation, and it is necessary to understand the different aspects of the organisations and how they worked.

Change is a key theme in this piece. Adaptation was essential. However, traditional variety remained evident throughout the period, and the format of variety was generally adhered to by the theatres. The format and some of the acts were dated and this present a challenge. The term 'music hall' had been superseded for nearly fifty years but it was still used synonymously with variety and there were many performers that had begun their careers in the early twentieth century like Albert Modley, Max Miller, Arthur Lucan and Kitty McShane along with more established performers like George Formby, Gracie Fields and Bud Flanagan and Chesney Allen that had transferred onto other media. These performers identified with its traditions and were still associated with the atmosphere and Peter Bailey's idea of 'knowingness' were still a part of the variety experience. This familiarity had made many of these performers some of Britain's biggest stars.

The Period 1945–1960

The Second World War had ripped through the lives of ordinary people in Britain. The experience of war had left an indelible mark on the nation. People hoped to return to normal but in the language of the twenty-first century, this would be a 'new normal'. People's vision of the future was to regain control of their lives but within a new context; no one wanted to return to the great hardships of the 1930s. David Kynaston describes

the remaining Victorian slums, 'inadequate-to-wretched housing almost everywhere'.¹ There were many homes without hot water, toilets or a bathtub. The poverty of the thirties lingered in many families, but the Beveridge Report offered respite and a new start after the toil of war. The restrictions of wartime were not over, and rationing was firmly in place but the political desire for change signalled by the Labour victory and Attlee administration was palpable

The Second World War had left Britain in a state of disorder and damage; three-quarter of a million houses destroyed or severely damaged, huge disruption of public services, Britain's debt a record £3.5 billion.² In both the fabric of cities and culturally and socially, 1945 was a time of unique and rapid change. The era after 1945 was significantly complex for the British, domestically, imperially, and in foreign affairs. Britain was losing its grip on the Empire, was simultaneously emerging from war and destruction, and forging a welfare state and facing up to new challenges in a divided world.

The war did not merely punctuate the experiences of British citizens, it marked a dramatic shift away from the received ideas about class, culture, and society. Deadly modern technology had penetrated the homes and communities of many but even outside the urban centres war had affected everybody's life. The radio had been a unifying point for many, and comedy had seemed to provide relief and comfort to the population. However, the notion that working-class populations were going to reoccupy their niche within what still looked like a Victorian class system before the war was folly. There was a renewed expectation of change, a budding sense of aspiration.

However, the post-war years promised a revitalised variety sector. There was a strong desire to be able to visit theatres and cinemas and enjoy the live experience

¹ Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, p. 20.

² *Ibid.*

without the threat of bombing.

For the first time in nearly six years the lights went on in front of the Variety theatres. The wartime boom created a momentum which carried well into the post-war period; but the pre-war world had gone for ever and as the momentum subsided the changes in the outside world were reflected in the enclosed world of Variety.³

Both soldiers returning from war and the domestic population had experienced trauma during the conflict. Rationing would not end until 1954, but along with the new Welfare State there was a demand to return to normal life but within a context that had been altered. There were new expectations and aspirations, but these changes would not be fully felt until the 1950s and 1960s. The world of comedy was in a similar situation, although the growth and importance of comedy during wartime on the radio and in the armed forces had produced a vibrant atmosphere for young comics. The variety theatres themselves had been damaged by wartime bombs but most of the network remained intact.⁴ They resumed their business and operated in a similar manner to the pre-war format, but the nature of the acts and their popularity had been altered by wartime. The fact that even in the lean times of austerity the variety theatres were still drawing in good takings is indicative of the resilience of the industry after the war and its popular appeal.

Between 1952 and 1959 over 400 of them ceased to exist.⁵ According to Oliver Double, in 1950 there were 21 variety theatres in London with a total weekly capacity of 424,745.⁶ By 1960 there were four left, namely the Golders Green Hippodrome, the

³ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 140.

⁴ Bryen D. Hillerby, *The Lost Theatres of Sheffield* (Barnsley, 1999), p. 84; Diana Howard, *London Theatres and Music Halls 1850–1950* (London, 1970).

⁵ Donald Auty, 'Those Variety Days', *Arthur Lloyd*, <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Variety.htm> [accessed 17 January 2022].

⁶ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 70.

Metropolitan in Edgware, the Palladium, and the Victoria Palace.⁷ The Metropolitan was demolished in 1964 and the only suburban survivor is the Golders Green Hippodrome, currently being used as a Christian centre after use as a BBC studio.⁸ Only some of the Theatreland venues of Central London survived. The decline of variety entertainment and consequently the vitality and breadth of the British comedy industry was rapid and in magnitude more significant than anything that had gone before. In terms of physical spaces, hundreds of theatres disappeared, thousands had to find new work and by the 1970s variety theatre was essentially extinct. This, however, is not a post-mortem of variety entertainment or live comedy, which would find new media and success, and evolve. However, this study will examine the challenges and opportunities for the comedy industry throughout the period. Comedy was central to the variety format and was often the glue between a diversity of acts. It could be argued because variety never took itself too seriously and every performer was supposed to be a part of the bonhomie that the 'carnival' atmosphere seemed old-fashioned in an era when popular culture became separated, serious, and possibly pretentious.

Variety was never a static form, and it had successfully met modern demands. It had changed from its bawdy, backroom roots into family entertainment. Continual transition was the experience for variety from its music hall years onwards. Richard Hoggart, and even Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, viewed the mass culture of the mid-twentieth century in isolation, outside the wider context of popular culture. The industry had been facing challenges and constantly adapting to social and economic conditions and technological change. It had conformed to societal and moral standards throughout its history. Therefore, variety fits into the story of modern popular culture

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ 'Anger as church buys hippodrome', *BBC News Website*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/6506043.stm> [accessed 11 January 2022].

and reflected the tensions between different market, cultural, and social forces. The changes in post-war entertainment should be regarded as a wider continuum of mass culture; popular culture and massification was nothing new. Whether this was a positive force or not is a much broader question.

The challenges for variety can be attributed partially to an increased awareness of 'cultural capital'. In the context of the 1950s, this is twofold: there is certainly an engagement with the high arts but also the desire for both technologically enabled entertainment and distance from the older forms of Victorian entertainment, a desire to engage with newer forms, more glamorous and not tainted with being old-fashioned. In line with Bourdieu's ideas, the desire for social advancement and education that manifested itself in shifting cultural taste helped to maintain social structures as much as shift them. 'Social origin' was still the determining factor despite the allure of cultural capital and shiny, new innovation.⁹ One of the key questions that will be tackled here is how far the inherited habits, what Bourdieu calls 'habitus' of each social class, determined their cultural consumption and whether social mobility and education shifted these tastes.¹⁰

Cultural and societal changes along with economic realities began to change the nature of variety. Firstly, the post-war atmosphere changed the appetites and attitudes of the population, as austerity gave way to aspiration. Technology, which variety had grappled with in the form of cinema, began to challenge the live audience. Radio had been the crucial entertainment and news conduit for most of the population. Television would be an even more significant rival. Teenagers began to be aggressively marketed towards: serious singers, skiffle, teen idols, and rock 'n' roll led to a revolution in the recording

⁹ Sam Friedman, 'Habitus clivé and the emotional imprint of social mobility', *The Sociological Review*, 64.1, pp. 129–47.

¹⁰ Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, p.170

industry and a fundamental change in how music was performed and marketed. Sex had always been a key component of music hall and variety, in the form of innuendo and saucy humour, but as attitudes began to liberalise the family atmosphere of the reformed variety theatres came under attack.

Comedy was the real backbone of variety. It is what gave the shows their unique character. This was not a space for thoughtful contemplation and there may have been the occasional emotional or transporting musical moment, but this would be quickly punctured by a return to the buoyant mood of the shows that helped smooth the gaps between the acts and provide fun, family entertainment. Fast-forward 20 years and lots of entertainment was grittier, sexualised, and took itself very seriously. Comedy had been given its own niche, its own cultural space to exist and although frivolity existed in light entertainment, the overall atmosphere had changed.

Some older stars of the music hall were persuaded out of retirement during the war. The variety theatres had initially closed during World War Two, along with other places of large congregations, like football grounds, theatres, and cinemas, although churches were exempt. This was to prevent a bomb hitting a large crowd, as Wilmot points out, though there was a large backlash against this measure and George Bernard Shaw wrote a letter to *The Times* to protest by pointing out that in the Great War there had been 80,000 soldiers on leave looking for entertainment. The theatres reopened after 16 September 1939, as long as they closed by 10 pm.¹¹ This led to a boom in the industry, although the blackout and petrol and food rationing changed the facilities and atmosphere in the theatres. Air raids were another challenge; the audience could leave but not many took this opportunity. No crowd was ever struck by a bomb at a theatre,

¹¹ Wilmot, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 136.

although theatres were destroyed, including the Holborn Empire. There were more travelling 'package bills' arranged by agents during the war, and this helped the industry, particularly the smaller venues. In some cases, compères were used more regularly, like the old chairman at a music hall. The lack of unemployment and the growth in the forces led to a boom in entertainment. With rationing in place, people used their spare money to spend on theatres and luxuries.

Entertainment for the troops was very important and led to the formation of ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association) or, as Tommy Trinder called it, 'Every Night Something Awful', which Wilmut says was true because a lot of the acts were very poor. Amateur and professional performers were also involved in the RAF 'Gang Shows' and the Army's 'Stars in Battledress' shows. These were also variable. The effect of these shows and the psychological landscape from which the entertainment was spawned is important to consider when looking at the long-term history of post-war comedy and some of the more radical changes that occurred after the war.

There were plenty of opportunities for performers, but these were counterweighted by challenges. Clothes were rationed (despite concessions for theatrical performances), and there were restrictions on railway baggage (props and scenery). Entertainment tax was doubled, and seat prices rose.¹² Heating and electricity were prohibited for use by theatres in 1944 and soap was difficult to obtain, which made it difficult for performers to remove make-up.¹³

Music-hall comedy, that had clear ancestry in the tradition, was still very important in the 1940s and 1950s. This was not stand-up comedy in the modern sense and a long way from the alternative comedy that would spring up in the 1980s. Funny

¹² Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 140.

¹³ *Ibid.*

dances and songs, funny costumes, movements and crossdressing, camp wordplay and saucy innuendo were all important. There was very little truly satirical or political material and, as John Osborne (in *The Entertainer*) and Dagmar Kift have stated, the music hall often reinforced conservative values¹⁴.

After the Second World War, variety was in a healthy position and, according to Roger Wilmut, there were few clouds on the horizon¹⁵ There was a boom in the demand for entertainment because people had disposable income which they were unable to spend because of the lack of consumer goods.¹⁶ This position of relative strength after successfully negotiating the challenges of cinema and radio would not last. Klaus Nathaus and Gillian Mitchell both comment on the resilience and flexibility of variety during the first half of the twentieth century, but this was unable to halt the slide over the next 15 years.¹⁷

Owners and operators attempted to appeal to audiences in a changing cultural and media environment. They used commercial strategy, different circuits, and the promotion of variety entertainment. In the post-war era, comedy was at the heart of the British variety industry. Comedians and comic singers were the mainstay of a variety bill and there were hundreds of touring comedians that were travelling the land performing at large city-centre variety theatres and smaller music halls. This period saw a drastic change in the way that comedy was available to audiences. Radio, television, and film had opened new and often more accessible avenues to consuming comedy. However, comedy in the flesh, the immediate and interactive dynamic between performer and crowd,

¹⁴ Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall*;
John Osborne, *The Entertainer* (London, 2013)

¹⁵ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage.*, p. 156.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Nathaus, 'All dressed up', p. 47;
Gillian Mitchell, *Adult Responses to Popular Music and Intergenerational Relations in Britain: C.1955-1975* (Kindle edn, London, 2019)

meant that the live comedy industry was still a vibrant and profitable business.

The landscape for live performers was shifting rapidly and the economics of amusement were becoming increasingly diverse for variety entertainment. Many theatres had been damaged or destroyed by German bombing and theatre closures during the conflict had disrupted the industry. The nation had become very dependent on radio broadcasting for entertainment. The Second World War had fostered a hope of returning to normality and nostalgia for pre-war entertainment, but war had in many cases irrevocably changed the attitudes of the nation. There were plenty of traditional music hall comedians treading the boards throughout Britain in this period. At first variety could adapt to the sociological shifts of the post-war world, eventually welcoming demobbed comedians onto bills. They were able to provide valuable income for radio performers and provided a showcase for big bands, popular singers, and eventually rock 'n' roll groups. It was the arrival of television and, more pertinently, independent television that was the most significant factor in altering the market.

Live comedy was delivered to audiences in a highly organised and lucrative framework. Chains of variety theatres of varying standards delivered comedy performance to large audiences every week in nearly every town in the country. It was possible to see a wide range of performers and acts in a year. In major cities, it was possible to see major stars perform twice nightly throughout the week.

Speculation, manipulation, and desperation changed the marketing, promotion, and nature of productions. The initial decade after the end of the Second World War can be considered a period of transition for the industry with the injection of new talent filtering from the military service entertainment corps, but it was still facing the same challenges that it had seen before World War Two. The later challenges and how they were faced will be tackled in a later chapter but here the initial decade and the initial

structures and methods of promotion will be examined.

Ownership

The variety theatres of the post-war era had developed a complex network of cross-shareholding and co-operation. Claire Cochrane and the *Theatre Ownership Report of 1953* describe this as 'The Group'. 'The Group' was formed of a key set of majority shareholders. The central figure was the grandiosely named Prince Littler, who wielded great power in theatre ownership along with his brother Emile. The other key parties involved in ownership of the variety theatres were the Cruikshank brothers and their Scottish chain of Howard and Wyndhams. The Cruikshanks maintained a portfolio of shares in both Stoll Theatres and Moss Empires and served in roles in the boardrooms of these two organisations. Their copies of the financial records of the institutions provide much insight into the operation of these companies. The major variety theatres were held by the Stoll Theatre Company and Moss Empires over both of which Prince Littler wielded a degree of control.¹⁸

Prince Littler was at the head of the pyramid of the variety industry. In 1942, with the death of company founder Oswald Stoll, he had acquired control of the Stoll Theatre Corporation. The demise of another important figure, George Black, allowed Littler to further expand his influence over the variety industry. George Black had played a decisive role in the recovery of variety in the 1930s with his successful transformation of the Palladium and he bolstered the position of Moss Empires with his introduction of many of the reforms that became an integral part of the variety format. Littler took a decisive role in 1945 when Black died. Although some elements of the ownership structure remain

¹⁸ Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Worcester, 2014); Federation of Theatre Unions, *Theatre Ownership in Britain: A Report Prepared for the Federation of Theatre Unions* (London, 1953).

mysterious, the actual dynamics of controlling or regulating several institutions in tandem were very complex. *The Theatre Ownership Report of 1953* shows that Littler did not have sufficient capital to control all these networks but had manoeuvred himself into a central position.¹⁹

The Variety Circuits

There were different levels within the variety industry, and these were represented by different circuits. There were the big-city venues that were desirable and lucrative for performers. There were medium-sized theatres that provided an opportunity to progress to the upper echelons by gaining a positive reputation amongst audiences, and then there were smaller theatres or those in less desirable locations that were the first rungs on the ladder for aspiring acts. Clare Cochrane explains how most theatres, both legitimate and variety, were controlled by 'The Group'. Roger Wilmut also notes the continued prominence of variety across venues and circuits:

Despite ... problems, and the competition from the cinema (British films in particular were in a boom of their own) the Variety theatres continued to provide entertainment up and down the country. The Moss/GTC and Stoll circuits continued to dominate the business, both in quality and quantity (despite the death of Sir Oswald Stoll in January 1942; he was succeeded as managing director by Prince Littler); but the variety boom was good news for the smaller circuits as well as the Syndicate Halls, Fred Collins, Bernard Delfont ..., Howard and Wyndham and the Butterworth circuit, all of which ran Variety and small touring revues with reasonable success.²⁰

The most important circuits, Moss Empires and Stoll Theatres, occupied the most successful end of the variety market. According to Oliver Double this was 'not only the

¹⁹ Federation of Theatre Unions, *Theatre Ownership in Britain*, pp.11-12.

²⁰ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 140.

biggest chain of theatres but also the most prestigious'.²¹ The Moss Empires chain began to accumulate more theatres in the period after World War Two to add to its portfolio. The Stoll Theatre chain had been built by Australian-born Oswald Stoll and he had developed a chain of theatres. This was run in tandem with the Moss Empires, but his theatres were eventually withdrawn from this arrangement. Prince Littler was a major shareholder in Stoll and Chairman of Moss Empires. They officially merged again in 1960 and were sold to Lew Grade's Associated Television (ATV) in 1965.²²

In 1946 the two [major] circuits were rationalised, so that the GTC took over all Moss's cinemas, while Moss Empires took over all GTC's theatres. Thus, GTC disappeared as a Variety circuit, while Moss became the largest circuit with about twenty-four theatres including the Palladium. The Stoll circuit, with twelve theatres, was their main rival while other circuits included the Butterworth and Syndicate theatres.²³

Double and Morecambe and Wise amongst others discuss the different circuits that existed for variety²⁴. The number one circuit equated to the Palladium and the major theatres in the Moss Empires and one or two Stoll Theatres. One of the chains in the second tier was the London-based Variety Consolidated Theatres that operated the Metropolitan in Edgware Road, the Brixton Empress, and the Palaces in Chelsea, East Ham, and Walthamstow. The South London Palace had been destroyed during the war.²⁵ VTC (Variety Theatres Consolidated) or formerly The Syndicate were affiliated to The Group, but the other companies did not maintain large shareholdings, although there

²¹ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 21.

²² Simon Frith, Matt Brennan, Martin Cloonan, and Emma Webster, *The History of Live Music in Britain, Volume I: 1950–1967: From Dance Hall to the 100 Club*, (London, 2013), p. 12;
Richard Anthony Baker, *British Music Hall: An Illustrated History* (Barnsley, 2014), p. 66.

²³ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 157.

²⁴ Double, *Britain Had Talent*;

Eric Morecambe and Ernie Wise, *Eric & Ernie*;

²⁵ Alan Chudley, 'The Brixton Academy', *Arthur Lloyd*, <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Brixton.htm> [accessed on 1st November 2021]

were associated board members. They took a little brother approach and were seen as collaborators and almost compliant to the demands of Moss Empires. The third-tier theatres were comprised of smaller chains, such as the Butterworth theatres. Independent halls formed the third tier, and Eric Morecambe claims that the Attercliffe Palace in Sheffield was a fourth-tier theatre.²⁶ The calibre of acts was in proportion to the position in this hierarchy.

It is important to add that many cinemas would also put on variety entertainment, either in conjunction with screenings or separately. FJ Butterworth's theatres were also a constituent part of this rung. At its peak, this chain operated in 18 venues around the country.²⁷ Importantly, Butterworth had begun taking the unusual step of converting cinemas to variety theatres. The FJB circuit ran a budget chain, as Alan Chudley explains:

On the FJB Circuit, which was always a Number Two Circuit, economy was the by-word. Staffing levels, and the Orchestra members, were cut to the bone, as were other expenses such as advertising. However, FJB gave these theatres a longer life than might have otherwise been the case, and for such much credit must be attributed to Freddie Butterworth.²⁸

There were even smaller chains run by figures like Fred Collins, Nat Tennens, and Nat Day.²⁹ Nat Tennens (Tennenbaum) ran the Clapham Grand and Kilburn Empire. Fred Collins was a performer, then variety agent; he held the booking rights for most Scottish theatres and became the lessee for theaters in Ayr Pavilion, Edinburgh Theatre Royal,

²⁶*The Story of Variety with Michael Grade*, aired Mon 28 Feb 2011, BBC FOUR Production; Oliver Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 53.

²⁷Jonathan Shorney, 'F J Butterworth', (20 Mar 2012), <http://www.hippodromebristol.co.uk/F%20J%20Butterworth1.html> [accessed 23 November 2021]; FJB Collection, *FJB Collection – Who are We?* <http://web.archive.org/web/20160706151924/http://www.fjbcareers.co.uk/who-are-we/> [accessed 23 November 2021].

²⁸ Alan Chudley, 'Theatres and Halls in Northampton', *Arthur Lloyd*, <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/NorthamptonTheatres.htm> [accessed 23 November 2021].

²⁹ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, pp. 156–7.

Tivoli Aberdeen, Palace Theatre Dundee, Liverpool Shakespeare, and a stake in Glasgow Pavilion.³⁰

Along with smaller chains, variety was available to many more at smaller theatres and cinemas. There were hundreds of cinemas across the country that staged variety either as part of the show or otherwise added another layer of theatres for performers and audiences.³¹ Although material will be included on the middle and lower circuits, this thesis will focus on the premium circuits that represented most of the variety capacity in the country.

Production and Variety Bills

'Bill matter' was the tagline that was given to every performer: for instance, Arthur English was 'Prince of Wide Boys', Michael Bentine was 'The Missing Link', or Tommy Cooper was 'Up to his tricks again'. Some were much more matter of fact and simply described the act very clearly.³²

Variety bills had comedy as a central part of their offerings. Comedians would form some part of nearly every show and often as a headline act. Comedians would also contribute musically, as singers or by playing an instrument, or more. They would perform dance routines too. Max Miller is a fine example of this format of performance. Songs were key performative and comedy elements in his turn, although the build-up and audience asides were arguably more amusing. His dance routines were peppered with amusing interjections about his physical appearance and movement.³³ Acts could blur

³⁰ 'Fred Collins', *The Collins Variety Agency*, <https://collinsvariety.co.uk/fred/> [accessed 1 November 2021].

³¹ Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre*, pp. 155-6.

³² The British Music Hall Society: Poster Archive, Sunderland Empire files.

³³ 'Max Miller Live at the Metropolitan', Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/album/3XRnXsE9UIuHHEUFhc4hRQ> [accessed 9 December 2021].

the lines too. Ventriloquists, singers, dancers, acrobats, and animal acts might have been openly comic or incorporated comedy patter into their routine. Variety bills were structured around a mixture of different acts. The concept of 'variety' was central. There was significant co-operation in the formulation of variety bills in 'The Group' and they coordinated the acts on offer at different theatres.³⁴

Commercial Strategy and Promotion

The commercial strategy of the theatres was simple. They provided a variety of entertainment that was fast-paced. It did not leave the audience time to become tired or bored with an act. There was a range of different forms of entertainment – singers, bands, comics, animal acts, acrobats, dancers, jugglers, mimes, impressionists, magicians, ventriloquists, equilibrists, and innumerable novelty acts featuring anything from cyclists to persons of small stature. A variety bill needed balance. The audience wanted to see someone famous, something funny, something that was different, and plenty of song and dance numbers. This was the tactic, a smorgasbord of acts, but they had to be balanced between the weird and wonderful, the funny and some music that could be enjoyed. This desire to balance a bill, to please everyone, can be seen to be variety's Achilles' heel. It made formulating entertainment much more challenging in a more socially and age-stratified era.

Promotion of variety had a strange relationship with other forms of media. Variety had tried to harness the pulling power of these new forms of technology with varying degrees of success. Film stars such as Marie Lloyd and George Formby had continued to perform but had been seduced by the wealth and fame of the silver screen and did not

³⁴ Federation of Theatre Unions, *Theatre Ownership in Britain*, pp. 7-28

need to put in the hard graft of touring theatres. The lower wages presented at the BBC meant that many stars were willing to perform on stage to supplement their incomes. In the early days of television, posters tried to encourage audiences to see stars in the flesh or conversely demonstrate acts that were banned from the small screen.³⁵

Variety bill posters were the key form of advertising for the theatres. Comedians played a key role in these promotional materials. They would normally appear at either the top of the bill or in second position, alternating with popular singers, like Alma Cogan or Ann Shelton.³⁶ Comedians like Max Wall, Arthur English, Frank Randle, Jewel and Warriss, Harry Secombe, Frankie Howerd, Charlie Chester, and even Laurel and Hardy were used to lure audiences.³⁷ A variety audience would have the opportunity to see big names as well as up-and-coming comedians on one ticket. It guaranteed a mixture of entertainment and catered to many tastes. The 'non-stop' concept that operated at the Windmill was the ultimate outcome of the fast-paced shows that did not have compères and only announced the act by way of numbered cards. This meant that audiences did not have to have a long attention span and that they could not grow tired of an act. The live elements of the performance offered a real engagement, it was local, and provided quickfire distraction and the opportunity to depart at any point.

Word of mouth and in-house advertising at the end of a performance was another important way of promoting shows. Newspapers listed the performances that would take place that week at local theatres. Programmes were also used to promote the following week's performances and included the bills for the following week.

³⁵ British Music Hall Society Archive: Poster Collection – Glasgow Empire (1956), Bill Poster, February 26 1951.

³⁶ British Music Hall Society Archive, Poster Collection.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Key Figures

A few powerful figures dominated the world of variety in the post-war era. Impresarios controlled different sections of the industry and in concert had great scope to promote the careers of performers and influence the direction of variety and what it offered audiences. At the ownership end of the scale, Prince Littler had cemented his position at the head of both Stoll and Moss. In terms of stage production and management, Val Parnell took the mantle of George Black at Moss Empires. The Winogradsky family were the most influential agents. They consisted of Lew and Leslie Grade and their brother, who used a different stage name, Bernard Delfont. Lew and Leslie worked in partnership; Lew would travel and find new talent around Britain and Europe and Leslie would deal with the administration.³⁸ Bernard Delfont was a theatrical manager and impresario and staged musicals, Hollywood stars, and variety shows too.

Val Parnell was the son of a ventriloquist and had begun working as an office boy for a music hall company at the age of 13.³⁹ In 1945, Parnell had graduated to become the managing director of Moss Empires theatres and thus had control of the most important circuit and the biggest draw of all, the London Palladium.⁴⁰

Prices

Variety comedy in the post-war world was still beholden to the legacy of the Victorian and Edwardian music hall, despite the changes made with the new and more lavish theatres. Comedy was still reliant on comics who displayed definite traits, a working-class

³⁸ Davies, *The Grades*, p. 100.

³⁹ John Oliver, 'Parnell, Val (1892-1972), Producer, Presenter, Executive', *Screen Online*, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/1146747/> [accessed 9 December 2021].

⁴⁰ Richard Halstead, 'Making of the Grades: Profile: The Grade Dynasty', *The Independent*, 2 February 1997, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/making-of-the-grades-profile-the-grade-dynasty-1276495.html> [accessed 9 December 2021].

sensibility, regional accents, and origins in a recognisable working-class background. Suggestive humour that harked back to the music hall was still prevalent in many successful comedians' acts, too. The clean-up of the theatres could not extinguish the audience's preference for 'knowing' comics. In the next 15 to 20 years, new popular culture fads came and went, but this comedy tradition remained.

For a typical variety performance at the Metropolitan Theatre in Edgware, ticket prices on a weekday ranged from 1 shilling for a seat in the gallery (£1.47 in 2020), 4 shillings for the stalls (£5.88 in 2020), 3 shillings for the Circle (£4.41 in 2020); in the Pit, one would have to part with and 2 shillings for a Gallery seat (£2.94 in 2020) and 5 shillings (£7.36) for a box seat. At the weekends, the best and worst seats stayed the same price in the Pit; Circle and Stalls were slightly more expensive.⁴¹

The prices at the Moss Empire-owned Nottingham Empire were slightly higher. On the week of 6 August 1951, with a bill that included the zither player Anton Karas, famous for the music from the film *The Third Man*, magician Arthur Dowler with the bill matter *The Wizard of Cod*, and a blackface act, G.H. Elliott. Boxes cost 22 shillings (2020, £35.32), the orchestra stalls and settees were 4s 6d (£7.23), the central stalls and settees were 3s 9d (£6.02) on most days and 4 shillings (£6.42) on Saturdays and holidays. The pits stalls were 2s 9d or 2s 3d (£4.41 or £3.61) on most days and 3 shillings or 2s 6d (£4.82 or £4.02). The circle was 4 shillings (£6.42) at all times and the balcony cost 9d (£1.20).

Average weekly earnings of industrial wage earners shown by Ministry of Labour inquiries were £4 16s. 1d. in July 1945, £6 16s. 2d. in April 1951, and £9 2s. 3d. in April 1955, a rise of 42 percent between 1945 and 1951, and 34 percent between 1951 and

⁴¹ British Music Hall Society Archive: Programme Collection, Metropolitan Theatre Edgware Road, 12 May 1952.

1955.⁴²

To put this in context, a seat to see Arsenal v Bolton Wanderers in the East Stand was 7 shillings (£11.24) and a place in the East Standing Enclosure at Wembley Stadium for the FA Cup final between Newcastle United and Blackpool was 3 shillings or (£4.82), or 10/6 (£16.83) for a North Terrace Seat.⁴³ Entertainment was everyday, accessible, and cheap. The average wage was £6 16s 2d. in April 1951 (£218.69 in 2020).⁴⁴ It is possible to see that the variety theatres were affordable entertainment for the masses and two showings a night provided many with an evening of fun before the age of television could distil this experience.

Wages and Conditions for Performers

The industry system operated in a similar way to modern entertainment. Theatres would take the money from patrons; they would pay the producers of the shows (impresarios like Bernard Delfont) a percentage of the takings and the performers would be paid a set fee negotiated by their agents (who would also take a cut). Bernard Delfont would often take 50 percent of the takings and then pay the performers in his show from this. Booking controllers like the influential Cissie Williams at Moss Empires would book individual

⁴² Average Industrial Wage (Purchasing Power) Volume 549: debated on Thursday 23 February 1956', *UK Parliament Hansard* [https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1956-02-23/debates/8806eeb3-a61f-4178-8115-8648bbd89f38/AverageIndustrialWage\(PurchasingPower\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1956-02-23/debates/8806eeb3-a61f-4178-8115-8648bbd89f38/AverageIndustrialWage(PurchasingPower)) [accessed 28 September 2021].

⁴³ Ticket Stub for Blackpool V Newcastle United 1951 FA Cup Final, *eBay*, <https://www.ebay.co.uk/itm/373192621271> [accessed 28 September 2021]; Ticket Stub for the 1951/52 Division One match Arsenal v Bolton Wanderers, *Match Worn Football Memorabilia*, <https://matchwornfootballshirts.com/products/1953-slash-54-original-division-one-ticket-arsenal-v-sunderland> [accessed 28 September 2021]; Ticket Stub for the 1951 FA Cup Final Blackpool V Newcastle, *Abe Books*, https://www.abebbooks.co.uk/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=14303999838&cm_mmc=ggl--UK+Shopp+RareStandard--product_id=bi%3A%2014303999838--keyword=&gclid=CjwKCAjw-sqKBhBjEiwAVaQ9a2f0TU8pCW5wQBqLehGmgVZLk_4rPM6teiCQB9rio_Ttze4smFoxoxoCGVwQAvD_BwE [accessed 28 September 2021].

⁴⁴ Average Industrial Wage (Purchasing Power) Volume 549: debated on Thursday 23 February 1956', *UK Parliament Hansard*, [https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1956-02-23/debates/8806eeb3-a61f-4178-8115-8648bbd89f38/AverageIndustrialWage\(PurchasingPower\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1956-02-23/debates/8806eeb3-a61f-4178-8115-8648bbd89f38/AverageIndustrialWage(PurchasingPower)) [accessed 28 September 2021], p.156.

bills of performers through booking agents like Lew and Leslie Grade, who would sometimes produce shows and act as impresarios.⁴⁵

Table 2.1: *Hylde Baker Weekly Salary, 1947–1948*

Date	Theatre	Pay
1 December 1947	West Hartlepool Empire	£40 or guaranteed 10%
8 December 1947	Salford Hippodrome	£40 or guaranteed 10%
15 December 1947	Preston Kings Palace	£40 or guaranteed 10%
29 December 1947	Stockton Hippodrome	£45
5 January 1948	Leicester Palace	£45
Jan 12 th 1948	Oldham Empire	£40
Jan 19 th 1948	Leeds City Varieties	£50
Jan 26 th 1948	Worcester Theatre Royal	Guaranteed £30 or 10% of takings less entertainment tax
Feb 2 nd 1948	Tivoli Theatre Hull	£55
Feb 25 th 1948	Wolverhampton Hippodrome	£40
Mar 1 st 1948	Nottingham Empire	£40
Mar 8 th 1948	Brighton Hippodrome	£40

Source: Lancashire Archives, Business papers of Hylde Baker. *£40 is equivalent to £1600 in 1947, and to £1487 in 1948; £55 in 1948 is equivalent to £2200.

Early in her career, booking agents would book Hylde Baker as an individual on bills at different theatres around the country.⁴⁶ Table 2.1 shows a portion of the touring Hylde Baker did in the theatres in 1947 and 1948 drawn from individual contracts agreed

⁴⁵ Norman Hoskins, 'The Terror of Cranbourn Mansions – Norman Hoskins recalls Cissie Williams', *The British Music Hall Society*, <https://www.britishmusichallsociety.com/terrorofcranbournmansions.pdf> [accessed 28 September 2021].

⁴⁶ Lancashire Archives: Business papers, Papers of Hylde Baker (1905–1986), DDX 1683/3.

with the theatres. It is possible to see that Northern venues were more likely to pay slightly more for Baker's services: Hull, Leeds, and Stockton (as well as Leicester) guarantee a £40 fee or potentially higher takings at the door.

Sometimes performers themselves would act as producers and put on their own shows. Kitty McShane, Frank Randle, and Hylda Baker all performed this role. They would then be in charge of booking and paying performers through their manager. Bernard Delfont kept detailed records of the shows that he was producing and what they took each night and would then receive his percentage of the takings.⁴⁷

The live experience was an essential component in the atmosphere and cohesion of variety shows. Comedians interacted with the audience and there was a great tradition of singing along and participating, shared with other long-established entertainment forms, like pantomime or Punch and Judy shows. The 'knowingness' cultivated between audience and performer was crucial: innuendo, shared meanings that could bypass censors, these could be transmitted by a knowing look or facial expression. These spaces were designed to provide entertainment, and the music hall and variety theatre were designed to be safe spaces where class and national identity was affirmed. They were not politically progressive spaces and were much more firmly rooted in conservative values than in those of radicalism. This collective knowingness provided a boon for many acts and offered the opportunity to actively repeat and reuse material on a nightly basis. An analysis of the type of comedy performers, their relative success, both regionally and nationally, their place in the bills of the time and how traditional variety presented and promoted itself in this period will explain the type of performer, their financial success, and relationship with audiences.

⁴⁷ V&A-TPC, Bernard Delfont Limited Archive, Figure book 1956-1958, 2 Jan 1956-3 Mar 1958, GB 71 THM/300/5/1

The other facet of a collective experience was the audience's desire to see novel and strange acts, usually further down the bill. Variety had a shared relationship with the world of circus; acts that had been honed in the 'big top' could transfer over to the more conventional theatres. This provided an element of the grotesque and a wide range of different performers. Short attention spans were catered for, and the format meant that nothing could drag on. This is where variety got its name, but this was also a link to a deeper shared past for music hall with other forms of entertainment, like the circus. The humorous element of these acts helped to contribute to the overall composition and atmosphere of the theatres. This trait will be examined through analysis of several variety bills from various intervals from the 1940s to the end of the 1950s.

Important Acts and Regionalism

Comic acts imbued with the traditions of music hall were essential headliners for variety theatres until the 1960s. The multimedia nature of the mid-twentieth century means that it is necessary to make distinctions between the origins of comedians and performers. It is necessary to determine whether performers made their name in variety, if their fame was also bestowed by appearances on radio, cinema, or on the big screen. Variety comics are those who developed an act onstage and used the style and conventions of live performance. Some comedians will be included that did make the crossover into film, radio, or television but not all could alter their act. These comedians could be deemed to be the least adaptable comics, but to regard them as failures would imply that live stage performance is less arduous. The appeal required and the skill sets did differ for performers, and some could master multiple media and retain the intimacy of stage performance. Other performers did not need to foster this sense of 'knowingness' and preferred the possibility of distance of newer technologies. In the early 1950s, traditional

comics produced strong takings but were increasingly supplanted by the rise of popular music. This intensified later in the decade after the introduction of commercial television meant that their acts could be seen in the nation's living rooms. Comics that had adapted their acts to the stage found that television used up their material much more rapidly, their quick-fire delivery, complete with asides, did not translate well, and the limitations of early broadcasting meant that visual or non-verbal cues could be harder to communicate.

Live comedy is one of the most daunting career options and the potential to 'die' onstage remained a great fear for all comic performers. The Glasgow Empire, Moss Theatres' main Scottish venue, was notorious for its hostile audience. According to Scottish actor and comedian Stanley Baxter, it was the place where 'English comedians came to die quietly'.⁴⁸ Des O'Connor and Morecambe and Wise all had a torrid time at the Empire. Louis Barfe explains what happened to Mike and Bernie Winters:

The act began with Mike wandering on stage with a clarinet, on which he played *Exactly Like You*. When Bernie made his entrance by sticking his head through the curtains and proffering his trademark toothy grin, a voice from the gods shouted 'Shite, there's two of them!'⁴⁹

This episode, and other ill-received performances, continued to be cited in more modern times as reminders that Glaswegian audiences are not easily impressed.⁵⁰

In the Managers' Report Cards from the Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Archive, the Winters brothers were given a much more favourable

⁴⁸ Louis Barfe, *Turned out Nice Again* (London, 2008), p. 99.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Annie Brown, 'How a generation of stars bombed in Glasgow's notorious comics graveyard', *Daily Record*, <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/how-a-generation-of-stars-bombed-in-glasgows-1001410> [accessed 28 September 2021]

response whilst appearing in pantomime at the Glasgow Empire in the 1957–1958 season.⁵¹

The unique nature of live experience and Bailey's idea of 'knowingness' applied to regionalism and working-class values. This familiarity which had helped formed the new urban regional identities in Britain was key to the enduring popularity of this strain of entertainment. It would not be accurate to characterise this as merely a regional phenomenon but there were definite archetypes that existed in the genre. These included the Northern working-class woman (played by Norman Evans or Gracie Fields), the cheeky local character (George Formby, but others on this list could apply), the Drunk (Frank Randle), and the Crafty Cockney (played by Max Miller or Sid Field). These appealed to communities where these people, their jokes, and observations were about an urban working-class experience, even if their themes were more universal. Knowingness and a language that was understood by the audience (sometimes merely within the music hall or a more regional identity) were key; the most important performers in music hall were fluent in the language of suggestion. Max Miller would conspiratorially admonish his audience, "Ere! – Oooh, you wicked lot, it's people like you who get me a bad name!" and blame them for anything that might seem suggestive with the phrase 'It's all in the mind'.

Miller did not play in many Northern theatres and mainly limited his performances to Birmingham and below.⁵² This also enabled him to be able to return to his Brighton home after a performance. He would sometimes offer top billing to others if he was further away, so he could leave early.⁵³ Roger Wilmut claims that it was his

⁵¹ V&A-TPC, Bernard Delfont Limited Archive, Stoll Moss Theatre Managers' Report Cards, 1938-1966, Mike and Bernie Winters, 7 December 1957- 27 January 1958, PN2597 Outsize.

⁵² Hudd and Hindin, *Roy Hudd's Cavalcade*, p. 120.

⁵³ 'I Like the Girls Who Do', *BBC Forty Minutes*, S9.E7, episode written and presented by Gerald Scarfe (first broadcast 16 February 1989).

‘cockiness’ that was unpopular with Northern audiences⁵⁴. Max Miller’s popularity in the 1940s meant he was the highest-grossing act at the Stoll-owned Wood Green Empire in 1946.⁵⁵

Max Miller was one of the most famous and successful comics of his era. He was a music hall and variety performer and, despite appearing in films and on broadcasts, his act relied on a live audience. His work included a profusion of innuendo and *double entendre*.⁵⁶ Miller had his two books, the blue and the white books, and the audience were given the opportunity to pick gags from the one they desired. They universally picked the ‘blue’ one with the risqué and possibly beyond-the-pale humour included. Max Miller appeared at the Royal Variety Performance in 1950, and he was annoyed with the fact that the famous American comedian had overrun and refused to do the act he had rehearsed. He asked the Royal Box what book they wanted, and the Royal Box responded the ‘blue book’. He also ran over his time and refused to respond to those in the wings who wanted him to leave the stage.⁵⁷ Max Miller wore gaudy, camp costumes.⁵⁸ Miller’s comedy had such longevity because it relied more heavily on his delivery and personality.⁵⁹ It may have seemed innate but exuding such bonhomie and playfulness required practice. Just as Frankie Howerd required his ‘oohs’ and ‘ahs’ written in the script, Miller’s asides looked and maybe felt easy but were essential to his stage persona, as Wilmut explains here:

⁵⁴ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 125;

V&A-TPC, Moss Empire Returns, 1945 - 1964. Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, GB 71 THM/303/1/10. V&A-TPC Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942-1964. Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, GB 71 THM/303/1/7.

⁵⁵ V&A-TPC Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942-1964. Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, GB 71 THM/303/1/7 1946. Takings of £2245.

⁵⁶ *I Like the Girls Who Do*, BBC *Forty Minutes* S9.E7, episode written and presented by Gerald Scarfe (first broadcast February 16th 1989).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, pp. 102–103.

⁵⁹ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 102.

The pace and rhythm of Miller's delivery is most important – he worked quite fast, but skilful use of repetitions and asides give the material a much greater impetus than if it were simply delivered straight; written down, many of the repetitions simply seem redundant, but in performance they help to make the gag something which Miller shares with the audience rather than something he hands them on a plate – he makes them work for it.⁶⁰

Miller wanted to create a sense of danger in his act and gambled with the boundaries, although he was aware of how far to push them.⁶¹ Miller was able to push with his natural charm and his 'cheeky chappie' persona. Miller is still recognisably funny today; his act is obviously dated but his jokes and style are still amusing, and he is not vastly different from modern stand-ups except for the song and dance routines that punctuate his patter. John Fisher explains Miller's appeal as 'flamboyant, outrageous, sensational. Every facet of his personality was so vividly accentuated ...'⁶² Miller refused to adjust his rapid delivery and other elements of his technique for film. It may have been difficult for him to change a core characteristic of his act.⁶³ This was one of the reasons he did not successfully make the leap to this medium despite appearing in 15 films.

Along with performers like Ted Ray, Tommy Handley, and Tommy Trinder, Miller's act moved more towards the role of a modern stand-up comedian.⁶⁴ He did use song and dance, but these seemed secondary to his words and patter. His ability in the 1930s and 1940s meant that he would have been an innovative and fresh act, but he was also using the traditions of music hall, the song and dance and the sense of knowingness and the feeling that pervades the theatre, the innuendo, the double meanings. These were

⁶⁰ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 123.

⁶¹ John Fisher, *Funny Way to be a Hero*, p. 88.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁶³ 'Educated Evans', *BFI Most Wanted: the hunt for Britain's missing films*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120803092948/http://old.bfi.org.uk/nationalarchive/news/mostwanted/educated-evans.html> [accessed 28 September 2021].

⁶⁴ Oliver Double, 'An Approach to Traditions of British Stand-Up Comedy', PhD thesis (University of Sheffield, 1991) <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/1873/1/DX182554.pdf>, p.57.

things that the BBC felt it should move away from and Miller's sleight of hand kept the Watch Committees at bay; in front of a censor or a BBC producer and thrust into a living room, this may have been viewed as offensive or intrusive. John Fisher expands on this idea:

More than any other performer he embodies that quasi-saturnalian function ... whereby in the warm security of the theatre an audience of essentially respectable citizens can sit guiltless, conscience-free as their most secret, unmentionable desires are acted out by the amoral, anarchic jester on stage.⁶⁵

The rapport between audience and performer, the sense of intimacy both in style but also in the clearly confined space of the variety theatre and in the spirit of the old music hall were present in Miller's act. He was simultaneously a modern performer that we can understand and laugh at today and one with deep roots in the working-class culture of music hall.

The Max Miller Show at the Finsbury Park Empire in November 1958 is described as 'The Pure Gold of the Music Hall' on the promotional poster.⁶⁶ Miller was still categorised as a 'music hall' performer and represented a bygone age and this presents a paradox with his 'modern' performance style. His work has aged well unlike other performers'. Miller depended on tapping into the audience's collective 'dirty mind'. To a modern ear, Miller's material could be deemed unacceptable, misogynistic, and politically incorrect but conversely his material remains some of the most accessible comedy from the 1940s.

Miller was one of the most successful and influential comedians of his generation. He always said, 'There'll never be another' and was quoted as saying 'When I'm dead and

⁶⁵ Fisher, *Funny Way to be a Hero*, pp. 87–88.

⁶⁶ British Music Hall Society, Bill Poster Files, Finsbury Park Empire 1958;

gone, the game's finished'.⁶⁷ The major theatres in the Moss and Stoll chain were sold to Associated Television 18 months after Miller's death in 1965 and variety ceased to exist in the same form after this date.

Peter Bailey's concept of 'knowingness' was fully at play in the work of Miller and Randle. Regional understanding formed one layer of the knowledge needed to decode the comedy on offer. The innuendo of Miller was steeped in the knowing nods and winks of music hall. He drew a following in the South with generational impact, to be ingrained in coded jokes amongst family and friends. Randle spoke much more to a Northern, Lancastrian identity and the failure to understand his humour outside the motherland of the North-west was something of a bonus for those that did understand the coded vernacular.

Broad comics like Max Miller and Frank Randle found themselves not only having to conform to the BBC's standards of decency but also having to project themselves out of their natural regional constituencies. They have maintained cult status along with the massive contemporary appeal that they enjoyed but they did not necessarily translate well to a 'national' or even 'international' audience that required the intrinsic understanding of dialect and regional caricatures. Northern audiences had their own allegiances and what Lancastrian comic Frank Randle shared with Miller was that he was a controversial figure who frequently was in trouble with Watch Committees.⁶⁸ Frank Randle's act was a carefully observed and honed character act, his 'Old Hiker' gossiping about his travels in a saucy and mischievous manner. The recordings that exist today can be difficult to decipher but in the Northern towns of the 1940s and 1950s he was a huge star. He was a big star in Blackpool and was a large draw and would sell out the summer

⁶⁷ John M. East, *Max Miller: the Cheeky Chappie* (London, 1977), p. 12.

⁶⁸ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, pp.197-9.

seasons and could make £1000 a week.⁶⁹ C. P. Lee has explained Randle's appeal in the North-West of England: '... [he] never appeared to extend his bailiwick beyond his homeland of terraces and mills, chimneys and ginnels, whippets and ale houses, Golden Miles and Alhambras.'⁷⁰

Randle was a strange character, and many stories circulate about his erratic behaviour and consumption of alcohol. These include taking Laurel and Hardy out to sea from Blackpool in a boat and having to be rescued by the coastguard, and bombarding Accrington with toilet rolls from an aeroplane.⁷¹ He was very popular with Northern audiences, although less so with fellow performers. He toured with his own show with a company selected by him around the country, 'Randle's Scandals'. The figures from the ledgers of Stoll and Moss Empires seem to verify the idea that comedians tended to be more successful in their region of origin. The physical traits of successful comics can make them successful, for example Tommy Cooper's large frame, the diminutive cheek of Norman Wisdom or George Formby's teeth. John Fisher explains the unique qualities that Randle possessed and how his physical appearance helped define his humour:

Frank Randle's stage appearance symbolized the persistence with which his erratic temperament refused to be contained by those who crossed his path professionally off stage. His whole body literally overflowed: inquisitive pop-eyes that appeared to be attached to invisible springs; a nose which with its drooping facial monopoly recalled the peering Mr Chad: dangling arms ... voluminous trousers ... a wide range of facial grimace and contortion and the verbal resources of a quirky Lancastrian mutter, both made more distinctive by his much-vaunted toothless condition.⁷²

⁶⁹ *Blackpool: Big Night Out*, BBC, producer Andy Humphries, Executive Producer Caroline Wright (first broadcast 26 December 2012).

⁷⁰ Lee, 'The Lancashire Shaman', p. 33

⁷¹ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, pp. 197–9.

⁷² Fisher, *Funny Way to be a Hero*, p. 155.

Randle employed a very different form of comedy to the quick-fire and charismatic Miller, but his style was still based around a familiarity, Bailey's concept of 'knowingness'. C. P. Lee has said that Randle embodied an almost mythical role as the 'Lord of Misrule' and his appeal to those in the North-West is elaborated on further by him:⁷³

What Randle achieved at the Met or the Empire was an art of consolidation through recognition. He held up a mirror to an audience who recognised a universality of truth ... [He was a] tribal shaman, the tribe in question consisting of what the *Stage* called 'ordinary decent people' with their 'unsophisticated' ways, i.e. the working class. It was the middle classes that had problems relating to Randle. The freshly-minted petty bourgeoisie prim and proper in their polite, suburban semis, reacting with horrified distaste to the Trickster King Twist.⁷⁴

Randle was highly thought of by some theatre managers. In 1947, the manager of the Manchester Palace Theatre believed that Randle 'goes better with a bigger audience.'⁷⁵ The manager of Nottingham Empire on 25 August 1948 had this summary of Randle's show: 'Excellent reception. Without question the principal in this show is a very sound artiste and a popular performer having as big a Box Office pull as anyone playing the Halls at the present day.'⁷⁶ However, in 1951 the Edinburgh Empire had a problem with the regional appeal of Randle.

A bright and lively show with a good variety of entertainment. The whole show getting a good reception but unfortunately as far as Edinburgh is concerned Randle himself has practically no following here, and there is nothing else to make a Box Office appeal to counteract the excellent weather we have had this week.⁷⁷

⁷³ Lee, 'The Lancashire Shaman', p. 36

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁷⁵ V&A-TPC, Stoll Moss Theatre Managers' Report Cards, 1938-1966, Randle's Scandals of 1947, PN2597 Outsize.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

They did not want the show to return.⁷⁸ Understandably, the manager of the Liverpool Empire on 28 April 1947 had a much more positive view of Randle's local appeal: 'Popular owing to its rather local character ... has been well received by both press and public. The cast on the whole are efficient and work hard to provide an entertaining show which is deservedly popular and is bringing in a lot of new patrons.'⁷⁹

The theatre managers in Moss theatres did not seem to mind Randle's suggestive humour, but he was known as 'star of stage, screen, and magistrate's court'. Randle was particularly successful in Blackpool and would spend many summer seasons performing there, although he had long-running battles with the police chief Harry Barnes. He was prosecuted in 1952 on four charges of obscenity and fined £10 on each count.⁸⁰ Blackpool was arguably the most important seaside resort and central to many performers' livelihoods.⁸¹

Most comedians could garner some sort of audience around the country, but they did have a regional constituency, and financial figures can reveal some of the differences between the regions of the United Kingdom and their preference for comedians. Unlike Miller, Randle did tour more extensively around the country, and it is possible to gauge his popularity in different venues.

Several major performers such as Frank Randle and Kitty McShane (with Old Mother Riley) ran their own companies for their shows; this was often similar with the radio shows. They operated in a variety format with short skits and songs, but the

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Kynaston, *Family Britain 1951–1957* (London, 2009), p. 109; Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, p. 99.

⁸¹ Rita Delroy interviewed by Sue Barbour [interview transcript], *Theatre Archive Project, British Library*, recording date 23 April 2009, Shelf mark C1142/259, <https://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/Theatre-Archive-Project/024M-C1142X000259-0100V0> [accessed 28 September 2021]

headline acts would appear more regularly.⁸² This led to some criticism from theatre managers of his *Randle's Scandals of 1948* tour. The Sunderland Empire described the problems of an artist organising their own tours for the week of 9 August 1948:

This company is very far from what I would call well balanced and it has been put on, by Mr. Randle, with little thought or attention to detail, but in spite of this, it is altogether being greatly enjoyed and highly spoken of, in all parts of the House, at each performance.⁸³

Table 2.2: *Randle's Scandals 1951 Tour Takings*

Date	Theatre	Takings	Adjusted for	Profit	Adjusted for
	(M) for Moss Empire; (S) for Stoll Moss		inflation (2020)		inflation (2020)
14 April 1951	Nottingham Empire (M)	£2109	£67,746	£638	£20,494
21 April 1951	Glasgow Empire (M)	£2173	£69,802	£596	£19,145
28 April 1951	Leeds Empire (M)	£2076	£66,686	£635	£20,398
5 May 1951	Edinburgh Empire (M)	£1296	£41,630	£171	£5,492
12 May 1951	Finsbury Park Empire	£1549	£49,757	£157	£5,043
19 May 1951	Liverpool Empire (M)	£2474	£79,470	£497	£15,965
17 June 1951	Sheffield Empire (M)	£1835	£58,944	£446	£14,327
30 June 1951	Manchester Hippodrome (S)	£2344	£75,294		
5 August 1951	Swansea Empire (M)	£1751	£56,246	£407	£13,074
25 August 1951	Shepherd’s Bush Empire (S)	£2030	£65,208		
29 September 1951	New Theatre Cardiff	£1982	£63,666		

⁸² 'Frank Randle in 'Randle's Scandals of 1951', *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/frank-randle-in-randles-scandals-of-1951/ [accessed 21st September 2021].

⁸³ V&A-TPC, Stoll Moss Theatre Managers' Report Cards, 1938-1966, Randle's Scandals, PN2597 Outsize.

Sources: V&A-TPC, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942–1964, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, GB 71 THM/303/1/71945; V&A-TPC, Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964. Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, GB 71 THM/303/1/10.

Randle's takings for the tour of the show he produced in 1951 show the success of his self-produced show in different cities.

Andy Medhurst has compared the career of Randle with that of George Formby. Although they shared a background and a suggestive sense of humour, they had many differences too. Formby and Randle were both from Wigan and born within three years of each other, they were childhood friends and became 'intense professional rivals' according to Medhurst.⁸⁴ Despite their shared roots, C. P. Lee has called them 'the Ying and Yang of Lancashire comedy' in terms of their performance style and content.⁸⁵

Formby, along with Gracie Fields, was one of a small group of domestic British film stars that were major draws for the major variety theatres. They had progressed onto the screen and had gathered significant success in film but returned intermittently to perform on-stage. George Formby had emerged from a very famous music hall family and had initially tried to distance himself from George Senior's legacy. Ultimately, he would become one of the biggest British film stars and his film appearances would preserve a style of music hall comedy for many generations. His work was shown on television for decades after his death. Formby only makes a brief appearance in the ledgers, taking £2235 (£84,220 in 2020) at the Leeds Empire in 1948.⁸⁶ Formby suffered from ill health in the years before his death in 1961.

⁸⁴ Medhurst, *A National Joke*, p. 71.

⁸⁵ *Blackpool: Big Night Out* (BBC).

⁸⁶ V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10, 1948, Leeds Empire £2235, 23 October 1948.

Gracie Fields was another huge star, and her success had come from the music halls.⁸⁷ She was seen as the heir to Marie Lloyd, who had been the queen of music halls before her early death. Fields was another Lancastrian comic from Rochdale. She worked on radio but became a big film star in Britain and amassed a great fortune from her appearances. By the 1940s she was living in Italy and had taken Italian citizenship; she was married to an Italian citizen at a time when Italy was at war with Britain and did not return to Britain but stayed abroad⁸⁸. All this damaged her reputation and her popularity and impacted her ability to appear regularly in theatres. Oliver Double explains the appeal of Gracie Fields to a working-class audience ‘asking the audience to imagine that they are not in some big, grand theatre, but in a vividly evoked working-class front room enjoying an informal sing-song ... pointing out their shared roots.’⁸⁹

Gracie Fields mainly worked on film and her life abroad during World War Two had complicated her star status. However, on 9 October 1948 Gracie Fields’ performances at the Palladium were a great success, with takings of £11,964 (£444,861 in 2020) and £12,140 (£451,405 in 2020), but Fields did not take up regular performing, did not tour her act around the country, and returned to her life in Italy.⁹⁰ George Formby and Gracie Fields represented a very distinct type of Northernness, but they also transcended their Lancastrian roots. Through film and their ability to appeal on a universal basis they had gathered an audience across the UK.

Male and female impersonation has a long history in comedy performance. It could be seen as merely an indicator of sexual repression or an immature attitude to gender,

⁸⁷ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 99.

⁸⁸ Baker, *Old Time Variety*, p. 16.

⁸⁹ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, pp. 100–101.

⁹⁰ V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945 – 1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10, London Palladium 9 October 1948 £11964 and 16 October 1948 £12140 with a profit of £6198

but it was very popular. It stretched all the way back to ancient theatre, medieval mystery plays, through Shakespeare, pantomime, Dan Leno, and into the twenty-first century via Dick Emery, Les Dawson, Kenny Everett, *The League of Gentlemen* and *Mrs Brown's Boys*.⁹¹ It can be viewed as crass or foolish, but it is undeniably an important trope in British comedy and a core element of variety entertainment. Male impersonation had also been represented during the music hall era by the very popular act of Vesta Tilley and later throughout the variety years by Hetty King.

The music hall male impersonator was judged on their capacity to imitate masculinity at the time of her performance, in the full knowledge that she was a woman. Hetty King's skill at crossing gender was relished by the audience and her peers: 'Old pros, who had seen the lady over the years, have raved to me about her painstaking, perfect portrayals of the characters she created for her songs: the man about town, the down and out, the army sergeant.' Male impersonators' performance of masculinity was precisely defined and often caustically observed; in some acts it was overblown and comically exaggerated. Real life cross-dressers, on the other hand, aimed to pass so well they would go unnoticed, their masquerade more of a homage to masculinity.⁹²

Female impersonator acts were a big draw during the 1940s and 1950s and it is important to consider them as a common trope within variety and as an important tradition within British performance.⁹³ One of the biggest draws in the immediate post-war period were Arthur Lucan and Kitty McShane, who were a double act that had been in existence since 1909.⁹⁴ Lucan shared with Norman Evans an act that involved dressing in women's clothing. Lucan and McShane were a married couple that could be described

⁹¹ Fisher, *Funny Way to be a Hero*, p. 84.

⁹² Alison Oram, *Her Husband Was a Woman! Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture, Women's and Gender History*, (London, 2007), p. 20.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁹⁴ Baker, *Old Time Variety*, pp. 303–4.

as a complex Freudian muddle: the much older, English-born Lucan played the Irish Old Mother Riley to his authentically Irish wife who played his daughter. They were successful on the music hall and variety circuit for years and starred in 15 films together, and they had a radio show too.⁹⁵ 'How can I be that wild old woman if I have to hold my script in my hand all the time?'⁹⁶ This did not stop their great success on the Stoll circuit; they were the top-grossing act at the Hackney Empire and Bristol Hippodrome in 1945, at the Manchester Hippodrome in 1946, and at the Grand in Derby in 1948.⁹⁷ John Fisher says Old Mother Riley 'represented the spirit of earthy domesticity to be found in every back-street granny who ever put on a bonnet and shawl'.⁹⁸ The act had much in common with a later incarnation of a parent-child rivalry.

It was essentially a love-hate relationship, and yet the element of pathos inevitable in such a situation was never allowed to become irksome, simply because sympathy was either blatantly asked for or cunningly contrived. Her 'hard-done-by' armoury of unwantedness, old age and loneliness, and ill health would have rivalled Albert Steptoe's ... and son Harold.⁹⁹

The Lucan and McShane performances in the 1930s were given a good reception, although even then, there were complaints that the show had been seen before and little had changed.¹⁰⁰

Another famous Northern female impersonator was comic Norman Evans, who was most famous for his 'over-the-garden-wall' routine, which was later adapted for sketches by Les Dawson and Roy Barraclough. He played Fanny Fairbottom who gossiped

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 307; Foster and Furst, *Radio Comedy, 1938-1968*, p. 67.

⁹⁶ Furst and Foster, *Radio Comedy*, p. 67.

⁹⁷ V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942-1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/71945. Hackney Empire £1774. Manchester Hippodrome £2298. 1946 Bristol Hippodrome £2745. 1948, Grand Derby £1900.

⁹⁸ Fisher, *Funny Way to be a Hero*, p. 77.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁰ V&A-TPC, Stoll Moss Theatre Managers' Report Cards, 1938-1966, Lucan and McShane, PN2597 Outsize.

conspiratorially across the garden wall with her neighbour.¹⁰¹ He toured extensively during the period after 1945 with his show 'Good Evans'.¹⁰²

Male impersonation was also an important trope within music hall and variety entertainment. The influence of the old-fashioned comedians and their profitability and attraction to the audience had waned by the early 1950s. However, these acts may not have been at the top of the bill, but they were still a part of the make-up of bills. Their influence on the first-generation of radio performers that began to dominate in the 1950s was clear and many had adapted their acts directly from their personas or to make the act more suitable for the sonic nature of radio or more palatable for a broadcast audience.

Hetty King was a real survivor from the nineteenth century and began her career in 1889 at the age of six.¹⁰³ Later, she began to perform as a male impersonator in the tradition of the great music hall star Vesta Tilley. She continued to perform until the end of variety theatre and beyond. King had been performing in shows such as *Do You Remember?* alongside Buster Keaton and *Thanks for the Memory*.¹⁰⁴ She had been performing in these shows since the 1930s, so half of her career was in nostalgia shows. These shows were designed to cater to an older audience that enjoyed the older variety acts.

The reception of King's performances is recorded in the manager's report card. Her appearances received a more mixed reception in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1947, at the age of 64, her reception at the Nottingham Empire was recorded:

¹⁰¹ Baker, *Old Time Variety*, p. 173.

¹⁰² V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942-1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/719451947.

¹⁰³ Cullen, Hackman and McNeilly, *Vaudeville Old & New*, p. 633; Nigel Ellacott, 'The Music Hall Pantomimes', *It's Behind You - The Magic of Pantomime*, <http://www.its-behind-you.com/music-hall.html> [accessed 20 September 2021].

¹⁰⁴ 'Bits and Pieces', *Voices of Variety*, <http://voices-of-variety.com/bits-and-pieces/> [accessed 20 September 2021].

Poor reception. I am of the opinion that the time is now past when the Artiste can put on an act that would appeal as it did. The construction of the act is old fashioned & not wanted by the present day majority & the Artiste no longer has the ability to put over the act effectively.¹⁰⁵

However, this was contradicted in 1951 in Leeds appearing in a show called *Do You Remember?*: 'V.G. reception. In grand form, immaculate, artistic & polished faultless impersonation, receives applause during the act for her clever asides, during the 1st half, in a well arranged item with the chorus, to very good applause'.¹⁰⁶

In Glasgow, they were more mixed. 'If her voice perhaps is a little weaker still retains her sprightliness & uses the stage well.'¹⁰⁷

In 1958, appearing at the age of 75 in 'Thanks for the Memory', a show comprising many old music hall and variety acts, the following review was given:

The work of this old star of music hall is too well-known for individual criticism. The characteristic common to each artiste is their outstanding ability to work a song. All artistes have had "their day" and [are] suffering from a vocal weakness which is most marked nevertheless personality is still strong. Not brash and raises applause little of which I am sure is due to sympathy. Well groomed.¹⁰⁸

In the 1940s, the 'Do You Remember?' and 'Thanks for the Memory' shows made good profits (between £500 and £1000 generally) at theatres around the country. By 1951, when Hetty King was appearing in Leeds, they were less profitable (making around £200 profit at most theatres but £933 at the Glasgow Empire). It appears that they were not touring at major theatres in 1958 when many new forms of entertainment had begun to top bills.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ V&A-TPC, Stoll Moss Theatre Managers' Report Cards, 1938-1966, Hetty King, Nottingham Empire, 18 August 1947, R107AF20353-10/46, PN2597 Outsize.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Hetty King, Leeds, 30 July 1951, R107AF20353-10/46, PN2597 Outsize.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, Hetty King, 1947, Glasgow Empire, 6 August 1951, R107AF20353-10/46, PN2597 Outsize.

¹⁰⁸ V&A-TPC, Stoll Moss Theatre Managers' Report Cards, 1938-1966, Hetty King, Hanley, 31 March 1958, PN2597 Outsize.

¹⁰⁹ V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942-1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/7.

Hal Monty is a good example of a comic who was regularly on stage in the 1940s and 1950s and sometimes topped the bill but also appeared further down. The evidence led me to Hal Monty (born Albert Sutan) because his name regularly cropped up in the financial ledgers but also in a collection of financial report cards. Monty's career may have been influenced by factors other than his talent and his middling success. Monty was a Cockney comic who had begun his career with one of the Winogradsky (Grade) brothers, Bernard Delfont; they formed the Delfont Boys, a pair of dancers.¹¹⁰ Hal Monty had also worked as a talent agent himself, at one time under his birth name.¹¹¹ However, in his first paragraph on Monty in his autobiography, Delfont says that in the 1920s, 'He was not exactly in the first division, but he was making a living' as a dancer.¹¹²

Monty does represent a jobbing comic; his own attempts at being an agent were to play second fiddle to his career as a comedian. However, Monty was never to really make a break into the 'big time', perhaps because he lacked the real craft and guile of his peers. The American magazine *Billboard* described him as 'a good comic with an unenviable reputation as a gag-lifter'. It claimed that he was earning \$750 a week for his stint at the Finsbury Park Empire in July 1943.¹¹³ They also complain about how Monty is only given top billing because of a dearth of comedy headliners.¹¹⁴

Monty also possibly 'borrowed' one of his acts with balloon animals from the American comedian Wally Boag.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Bernard Delfont and Barry Turner, *East End, West End*, (London, 1990), pp. 24–50.

¹¹¹ 'New Comics Click on London Cirks', *Billboard*, 24 Jul 1943, p. 25, <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=fQwEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PP1&pg=PT24#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed on 21 September 2021].

¹¹² Delfont and Turner, *East End, West End*, p. 24.

¹¹³ 'New Comics Click on London Cirks', *Billboard*, 24 Jul 1943, p. 25, <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=fQwEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PP1&pg=PT24#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed on 21 September 2021]

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Hudd and Hindin, *Roy Hudd's Cavalcade*, p. 16, p. 124.

Monty's important connections could help to explain the lukewarm reaction to some of his work but his continued bookings. The report cards that he received from different theatres on the Moss Empires chain were mixed: from the Sunderland Empire in the week 21 to 28 June 1954, 'The comedy is provided by Hal Monty, but his material does not go for much, because it is so old'; and from Portsmouth on 1 February 1954, 'Fairly well received. Quite amusing, certainly has tried to find new material'.¹¹⁶ George Black in the 1920s had tried to ensure that acts were pursuing new material and had encouraged or even forced comics to try out new material rather than rely on old routines.¹¹⁷ The London Palladium (5 to 12 April 1954) reported that he was 'Well received ... Found the Monday audience tough but later performances proved more responsive. I find him very difficult to follow with his quick speech, but his style appeals to quite a good proportion of the house.'¹¹⁸

Monty's example could be exceptional because of his connections although he represents the type of middle-range comic who was working the halls, not extremely successful but making a living. The fact that he was generally performing in the first-tier Moss Empire circuit rather than a lower rung indicates that he was clearly a success in the industry.¹¹⁹ Others were not as lucky, and by the late 1950s theatres were closing at a rapid rate and lower down the variety hierarchy became a much grimmer place than before, even considering the frequent travelling and poor accommodation that many acts already endured.

¹¹⁶ V&A-TPC, Stoll Moss Theatre Managers' Report Cards, 1938–1966, Hal Monty, PN2597 Outsize.

¹¹⁷ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 54.

¹¹⁸ V&A-TPC, Stoll Moss Theatre Managers' Report Cards, 1938–1966, Hal Monty, PN2597 Outsize.

¹¹⁹ Hudd and Hindin, *Roy Hudd's Cavalcade*, p. 124;

'Max Bygraves - Obituary', *The Guardian Online*, 1 September 2012,

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/sep/01/max-bygraves-obituary-comedian-singer> [accessed on 20 September 2021];

Marion Konyot interview by Sue Barbour, [interview transcript], *Theatre Archive Project, British Library*, 7 November 2008. Shelf mark C1142/252 <https://sounds.bl.uk/related-content/TRANSCRIPTS/024T-C1142X000252-0100A0.pdf> [accessed 21st September, 2021].

The headline acts do not all translate well to the modern era, but they all had skill and were expected to be all-round entertainers. The comedians of this period at the top of the bill would be expected to sing, dance, or play an instrument. There were comedy singers, musicians, and even acrobats. In the variety theatre, an act would be expected to make people laugh and nothing was played completely 'straight' or taken too seriously. This was about to be changed by the growth in specialist musicians and singers who would be expected to be appreciated solely for their musicianship, voice, or song-writing abilities. The 1950s and 1960s were a crossover period for many performers who still maintained all-round skills, such as Max Bygraves, Morecambe and Wise, Bruce Forsyth, Ken Dodd, and even those associated with rock 'n' roll and skiffle music like Jim Dale and Lonnie Donegan. However, this sensibility was fostered in the interdisciplinary environment of the variety theatre and was to become increasingly unfashionable.

Further Down the Bill

Oliver Double and David Kynaston have both included examples of variety bills in their work, but these are often treated in isolation, as examples.¹²⁰ It is worth considering the format of variety and how acts fitted together in a performance. Here is an example from the Birmingham Hippodrome in 1945. This is a good indication of what a variety line up was like at the start of the period.¹²¹

Variety Show featuring Tessie O'Shea

Opening Night: 26 November 1945 Performance: 1 December 1945

Overture

¹²⁰ Kynaston, *Family Britain*, p. 109;
Double, *Britain Had Talent*.

¹²¹ Adam Ainsworth, 'Packed from Pit to Ceiling: The Kingston Empire (1910–1955) and British Variety', in Adam Ainsworth, Oliver Double, and Louise Peacock, *Popular Performance* (London, 2015), pp. 97–118, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474247368.ch-004> [accessed 20 September 2021]; 'Chronology of Performances', *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, http://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/ [accessed 21 September 2021].

The Balmoral Four – In a Dance Presentation
 Sirdani teaches how to ‘Diddle’ and become a Magician
 Freddie Bamberger – ‘Jest-er Piano Player’
 Wilson, Keppel & Betty – ‘Cleopatra’s Nightmare’
 Marianne Lincoln – The Vital Spark
 Sirdani – ‘Don’t be Fright’ in Vaudeville
 Interval – The Hippodrome Orchestra directed by Kevin Mallon –
 Overture ‘Lustspiel’
 The Balmoral Four – Will Entertain Again
 Freddie Bamberger & Pam – Talent Spotting
 Nat Jackley & Company – ‘The Roar Recruit’
 Tessie O’Shea – ‘Two-Ton Tessie’
 Amar & Alana – Balancers
 Performance Times: Evenings at 18:00 and 20:15¹²²

This format would have been recognisable to a Victorian audience and is comparable to a line-up from 1899.¹²³ Tessie O’Shea was a traditional music hall act; she used a banjolele and sang songs that mocked her weight and age. She was a musical act, but the songs were humorous. Wilson, Keppel, and Betty appear on the bill and Nat Jackley also specialised in ‘comic dancing’ and appeared alongside his wife, the actress Marianne Lincoln.

Wilson, Keppel and Betty were famous for their sand dance, an Egyptian-style dance performed by two men and a woman to a song arranged for them by Hoagy Carmichael. It was a mainstay of variety entertainment, and they had begun their careers in 1928.¹²⁴ Much later in their career the Managers’ Report Cards described the act as ‘familiar’ and ‘doing the same act as their previous visits’ but it was still very popular.¹²⁵

¹²² ‘Variety Show featuring Tessie O’Shea – Opening Night: 26 November 1945, Performance: 01 December 1945’, *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/variety-show-360/ [accessed 21 September 2021];

Hippodrome / Coventry Theatre / Apollo show archive, *Historic Coventry*, <https://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/theatre/index.php> [accessed 21 September 2021].

¹²³ ‘Magnificent Xmas Holiday Programme!’, variety poster, Victoria & Albert Museum, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1164741/poster-george-pearce/> [accessed 7 July 2017].

¹²⁴ Hudd and Hindin, *Roy Hudd’s Cavalcade*, p. 97.

¹²⁵ Wilson, Keppel and Betty, Stoll Moss Theatre Managers’ Report Cards, 1938-1966, V&A Theatre and Performance Collections. PN2597 Outsize

Nat Jackley, who was famous for his unusual movements and contortions, was generally popular with many theatre managers and in the report cards he is well-received. At the Birmingham Hippodrome, Jackley was given a rave review by the management: 'Scores a big success & he keeps the house in roars of laughter whenever he is on stage with his peculiar mannerism & facial expressions'.¹²⁶ His elevation from an unknown position to a 'forefront comedian' was reported by the manager of the Glasgow Empire in 1940.¹²⁷ He is similarly described as 'outstanding' at the Sunderland Empire.¹²⁸

After the war, at the Edinburgh Empire his act was given this feedback: 'Excellent reception. Is registering very well in his various appearances, his crazy antics & facial expressions & contortions are very funny. Earns excellent laughter & meets with big applause at the finish.'¹²⁹ In 1949, at the Sunderland Empire, he was described as 'The backbone of the entertainment. Is working exceedingly well, & with excellent material'.¹³⁰ At the Liverpool Empire, a change in his style was recorded, it was said he 'Is greatly improved; his comedy is much smoother & he has a more experienced deportment. It may be that he feels himself more of a straight comic than previously as the "rubber neck" man'.¹³¹ By 1954, he was still being 'excellently received' in Portsmouth, Brighton, and Sheffield but in Brighton his sketch 'The Roar Recruit' was described as 'old' but still getting terrific laughter.¹³²

Sirdani, or Solomon Sydney Daniels, was a vinyl record-eating, self-mutilating magician who would also tread on glass and pierce his neck with a large needle as part of

¹²⁶ V&A-TPC, Stoll Moss Theatre Managers' Report Cards 1938-1966, Nat Jackley, Birmingham Hippodrome, 11th March 1940, PN2597 Outsize.

¹²⁷ V&A-TPC Stoll Moss Theatre Managers' Report Cards, 1938-1966, Nat Jackley, Glasgow Empire, 25th March 1940, PN2597 Outsize.

¹²⁸ Ibid., Nat Jackley, Sunderland Empire, 25th March 1940, PN2597 Outsize.

¹²⁹ Ibid., Nat Jackley, Edinburgh Empire, 4th July 1949, PN2597 Outsize.

¹³⁰ Ibid., Nat Jackley, Sunderland Empire, 18th July 1949, PN2597 Outsize.

¹³¹ Ibid., Nat Jackley, Liverpool Empire, 1st August 1949, PN2597 Outsize.

¹³² Ibid., Nat Jackley, Report card, R107 AF40342, PN2597 Outsize.

his act.¹³³ He had a quick comedy patter with a foreign accent and malapropisms; he was a sort of prototype Tommy Cooper and had catchphrases, such as 'Don't be Fright'.¹³⁴ He was most famous as a radio magician and would explain the tricks on air, just as Peter Brough had been successful with radio ventriloquism.¹³⁵ Freddie Bamberger is described by Oliver Double as a 'dark-haired, big-nosed, beetle-browed comedy pianist'.¹³⁶ The Balmoral Four performed two dances and Amar and Alana performed a balancing act that they had been performing in variety theatres throughout the 1940s but had originated in the circus.¹³⁷ It can be seen from this bill that this was similar to what had been happening 46 years before.

Variety Show

Opening Night: 22 March 1948 Performance: 27 March 1948

1. Overture
2. The Zio Trio – Steps in Rhythm
3. Johnson Clark – The Squire Ventriloquist
4. Leonard Barr and Partner – Lunatics of the Dance
5. Dick Henderson – The Popular Yorkshire Comedian
6. Buster Shaver with Olive, George and Richard – America's Tiny Stars
- Intermission – Hippodrome Orchestra under Kevin Mallon – Perpetual Motion
7. The Zio Trio – Dance Time Again
8. Ray and Ray – Singing Acrobats
9. Leslie Strange – Character Comedian and Impressionist
10. Two-Ton Tessie O'Shea – Britain's Dynamic Personality; at the piano – Wally Dewar

¹³³ *Sirdani the Indestructible* [online film, film ID:1634.11], (British Pathé, first broadcast 11 October 1934), <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/sirdani-the-indestructible> [accessed 21 September 2021].

'Sirdani (1899–1982) - Filmography', *Internet Movie Database*, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm5490923/> [accessed 21st September 2021];

Maurice Powell, 'Summer Entertainment on the Isle of Man - The Joe Loss Years Part 1: 1946–50, "Let the good times roll again"', *Manx Music – Collectors & Primary Source Material – Research Papers and Working Guides*, [https://www.manxmusic.com/media/History%20photos/Douglas%20Entertainment%201946-50%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.manxmusic.com/media/History%20photos/Douglas%20Entertainment%201946-50%20(2).pdf) [accessed 21 September 2021].

¹³⁴ *Says Sirdani* (Vim Advert), [online film], (BFI player, first broadcast 1945) <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-says-sirdani-1945-online> [accessed 21 September 2021].

¹³⁵ Hudd and Hindin, *Roy Hudd's Cavalcade*, p. 170.

¹³⁶ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 15.

¹³⁷ See advertisements in *Arbroath Herald and Advertiser for the Montrose Burghs*, Friday 15 August 1947, p. 2.

11. Yeaman's Sporting Dogs – A Riot of Fun.¹³⁸

This week took £1745 (or £64,885 in 2020) and a profit of £342 (or £12,717 in 2020).¹³⁹

Just under five years later, a similar show with similar headliners appeared at the Birmingham Hippodrome. Wilson, Keppel, and Betty were still touring in 1950 too and performed back at the Birmingham Hippodrome on 13 November.¹⁴⁰ Below is the similar bill from May 1950. There are signs of change with regard to the nature and provenance of the acts, but the same acts were regularly in the major theatres around the country and a similar composition of acts fills the bill.

George and Alfred Black present Tessie O'Shea and Nat Jackley in a New Road Show – 'Hit A New High'

Opening Night: 8 May 1950 Performance: 13 May 1950

1. Irene and Stanley Davis – Dance Stylists from the USA
2. The Audition? – with Jerry Desmonde and introducing Nat Jackley
3. Aimee Fontenay and Partner – A Song In The Air
4. Arthur Dowler – Abra-Cod-Abra
5. The Foreign Legion – with Nat Jackley and Jerry Desmonde
6. Two-Ton Tessie O'Shea – with Wally Dewar at the Piano
- Intermission – Hippodrome Orchestra under Frank Hagley
7. Irene and Stanley Davis – On With The Dance
8. Sheridan Brothers – Twins In The Balance
9. Crime Doesn't Pay – with Nat Jackley and Jerry Desmonde
10. Chevalier Brothers – Comedy Entertainers

Performance Times: Twice daily at 18:15 and 20:30¹⁴¹

This week made £1997 (or £69,980 in 2020) and a profit of £384 (or £13,456)¹⁴².

This bill includes Jackley and O'Shea performing their acts. Jackley was alongside Jerry Desmonde, an actor with experience in a variety of media but famous for playing

¹³⁸ 'Variety Show - Opening Night 22 March 1948, Performance 27 March 1948', *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/variety-show-318 [accessed on 12th December 2021].

¹³⁹ V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945 – 1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ 'George and Alfred Black present Tessie O'Shea and Nat Jackley', *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/ [accessed 12 October 2022]

¹⁴² V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/7.

alongside Norman Wisdom in many of his films. There were the American dancers Stanley and Irene Davis and Aimee Fontenay, the 'famous singer on the flying trapeze';¹⁴³ Conjuror Arthur Dowler, known as 'The Wizard of Cod' or 'The Codologist';¹⁴⁴ the Sheridan brothers from South Africa, a balancing act. Jackey continued to receive praise on the Managers' Report Card into the 1950s for his eccentricity and the 'weirdest of contortions'.¹⁴⁵

The Max Wall Show

Opening Night: 30 May 1955 Performance: 4 June 1955

Max Wall

The Ken-Tones – Vocal Group

Freddie Frinton – Comedian with Joan Gibber

Benson Dulay and Company – Conjuror

Joan Mann – Singer

Bobby Collins – Whistler

The Five Speedacs – Acrobats

Marie Du Vere – Dancing Trio¹⁴⁶

This made £2019 (or £54,171 in 2020) and a profit of £219 (or £5,876 in 2020)¹⁴⁷.

Apart from the appearance of a vocal harmony group in the form of the Ken-Tones, performing a light version of the popular music of the time, the rest of the bill had a similar feel. Freddie Frinton was a music hall comedian most famous for the 'Dinner for One' sketch, which was broadcast in Germany and many countries around the world annually

¹⁴³ *A Singer On The Flying Trapeze: Aimee Fontenay*, black and white photograph taken 7 July 1961, Alamy - <https://www.alamy.com/jul-07-1961-a-singer-on-the-flying-trapeze-aimee-fontenay-the-famous-image69394610.html?imageid=DE6FCD73-95AF-4536-A9AB-8A60552C3002&p=90011&pn=1&searchId=ad1280b1b82bf2e4873a84c22eb8ef83&searchtype=0> [accessed 21 September 2021].

¹⁴⁴ Kynaston. *Austerity Britain*, p. 264;

Bill Sachs, 'Magic', *Billboard*, 6 September 1947, p. 41,

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=VAwEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PP1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed on 21 September 2021];

Nottingham Empire Programme for week commencing 6 August 6 1951, PDF consulted via https://www.infotextmanuscripts.org/webb/webb_nott_emp_sky.pdf [accessed 1st September 2021].

¹⁴⁵ Jackley Report Cards, Finsbury Park Empire, 16 April 1954.

¹⁴⁶ 'The Max Wall Show 30 May 1955', https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/

¹⁴⁷ V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942-1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/7

on New Year's Eve. There were more individual singers on this bill, but it is dominated by conjurors, whistlers like Bobby Collins, acrobats, and dancers.¹⁴⁸ Max Wall was the most versatile comic of his generation and could sing, dance, act, play guitar, tell jokes, and clown. His versatility was well used by variety theatres, but this show was simply promoted as 'Max Wall, The Queen's Jester, Making Millions Laugh.'¹⁴⁹

Four years later, it is possible to see a bill that looks remarkably similar to bills from earlier years. Tessie O'Shea is joined by Hal Monty and dancing is provided by Flack and Lamar.¹⁵⁰ Circus balancers The Duo Russmar added to the variety flavour of the bill.¹⁵¹ There was the addition of a singer in David Hughes, who performed in a pop and operatic style.¹⁵² Francois and Zandra were a novelty dance act.¹⁵³ Overall, this bill reflects a distinct lack of change from the earlier bills. The above week made £1217 (£28,958) and a loss of £425 (£10,113).

Variety Show featuring Tessie O'Shea – Direct from her USA and Caribbean Tour, with Ernest Wanpolos at the piano

Opening Night: 3 August 1959 Performance: 8 August 1959

1. Overture
2. Flack and Lamar – Turn on the Taps
3. Duo Russmar – Feline Fantasy
4. Hal Monty – Laugh and Be Happy
5. Tessie O'Shea – Direct from her USA and Caribbean Tour, with Ernest Wanpolos at the piano
- Intermission – Hippodrome Orchestra
6. Flack and Lamar – Dancing Time

¹⁴⁸ 'Bobby Collins', *Then and Now*, consulted on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BawZ2UfMIRw> [accessed 21 September 2021]; Bruce Forsyth, *Bruce: The Autobiography* (London, 2012).

¹⁴⁹ 'Max's Life', *Max Wall Society*, https://www.maxwallsociety.org/max_life.php [accessed on 21st September 2021].

¹⁵⁰ Hudd and Hindin, *Roy Hudd's Cavalcade*, p. 59.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60.

¹⁵² Colin Larkin (ed.), *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music* (London, 1992), p. 1203.

¹⁵³ Chris Hare, 'Obituaries: Manny Francois', *The Stage*, 18 Jan 2010, <https://www.thestage.co.uk/obituaries--archive/obituaries/manny-francois> [accessed 21 September 2021];

Chris Hare, 'Obituaries: Joy Francois', *The Stage*, 18 October 2017. <https://www.thestage.co.uk/obituaries--archive/obituaries/obituary-joy-francois> [accessed 21 September 2021].

7. Francois and Zandra – Unusual Dance Team
8. Hal Monty – The One Man Variety
9. David Hughes – Television's Local Personality¹⁵⁴

Acts that were stalwarts of the 1930s and 1940s were still performing variety. The format and composition of the acts had not changed much, they often were merely tweaked rather than changed to suit a new demographic. Concessions to popular music and television are evident but in 1959 there are variety bills headlined by comic singers and dancers that had been on stage for 30 years or more. The performances began to make significant losses. This was a shortened bill but comparing this bill to others in the same year, it is not unusual. There were more acts aimed at the young and which used radio and television as a way of drawing in crowds, but variety was certainly stuck in a rut and found it difficult to incorporate any innovations into its tight and well-worn format.

The troubles for variety are illustrated here. This excerpt headed 'Rude to Patrons', from an article in *The Stage* on 8 July 1954, illustrates the fine lines that comedians had to navigate in mid-1950s variety:

A business man writes to us about a comedian who, playing before a small audience in a provincial music hall, peppered his patter with remarks about the few patrons and many empty seats, to the particular embarrassment of the people in the front row of the stalls, who were especially 'favoured' with these cheap witticisms. Instead of being grateful for the few who had turned up, the comedian was anxious to take it out of these stalwarts for the absence of others. If a comedian has to rely on such dubious methods, it's high time he packed up, our correspondent thinks.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ 'Variety Show featuring Tessie O'Shea Opening Night: 3 August 1959 Performance: 8 August 1959', *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/ [accessed 4 October 2022]

¹⁵⁵ 'Variety: Variety Records Broken', *The Stage*, 8 July 1954 [accessed via ProQuest].

Conclusions

Britain had changed greatly after the Second World War and music hall comedy seemed evocative of a bygone age, one that was forged amongst the 'dark satanic mills', to entertain the great urban masses that emerged in the industrial revolution. The 1950s were when Britain tried to change this identity and had to face up to the fact that it was no longer a world power, and the great industries now began to struggle. The great commercial forces in America had turned the heads of Britain's youth with the glamour of film stars and popular music. The all-singing-and-dancing comics that had proved so versatile could sometimes transition into the new media, but their working-class personae could not summon up the glamour or edginess. There were transition points between Max Miller on stage and George Formby on film to Norman Wisdom and Max Bygraves, but the dyed-in-the-wool music hall performers were endangered by the 1960s. Bruce Forsyth, Morecambe and Wise, and Ken Dodd would carry the torch, but they had to find new appeal on television. This process had begun before the 1940s, but music hall performers were no longer the headline acts and did not consistently make variety theatres a profit.

Despite this, variety was fun. It had some ludicrous acts that were weird and wonderful and the very concept of them is amusing. Circuses were still operating but variety had taken many acts from circus performers and genuine novelty acts into its repertoire and provided a place for these oddities and unconventional acts to showcase their talents. These acts were always going to find it difficult to translate out of a live setting, but they added to the Carnavalesque atmosphere of the entertainment. The wild, drink-fuelled singalongs of the public house/ music hall had been replaced, but this was still a space where out-of-the-ordinary events could take place. Variety had already been sanitised but a future without it would be duller and in spite of the surrealism of Milligan

on the radio, this was a more cerebral form of eccentricity than the circus-like novelty acts of the variety stage.

The variety industry needed to change in the 1940s and 1950s. The acts had developed, and the songs and acts of Miller, Fields, and Randle were different to their older ancestors Robey, Leybourne, or Lauder, but they were not that far removed. Variety and music hall were under threat in a multimedia age.

It is possible to see from the bills selected from the 1940s and 1950s that despite wider changes in the industry and in the make-up of music hall bills, the format had not fundamentally moved on, even in 1959, from the earlier stars and performers. Variety on the cusp of the 1960s would still have been recognisable in the form and types of acts that performed. This is not to say that the style and substance of the bill had not changed in the intervening years. This begs two questions: firstly, why was variety stubbornly persisting with this form of entertainment; secondly, and conversely, if this format had persisted for over a century, were they right to keep ploughing an increasingly unprofitable furrow? These questions will be covered in more detail when an analysis of technological developments will be discussed in forthcoming chapters. The point still stands, though, that as late as 1959 there seemed to be a distinct inflexibility in the presentation of variety in the years after 1945. Tessie O'Shea may have seemed to be a dated and desperate act to keep wheeling out in 1959, but it is easy to forget that the last of the great music hall performers, Ken Dodd, would outsell the Beatles in the music charts in the 1960s. Dodd would keep performing music hall well into the twenty-first century in front of considerable audiences around the country.

So, was variety intransigent and anachronistic or was it unable to incorporate new styles or fads into its format? The texts of Shakespeare and Sheridan are still performed word for word and the compositions of Mozart and Beethoven are usually unaltered.

Then why did an entire cultural form that was well-established, understood by the audience and that had provided good profits become culturally irrelevant? The comedy of the variety theatre and the format in general did not hold the cultural prestige of other forms. Variety entertainment represents popular entertainment, but Shakespearean theatre had been available to the masses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This implies that variety and music hall were fundamentally ephemeral because of the structure and high-paced nature of the acts. This form of entertainment was contextually specific and could not be preserved in aspic, it could not be scripted, and every performance was different. This perhaps was its biggest strength but also one of its fatal weaknesses.

Until the advent of commercial television, there was a lingering success for the old-fashioned variety comedians and the concept of variety. However, there was a desire for change amongst the public; variety theatre was wedded to a Victorian and Edwardian format and presentation. As popular culture moved on, there was a slow and steady decline in takings and profits for the variety theatres and only big-name theatres continued to make money.

Miller and Randle were both real stars but even they had regional constituencies. They were not suitable for an era of national broadcasting and their style was not only more appealing to certain audiences, but their styles did not translate to the small screen. They were not family entertainers, and their comedy and performance style were informed by the sexually suggestive and alcohol-fuelled spirit of old music hall.

John Osborne's play *The Entertainer* is an allegorical representation of the failures of music hall and the state of Britain in general. It starred Laurence Olivier as a failed variety performer, Archie Rice, and was first staged in 1957. It makes wider comment on the variety industry and old-time music hall and seeks to use these as allegories for the

situation in Suez and the state of the British Empire but makes wider comments about the changing nature of British society. Some of these allusions seem a little awkward and unnecessary but this would have been topical both internationally and in terms of the state of the variety industry. Osborne reflects on the outdated nature of the industry and the influence of television but also refers to the jingoistic heritage of the music hall. It was subsequently turned into a film in 1960 which also starred Olivier, but by this time the game was well and truly up for variety. Osborne's view is important for two reasons: it provides a snapshot of one view of the British comedy industry at the time and links this to the national mood of the time. However, more importantly, it is a piece which captures an intellectual view of variety and one which has been studied and analysed more than the actual industry itself. Osborne was a huge admirer of Max Miller – he called him a 'saloon-bar Priapus' – but the depiction of Rice is a damning.¹⁵⁶ In fact, Rice was depicted as a nasty, cartoonish caricature and representative of a degradation and moral decline that some saw in Britain after World War Two.

This is a convenient comparison for how traditional variety was treated. It was seen as a tired failure, a joke that was no longer funny. By 1957, this is partially true but the major performers in the theatres never become laughable in the wrong sense. There was great affection for these performers, beyond mere nostalgia. The stagecraft of figures like Miller, Randle, Formby, and Fields, amongst many others, was the inspiration for the stars of television light entertainment in the 1960s and 1970s.

Mollie Ellis in her editorial pieces 'What We Think' in *The Stage* criticised different aspects of variety. In 1957, on 10 October, she attacked the 'outmoded' nature of many acts and their refusal to adapt as a key element:

¹⁵⁶ East, *Max Miller: the Cheeky Chappie*, p. 12.

It is well to face the undeniable fact that many artists and acts are unemployed because they are unemployable on a modern bill. A different breed of pro has sprung up, not necessarily a better breed, and the old brigade who can't adapt themselves to the modern trend are as outmoded in show business ... Different techniques in comedy, singing and dancing have come along so rapidly that they have left the ordinary music hall performer bewildered. What's to be done? First, performers should remind themselves that we are living in the Space Age, not in Marie Lloyd's age, however delightful that may have been. Show business is going through an awkward, in-between stage just now. No-one quite knows what will be the result. The old days are finished for ever, and the days which lie ahead are uncertain except for one thing: a new approach must be found.¹⁵⁷

She does go on to accept the value of experienced performers being offered bit-parts, but this is a damning appraisal for many in the variety industry. Mollie Ellis in *The Stage* criticised the impropriety and inability to connect with a family audience for many comics, which seems somewhat incongruous with the emergence of the strip shows at this time. She describes them as 'horror comics':

One of the reasons why present-day variety is feeling the pinch is that some of her comedians have no sense. Unfortunately, a number of present-day comedians are not doing their job very well. In fact, they're doing it very badly, for instead of attracting the public, they are repelling them ... What's the result? The family audience is lost forever ... And the blame rests entirely with the comic who hadn't the sense to see that a gag which raised the roof at a stag party, upsets and often angers the same men if told to a mixed audience.¹⁵⁸

She goes on to make an intriguing argument that seems both hypocritical and certainly harbours a nostalgic view of the music hall:

The honest vulgarity of the old-fashioned music-hall was surely not based on a repertoire of filth ... It had instead the fruity, warm appeal of a Scott Sanders or a Billy Russell, a Max Miller, or a Crazy Gang, born experts in their own right of the common touch, using material which had been intelligently and imaginatively prepared. Some of our leading comedians today can sail as near the wind as they please without offending even the purest of minds, for they

¹⁵⁷ 'Could You Run a Provincial Hall?', *The Stage*, 10 October 1957, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19571010/023/0003> [accessed 13 December 2021].

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

respect that fine line between humour and sordidness which many of our minor comics don't even know exists.¹⁵⁹

Osborne was right to say that variety performers represented something from the Victorian past, just as now the great youth movements of the 1950s and 1960s feel very distant. This link to decline is a very interesting one. Either way, variety and music hall were under threat in a multimedia age. The fact that stars like Hetty King and George Robey were still working in nostalgia shows that mirrored the format of the supposedly modern shows indicates some of the major problems for variety.

The language and 'knowingness' of music hall was to find its way into radio, television and film. Initially, as performers worked on the radio, Frankie Howerd being a primary exponent in the 1950s, Tony Hancock would continue this and his colleagues would also be key components in the *Carry On* films which would go further than was allowed on most broadcast programmes. Eric Morecambe and Les Dawson would keep many of these music hall traditions alive, as they began to be reinterpreted in the 1970s.

The tables below show that the Moss theatres generated a profit throughout the period but became more reliant on the profitable theatres, such as the Palladium. However, it does demonstrate that variety was not only viable but profitable until 1964, but with a reduced network. Variety as a performance framework was struggling but the venues themselves were still able to generate profits and with a change in focus and government assistance, many could have been saved. The traditional elements of variety still had an audience at the end of the 1950s. Competition from television and the way that it undermined the live experience was a key factor in the closure of theatres after 1955.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Kynaston explains the attitude of many in the late 1950s: 'For most people the future ... was indisputably modern – yet modern, they hoped within a familiar, reassuring setting. Modernists, by contrast, had little patience with the recalcitrant forces of social conservatism.' He goes on to explain that the battle between these two outlooks would characterise this period: one perspective glancing over its shoulder at the past and the other firmly fixed on the future. The media world and variety were gripped by this tension. Large portions of cities were demolished and rebuilt. Variety theatres were firmly in the sights of the developers. Music hall still had an audience, but this could be considered merely driven by nostalgia or it could be viewed as heritage worthy of preservation, both physical and cultural. With hindsight, this desire for modernity delivered improved living standards and infrastructure but the brunt was often felt by working-class communities that were torn up and replaced with tower blocks, and to many varieties was the culture of the 'working class slum' rather than the Space Age.

Table 2.3: *Moss Empires Theatres' Receipts and Profits*

Year	Receipts	+/- on previous year	Profit or Loss	+/- on previous year
1945			£357,791	£78,138
1946	£2,262,083		£329,007	-£28,784
1947	£2,163,178	-£98,905	£418,843	£89,836
1948	£2,460,667	£297,489	£511,089	£92,246
1949	£2,518,025	£57,358	£438,068	-£73,021
1950	£2,389,362	-£128,025	£388,193	-£49,875
1951	£2,394,165	£4,803	£277,895	-£110,298
1952	£2,444,699	£50,534	£310,767	£32,872
1953	£2,368,028	£76,671	£243,712	-£67,055
1954	£2,545,927	£177,899	£353,243	£109,531
1955	£2,526,803	-£19,124	£306,241	-£47,002
1956	£2,399,633	-£127,170	£230,115	-£76,126
1957	£2,570,482	£180,849	£283,132	£53,017
1958	£2,115,564	-£454,918	£147,200	-£135,932
1959	£2,183,974	£68,410	£153,749	£6,549
1960	£2,156,947	-£27,027	£216,094	£62,345
1961	£2,363,141	£206,194	£247,372	£31,278
1962	£2,144,356	-£218,785	£148,979	-£78,393
1963	£2,077,254	-£67,102	£192,621	£43,642
1964	£1,684,740	-£126,535	£146,333	-£31,416

Source: V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns 1945 – 1964, GB 71

THM/303/1/10; The 1964 data is Jan–Oct when ATV took over the Moss Empire chain of theatres.

October is an incomplete month, thus the larger discrepancy between Oct 1963 and Oct 1964.

Table 2.4: *Moss Empires Theatres: Weeks in profit*

Theatre	Weeks in profit												
	1946	1949	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960
Glasgow Empire	52	52	52	52	52	49	48	39	42	36	25	14	12
Finsbury Park Empire	51	49	48	45	46	42	41	35	28	25	22	18	SOLD
Sheffield Empire	51	51	50	48	47	41	34	28	29	19	17	SOLD	
Liverpool Empire	51	51	42	50	47	36	33	32	28	33	22	25	16
Swansea Empire	50	40	42	46	41	39	31	21	24	SOLD			
Newcastle Empire	51	50	51	51	51	49	43	43	42	42	27	17	18

Source: V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns 1945 – 1964, GB

71 THM/303/1/10.

3. Radio and Variety

This chapter will examine the interaction between radio and variety. The BBC had its own Variety Department that aimed to re-create variety on the airwaves or used variety performers within its programming. The initial interaction between broadcasting and radio was not one of outright competition. The role of radio was particularly important during World War Two and this left it as the primary form of domestic entertainment in 1945. There was also a new generation of comedians and performers that had served during World War Two and their impact in variety and radio will be assessed here. Variety theatre provided a platform for individual performers from the radio, both to those looking to supplement their income by returning to their music hall roots, as well as for those forging their own path to stardom and who needed stage experience to refine and develop their act. There were significant shared interests for both industries.

During this war, the nation was confronted with the unprecedented task of entertaining both a civilian population which was itself under attack and taking part in the wartime effort, and the armed forces overseas. This task could not be fulfilled solely by professional performers from the variety circuit because they were required to help keep morale high on the Home Front. So many performers were identified or volunteered from the ranks of the military. Some had prior experience before the war, but others were used because they had the ability to make others laugh or held the attention of their peers.

Servicemen and women who participated in ENSA (and other entertainment corps) emerged from the war with a taste for showbusiness and a knowledge of performance. Frank Mort claims that the acts of Michael Bentine and Jimmy Edwards at

the theatre offer an insight into the experience of the psychological terror of war.¹ Soldiers who returned from war and civilians who had lived through the war had a distinctly different perspective. The more upsetting and sometimes unspeakable experiences of war highlighted the absurdity of everyday life and fostered a sense of the absurd and surreal for those that returned from the war.

Broadcasting had a strong influence on the success and composition of variety theatre. Simultaneously, the BBC sought to incorporate variety entertainment into its schedules. Entertainment at home became increasingly important. Variety and comedy became a mainstay of radio schedules. Both live performance and radio were part of a multimedia entertainment sector, but the experience of war had elevated both in terms of demand from the public.²

The effect of radio on variety was significant. The wireless listeners would be drawn away from both the variety theatres and cinemas by the convenience of home entertainment. According to the UK Cinema Association, cinema attendance peaked in 1946 with 1.64 billion admissions.³ Just as cinema peaked in the post-war period, top division football reached a new summit in 1949 with average attendances of 38,792. That number has only recently been approached and not bettered.⁴ Entertainment that required patrons to leave their homes took a great dip after the mid-1950s.

The commercial strategy and promotion of variety comedy acts had to change in the 1930s onwards. The growth in the importance of radio during World War Two meant

¹ Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs*, pp. 258–9.

² Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London, 2006), p. 211.

³ 'Annual admissions – 1935 onwards', *UK Cinema Association*, <https://www.cinemauk.org.uk/the-industry/facts-and-figures/uk-cinema-admissions-and-box-office/annual-admissions/> [accessed 1 November 2021];

Mark Glancy, 'Going to the pictures: British cinema and the Second World War.' *Past and Future* 8 (2010), pp. 7–9.

⁴ 'League Attendance', *History of English Football*, <https://www.european-football-statistics.co.uk/attn/nav/attnengleague.htm> [accessed 1 November 2021].

that variety theatres had to accommodate this new rival and figure out how to stage many of the shows that were designed with audio in mind and often veered towards sketches or comedy drama in nature.

Variety on the radio

The BBC operated a Variety Department from 1922 to 1967. At the time, vaudeville and variety were the primary forms of popular entertainment that needed to be emulated. Film stars like Chaplin and Stan Laurel had started in music hall, the Marx Brothers and Buster Keaton in American vaudeville. By 1945, radio had become the major entertainment form of the day and 9,710,230 wireless licences had been issued. The BBC was interested in replicating successful cultural formats, including those of music hall and variety. Looking at how the relationship between these two media changed in the period is important, especially as in the late 1930s and early 1940s relays of music hall performances and shows, set in real theatres with music hall performers, were the mainstay of the radio schedules.

Comedy had been a key component of radio schedules from the early days of the BBC. However, there was no precedent for how to present comedy in anything other than a live context. Music hall and variety theatre settings or live recordings were formulated for early shows and obviously adapted to the acts that would operate successfully in an audio-only environment.

The most successful radio comedy during World War Two had been *It's That Man Again* or *ITMA*, a sort of proto-situation comedy that mocked everyday life in wartime Britain by using stock characters and catchphrases. Its topical nature and self-deprecation of the British character helped catapult it to great success during the war.

Its principal performer, Tommy Handley, became a huge star, and the programme had a large socio-cultural impact. Steve Foster and Andy Furst (who is a writer and comedian) have written the most complete guide to radio comedy, including broadcast dates and information on all the programmes. They explain that the 'significance, and the affection in which its star, Tommy Handley, was held, cannot be over-emphasised.'⁵ The show's writer, Ted Kavanagh, illustrates: 'It should be written somewhere for all to read that Tommy Handley, in the Fiendish Forties of our century, made more folk laugh than any other native comedian. And by laugh I do not mean smile.'⁶

It's That Man Again (ITMA) ran from 1939 to 1949 and was hugely successful. Foster and Furst claim that it had a domestic audience of 20 million and an international audience in wartime more than 30 million.⁷ This changed not only the emphasis the BBC put on comedy but was in the context of the first mass experiences for a radio audience. As Siân Nicholas notes, data from the Listening Barometers and the Listener Research Bulletins shows that, by 1944, 40 percent of the population listened to ITMA.⁸

It made radio a central part of the cultural life of Britain and placed comedy at the heart of this medium. In wartime, radio was used for a mix of information, entertainment, and propaganda, and comedy became a part of this machinery intended to maintain the national morale. News from the front, combined with speeches from Winston Churchill and entertainment, made radio indispensable during wartime. However, the BBC did not want the values of the music hall transferred to their organisation.

⁵ Foster and Furst, *Radio Comedy*, p. 27.

⁶ Gale Pedrick (ed.), *The World Radio and Television Annual: Jubilee Issue*, (London, 1946)

⁷ Foster and Furst, *Radio Comedy*, p. 27.

⁸ Siân Nicholas, 'The good servant: the origins and development of BBC Listener Research 1936–1950' in *Introduction to BBC Audience Research Reports Collection, Part I: BBC Listener Research Department 1937–1950* (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2007).

Transferring comedy from the stage to the wireless was not necessarily an obvious or advantageous proposition, especially for the first Director-General John Reith. 'Variety was anathema to the humourless Reith' is the opinion of Andy Foster and Steve Furst.⁹ Radio did not rely on the tried and tested act of a stand-up performer, but on scripts written on a regular basis. Radio performances had not only the opportunity but also the obligation to be more topically relevant than variety and music hall acts that would tour similar material for months at a time and could be repeated several times over.

From the war years into the 1950s, audiences began to desert variety in favour of broadcasting.¹⁰ Theatres began to look and feel old-fashioned and leaving the house for entertainment began to seem unnecessary. Radio listening had a cultural cachet that visiting a music hall had lost. Radio represented aspiration, both materialistically and as a lifestyle accessory, and added to a competitive entertainment market.

The comedy presented in theatres and music halls, based on song, dance, and sketches, and simple characters and patter moved towards more sophisticated and complex dramatic structure. With broadcast entertainment came the situation comedy and a whole new realm of realism. However, the transition from stage comedy to what in essence was dramatic comedy was not easy for variety comics or stage actors. It required a new type of performer who could make people laugh but make people believe they were also a credible character. This had been pioneered on film, but films were not serialised like radio and thus there had to be significant depth to the radio characters. Jimmy Grafton, the *Goon Show* script editor (and the man credited with bringing the *Goons* together at his public house) explains: 'Variety comics as such are not considered to work so well in situation comedy, because they're slightly larger than life, and therefore they

⁹ Foster and Furst, *Radio Comedy*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 208.

overproject. In situation comedy you can't have that, because you have to suspend disbelief ... so you have to have actors rather than comedians.'¹¹ Jimmy Grafton also made the point that 'people who came into radio from stage Variety had to rest to a great extent on their stage experience which usually had a strong visual element in it', meaning their impact was not always guaranteed.¹²

Changing from touring variety companies that performed in different towns night after night to a nationwide broadcast service meant a sudden drop in the longevity of comic material and, if they were not original, sometimes in the longevity of comic performers themselves.

The following extract from an internal BBC circular memo highlights the problems of the transition from live performance to radio and how it affected audience interaction in a twofold manner. Producers had to consider the interaction between the acts and the 'real', on-site, music hall audience, as well as cater to the wishes of the 'virtual' audience in front of the radio sets, who also expected the performer's full attention.

With regard to "Music Hall" there is a growing feeling among listeners as well as among people here, that acts are tending to disregard the microphone and play at the audience not only in respect of the type of performance they give, but in their movements about the stage. I do not wish to make any regulations which will kill the spirit of "Music Hall", but at the same time I want you to keep a special eye on this.¹³

Decency was also considered a highly important issue at the time and the ethos of the BBC under the puritanical, Calvinist influence of John Reith wanted to make sure that offensive or prejudicial material was not a part of any BBC output even in the guise of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 208.

¹³ BBC Written Archive in Caversham: *Policy Music Hall Relays, 1928-1944*, 9 February 1937, (BBC Internal Circulating memo, from Director of Variety to Mr Sharman), R34/482.

When referring to archival documents I will be giving information on the document, file and author, so as to distinguish from other documents in the same file.

jokes or one-liners. Announcer Peter King explained how they eliminated dubious material, either at rehearsal stage, or afterwards: the motto was 'If the band laughs – cut it!' Peter Titheradge describes the constraints on BBC writers: 'There were five principal things we had to watch: religion, royalty, physical disability, colour [race] and homosexuality.'¹⁴

The BBC editor-in-chief sent a memo to the Director-General of the BBC regarding the subject of 'Clean Variety' on 24 November 1943, in which the radio environment was deemed more problematic and suggested the standards allowed in a music hall were not acceptable in people's homes. This attitude to moral standards led to people objecting more strongly to 'vulgarity' in broadcasts.

Our present dilemma is that we are trying to make the best of both worlds and getting the worst. Some of the greatest British critics from Hazlitt onwards have told us with gusto that the British music-hall is based on a tradition of broadness and vulgarity. We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that audiences enjoy such things in music-halls. We can take heart in the fact that these very same people will be the first to object to the B.B.C. taking identical 'entertainment' into their own homes.¹⁵

In the memo he summarises the BBC objections to 'vulgarity' in comedy and how the British thirst for bawdy comedy did not extend from the boisterous music hall into the home that was shared with their children.

... our long-term problem, which is to build up our own variety. It must be a genuine broadcasting product with our own technique and our own standards. Quite apart from all questions of taste, so much of our present material is poor broadcasting. In such a new medium ... questionable jokes, suggestiveness and vulgarity will be so obviously out of place that they will not be admitted!¹⁶

¹⁴ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 209.

¹⁵ BBC Written Archive in Caversham: *Variety, File 1, 1943–1956*, 24 November 1943, (Document; Memo: Editor-in-Chief to Director-General 'Clean Variety'), R34/917.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The BBC needed more control of the entertainment broadcast and producing their own shows cut out the need to constantly worry about the vulgarities of the music hall performer. These performers were used to performing in an 'adult' environment where the odd double entendre, naughty song, or rude gag would go unpunished. The editor-in-chief continues:

So long as the British music-hall rests on its present traditions, I do not believe that a marriage of interests between wireless and the music-hall is possible. Even in wartime there is no reason why we should not press on with our task of creating our own substitute. The B.B.C. by the spread of its power and the strength of its influence should be able to create and inculcate its own traditions – and the experience of what has happened to most B.B.C.-made stars in the past tells us that in the end any success we have in this direction will ultimately make itself felt on the music-halls.¹⁷

The BBC was taking a moral standpoint with variety and actually wanted to mould and alter the nature of variety.

The lack of control exercised by the BBC over the programmes involving variety artists, either in a studio or from music hall 'outside broadcasts' was one of the main reasons why they wanted to bring programming into their studios and into a format that was unique to radio, rather than relying on the material of individual performers. Producing programmes that bore more resemblance to values in the film industry were therefore seen as highly desirable. An in-house programme could be moulded to their liking, it could utilise their individual studio production values and they could employ writers and performers of their choosing rather than those who had built a following in the world of theatre variety. Pat Dixon, a producer for *ITMA*, *Take It From Here*, *The Goon Show* and *Hancock's Half Hour*, explains the main purpose of the BBC's variety output: 'I

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

agree that the Variety Department's first job is to make people laugh and also that it is up to the Department to find ways of doing this in terms of radio as opposed to theatre and music hall'.¹⁸

The BBC had a tricky relationship with variety but the most significant factor for them was to have editorial control over entertainment. John Reith's motto of 'Inform, educate, and entertain' placed entertainment after the first two. The BBC was to provide a state-sponsored public service for the betterment of the nation rather than simply give the public what they desired. An adherence to these Reithian ideals was contradicted by the 'vulgarity' of music hall entertainment. The BBC did not care much in the late 1940s that it might damage variety. At this time, the industry was still healthy and although the broadcaster must have foreseen the impact on music hall entertainment, their goals were different, namely, to provide a public service, and not to compete for market share necessarily. At a time when radio was still crucial and about to hit its prime (unlike in the USA), the only early competitor to the BBC was Radio Luxembourg. Radio Luxembourg was an early commercial radio rival to the BBC which operated from the Grand Duchy and could be received on long-wave and medium-wave. Its commercial model (sponsorship) provided much more populist material. However, the BBC still maintained the strongest audience figures.¹⁹

There was plenty of room for radio comedy and for it to be complementary to what appeared on stage. Asa Briggs explains the importance of radio comedy in the post-war years. He highlights *Take It From Here* as a key example of a successful attempt at creating a new style of programme for radio. *Take It From Here* ran throughout the period and had

¹⁸ BBC Written Archive in Caversham: *Variety, File 1, 1943–1956*, 24 January 1950, (Memo: Mr Pat Dixon to Head of Variety, 'Radio and Television', R34/917.

¹⁹ Siân Nicholas, 'The People's Radio: The BBC and its Audience, 1939–1945, in Nick Hayes and Jeff Hill (eds), *'Millions like us?': British Culture in the Second World War* (Liverpool, 1999), p. 66.

its heyday in the early 1950s. Its run was from 1948 to 1960, and it starred Jimmy Edwards and Dick Bentley in fast-paced, gag-based comedy; this featured a 'show within a show', the comic soap opera, *The Glums*.²⁰

In general, radio-broadcast quizzes and variety programmes boomed – although there were inevitable flops – with *Take It From Here*, first broadcast on 19 March 1948, standing out in retrospect as 'the first radio show to emerge from the post-war comedy explosion, when ... all the physical and mental restraints of the years of trial and hardship culminated in a mad scramble to seek and parade laughter.'²¹

The late 1940s and 1950s were when radio comedy began to truly find its own feet, combining the success of wartime shows, music hall, and American styles to form a unique style and format that set British comedy apart. Along with *The Goon Show* and *Hancock's Half Hour* were *Take It from Here* and *Life With The Lyons*, and *Ray's A Laugh* mixed the American sitcom styles with British humour.

Radio Luxembourg had a growing audience in the mid-1950s and capitalised on the demand for quiz shows, pop music, and exciting children's entertainment in the period of transition to television. Luxembourg held an average audience of 5 per cent or around 1.9 million listeners.

The table below shows some of the most popular programmes for a sample week in 1950. It was dominated by major variety programmes: *Variety Bandbox*, *Educating Archie*, *Take It from Here*, *Music Hall*, and the quiz show *Have a Go!*

²⁰ Foster and Furst, *Radio Comedy*, p. 102.

²¹ Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in The United Kingdom*.

Table 3.1: *Most Popular Radio Programmes 9 December – 15 December 1950*

Name of Programme (Broadcast Date, Radio Station)	% of adult population	Millions
Quiz: 'Have a Go' (Wednesday, 9.30 p.m., Light)	50	18.3
'Variety Bandbox' (Sunday, 9.00 p.m., Light)	42	15.3
'Curtain Up!' 'The First Year' (play)(Wednesday, 8.00 p.m., Light)	37	13.7
'Music Hall' (Saturday, 8.00 p.m., Home)	36	13.1
'Saturday-Night Theatre': 'Fly Away Peter' (Saturday, 9.15 p.m., Home)	36	13.1
Records: Family Favourites (Friday, 8.30 p.m., Light)	35	12.8
'Welsh Rarebit' (variety) (Thursday, 9.00 p.m., Light)	35	12.8
'Take It From Here' (repeat) (Tuesday, 8.00 p.m., Light)	35	12.8
'Educating Archie' (variety) (Tuesday, 7.30 p.m., Light)	34	12.4
Discussion: 'Any Questions'(Friday, 9.15 p.m., Light)	32	11.7
Serial Play: 'Paul Temple and the Vandyke Affair' (Monday, 8.45p.m., Light)	32	11.7
'Starlight Hour' (variety) (Monday, 9.15 p.m., Light)	32	11.7

Source: BBC Written Archive in Caversham R9/12/6 *Audience Research Listener Barometer Reports 1.8.1950–31.8.1951*. Table compiled from reports in week Saturday 9 December to Friday 15 December 1950.

A New Type of Entertainment for the Airwaves

The BBC's desire to move away from traditional variety but not be driven by commercial or populist interests drove it in a new artistic direction, as Pat Dixon explains in an

internal memo: 'The pure radio comedy show will not appear suddenly as something new but will develop gradually from existing formulae, but only provided that long-term opportunities are given for it to do so.'²²

This comment, made in the early 1950s, was not a prophecy that he plucked from thin air; as a prominent variety producer and future producer of *The Goon Show*, he was at the forefront of developing new programmes for the BBC. Tommy Handley had proved that there was a need for a new formula for radio entertainment, one that was distinct from the variety format. The BBC also needed to produce its own streams of talent rather than fall back on what the music hall could produce – performances which sometimes could be understandably poor and certainly not up to broadcast quality.

The essential thing [about *The Goon Show*] ... is the combination of a quite special, ultra-modern humorous idiom with a nostalgia for our Victorian, imperial past. It is as though Britannia were having not a nightmare but a sort of comic dream; it is as though Dali, Kipling and Dickens had co-operated.²³

The Goon Show symbolised the post-war era, irreverent, influenced by the conflict and driven by a younger cast. It could be described as a forerunner of other youth movements in demonstrating an impudent and slanted view on authority. The Goons were popular amongst a middle-class audience and famously the future King Charles III but had a wider appeal. Sellers, Secombe, Bentine and Milligan were not middle-class but offered a unique perspective, with clear influence from the music hall but showing a nation that had changed during the war. They produced comedy that was not only very difficult to replicate on-stage but that was too weird or expansive for the audience or the space of the more traditional and conservative variety theatres. The variety theatre liked

²² BBC Written Archive in Caversham: *Variety, File 1, 1943–1956*, 24 January 1950 (Memo: Mr Pat Dixon to Head of Variety, 'Radio and Television', R34/917).

²³ Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945–51* (London, 1992), p. cccxi.

to think of itself as unruly and non-conformist but now had become an emblem of the Victorian establishment, entrenched in old-fashioned values and somewhat conservative politics.

Social Class and Snobbery

The BBC is not a political instrument. It is a cultural agency, a medium for entertainment, a means of worship, a forum for discussion and a disseminator of news.²⁴ (Arthur Greenwood, 4 September 1945)

Labour minister Greenwood offers an idealistic if controversial view of the BBC. He believed that it transcended the role of a mere purveyor of programmes and became a public service that helped bring the cultural existence of Britain under a single umbrella. However, there was a conflict between the material that the BBC wanted to produce to enliven the intellects of the nation and the entertainment that most Britons desired. Social class was at the heart of this debate. The BBC's desire to inform, educate, and entertain, together with the BBC's desire to include highbrow talks and 'serious' music, was pitted against most of the public's taste for American music, quiz shows, and throwaway gags. Did the BBC need to educate, inform, and entertain simultaneously? Certainly, John Watt, Director of Variety, in this memo to the Controller of Programmes was worried about the low intellectual level of some of the variety programming:

The backbone of our output must continue to be lowest-common-denominator entertainment with a leavening of more 'serious stuff' i.e. entertainment at a slightly higher intellectual level. This is justified, I think, on the grounds that the public seems to be becoming a little more serious-minded although I fear intelligent entertainment will never have as large a public as slab entertainment. For example, the excellent Naunton Wayne and Basil

²⁴ Briggs, *History of Broadcasting* p. 517.

Radford serials of the Athene Seyler revues never had the public which was gained by the worst of 'Music Hall' bills.²⁵

John Watt raises concerns about the direction of the BBC. This reveals the snobbery of the times and how the public service broadcaster still yearned for freedom from the obligations of public taste and music hall was a core part of the objection.

a rigid maintenance of rising standards of taste and culture is simply to fill the moat and raise the drawbridge of an ivory tower; a dynamic galvanization of the entertainment departments is not likely to discover a new ITMA overnight.²⁶

Val Gielgud, brother of actor Sir John Gielgud and head of radio drama at the BBC in the early 1940s, is quoted by Asa Briggs in relation to the class distinctions in BBC programmes, specifically on the subject of 'Mrs. Dale's Diary', which he describes as 'socially corrupting by its monstrous flattery of the ego of the common man'.²⁷ R. J. E. Silvey, the Head of Audience Research, illustrates his findings in relation to comedy and perhaps does more to demonstrate the BBC attitude to regions, rather than providing a useful analysis of accents in comedy.

The North Country accent, which is generally regarded as traditional in comedy, is acceptable everywhere except in Scotland where it is not liked. The Irish accent in comedians is popular in Scotland, acceptable in the North but not liked very much in the South. As to the Scottish accent, it rather depends how broad it is, the Highland accent, for example, is very unpopular all over England and Wales; the Lowland accent is not quite so unpopular in England but very unpopular in Wales.²⁸

²⁵ BBC Written Archive in Caversham, Vaudeville and Variety File 2B, 1941–1944, 14 July 1942 ('Variety Policy and Output' by John Watt, to Controller of Programmes), R34/918/3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Briggs, *History of Broadcasting*, p. 699.

²⁸ BBC Written Archive in Caversham: *Variety File 1, 1943–1956*, 16 February 1945 (Memo from R. J. E. Silvey, Listener Research Director, John Watt to Controller of Programmes), R34/917.

The BBC at the time was clearly prejudiced based on region and class. This attitude was transferred to the opinion of comedy as high- and low-brow and this informed its opinion of variety comics. Those comedians who were too deeply entrenched in the dialect and social manners of a particular region and often in the vernacular of the industrial North were not the direction that many BBC executives wanted the corporation to move in. Although Al Read, Jimmy Clitheroe, and others did make a career, this was within the context of a loose-sitcom background. The BBC neither wanted to be populist nor unpopular, but also not too radical. By the 1960s, this had begun to benefit the Oxbridge-educated class of comedians that had almost no connection to the traditions of variety.

There is a tendency with the passage of time towards the narrow focus on worthy comedy, where some comics are lionised, and others are forgotten, or their importance is diminished. Comedians like Charlie Chester and *Old Mother Riley* are not given much attention in the histories of variety, comedy, or broadcast and seldom mentioned in the retrospectives of great comedians of the time. Similarly, according to the figures in the ledgers of the major variety theatre chains, Max Miller and Frank Randle were consistent in attracting audiences but they were outshone by radio performers after the Second World War. Randle and Miller are awarded detailed analyses in many commentaries of the 1940s, although perhaps their true glory days were in the pre-war years, and they were no longer relevant or fresh to variety audiences. The other side of this argument is that these acts are unfashionable and that comedy connoisseurs do not want to acknowledge their success, in the way that contemporary comedy shows like *Mrs. Brown's Boys*, Michael McIntyre or even Peter Kay are not given the same treatment as more intellectual comics like Stewart Lee.

Radio and Radio Performers on Stage

Broadcasting and radio began to be transferred from the airwaves to the stage. The crossover between broadcast comedies and variety was experimental and daring. Transferring acts, characters or situations from the sonic space of radio into live theatres was both difficult and daring. Variety theatres were usually successful at this and many radio performers excelled on stage and this had a positive effect on their careers.

There was clear influence from broadcasting with big band leaders and comedians performing in 1945 and 1946 but the impact of radio on variety was most apparent in 1947. The headline acts were dominated by radio show revues and performers that made their name on the radio. The revues were primarily radio comedy shows supplemented by old music hall performers, film comedy legends, like Chico Marx and Laurel and Hardy, and a smattering of individual singers. Performers like Arthur Askey had made their name before the war on the wireless and others such as comedians like Jewel and Warriss from *Up the Pole!*, Elsie and Doris Waters, Old Mother Riley, and Norman Evans had had their own programmes. Carroll Levis was touring his talent shows that were also successful on radio. Band leaders that had made their name on the BBC or appeared regularly featured regularly as headline acts. Comedian Issy Bonn had made over a thousand broadcasts and appeared on *Variety Bandbox*, and Vic Oliver made his name on the radio show *Hi Gang!* It is impossible to fully extricate performers from their variety roots and work in other media.

Many of the radio shows needed to be reformatted entirely for the stage but many retained elements of Raymond William's concept of 'flow'. This had been pioneered by radio

schedulers and the live shows would combine the short programming of radio by condensing sketches into short variety times slots.

1947 demonstrates how the promotion of the variety theatres was now driven by attractions from the radio and that radio performers were using the variety theatres as a key income stream. Radio was one of the main promotional tools and agents, theatres, and performers were exploiting the reach of broadcasting. The theatres were still very lucrative and were turning strong profits in 1947. (See Appendix III for case studies of radio acts at the Finsbury Park Empire and Birmingham Hippodrome in this year.)

The period after the war was a time when, just like British society, comedy and entertainment were emerging with a new identity. The pre-war stars were still present, cinema produced the biggest stars and drew in the most successful takings, but radio was increasingly providing the headline acts, and by 1947 this had been firmly established. *ITMA* had begun to imagine a sonic world and new format. Tommy Handley did not tour the theatres with *ITMA* after the war and instead poured his efforts into the radio show. He died in 1949 and thus his influence on comedy was characterised by the war years.²⁹

All the headliners and a significant number of the non-visual acts on any given bill will have been engaged by the BBC or Radio Luxembourg. At smaller venues, the performers may not have been of a sufficient standard but at this time there was a collaboration/competition between the media. On the radio show *Happidrome*, which featured a fictionalised theatre and staff as a vehicle for variety performances, earlier music hall stars such as Harry Champion, George Robey, Hetty King, and G. H. Elliott all appeared. The 1947 shows tend to be ones that employed existing wartime stars, and it takes a few years for some of the demobbed comedians to appear on the bills of the variety theatres after they have achieved success on radio.

²⁹ Fisher, *Funny Way to be a Hero*, p. 162.

The importance of radio did not dissipate immediately. The revue shows did become less frequent, and artists used their position in radio to get top spots in variety theatres: in 1948 – Ignorance is Bliss, big bands, Charlie Chester and Vic Oliver; in 1949 – radio comedians Charlie Chester, Gert and Daisy, Vic Oliver, Arthur Askey, and Jewel and Warriss all made appearances. There were big band leaders who appeared on the radio and a stage version of the programme, *Music Hall*, was the only major touring version of a radio production on the circuit. 1950 seemed quiet for radio-promoted acts and there was an increased emergence of individual singers and American artists.

By 1951, radio was a medium in a crowded market – film, recorded music, and television. All of these were exploited by variety bookers, all the while putting pressure on the success of variety itself. The influence of radio shows was still strong in 1951 – Peter Brough, the radio ventriloquist, could demonstrate his vocal skills in a live version of *Educating Archie*; Peter Sellers, who had appeared on *Educating Archie*, was about to make his name in *The Goon Show*; and the breakout star of *Variety Bandbox*, Frankie Howerd, and fellow demobbed comic Arthur English (with his spiv act) were appearing as headliners in 1951. Other familiar names on the radio included band leader Billy Cotton, and pre-war comics like Arthur Askey and Elsie and Doris Waters. Rather than revues for each show, variety bills were presented as Highlights of Radio. Carroll Levis' talent show continued to tour Britain. Some of these performers had begun their careers on the variety stage anyway. Peter Sellers had lived above the Bedford Music Hall in Camden when his mother was performing below. Radio was not as much of a gimmick by the early 1950s but was now embedded in a multimedia culture where performers would work across platforms to gain exposure and money. The key element was that for many younger performers, radio had provided the fame that allowed them to become sufficiently famous to headline variety theatres.

Stand Easy had emerged from the popular wartime radio show *Merry-Go-Round*, and the three services editions of the show, *Much-Binding-in-the-Marsh*, *Stand Easy*, and *Waterlogged Spa* had helped launch the careers of Charlie Chester, Kenneth Horne, Richard Murdoch, and others.³⁰ *Stand Easy* and Charlie Chester individually were both very lucrative on stage: in 1947, *Stand Easy* was the top grossing act at the Shepherd's Bush Empire, while Chester performed individually at the Hackney Empire and Manchester Hippodrome on the Stoll Circuit.³¹ On the Moss Empires circuit, *Stand Easy* was the top performing show in 1947 at the Finsbury Park Empire, Newcastle Empire, Nottingham Empire and Swansea Empire.³² In the following show, it is possible to see how a variety bill was shaped around the radio show with little difficulty. Charlie Chester, the principal comic, and the rest of the cast took turns to perform alongside other variety performers.³³ It was a simple adaptation although it did require a variety-influenced set of performers who were used to the style and organisation.

George and Alfred Black present 'Stand Easy'

Opening Night: 17 April 1950

Performance: 29 April 1950

Overture

1. Edwina Carol and the John Tiller Girls invite you to Stand Easy
2. The Gang Break Loose, led by Cheerful Charlie Chester, accompanied by Fred Ferrari, Ken Morris, Arthur Haynes and Len Marten
3. The Five Brahims from Morocco Take A Tumble
4. 'Follow The Guides' – Company
5. Gene Anderton asks you to 'Take Your Choice' – and the Company introduce Marriott and Wenman

³⁰ Denis Gifford, 'Obituary: Charlie Chester', *The Independent*, 27 June 1997, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-charlie-chester-1258200.html> [accessed on 2 Dec 2021; Foster and Furst, *Radio Comedy*, pp. 86–90.

³¹ Foster and Furst, *Radio Comedy*, pp. 86–90;

V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/7 (Stand Easy £1988; Charlie Chester £2088; Manchester Hippodrome £2634).

³² V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empires ledger Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10 (Stand Easy £1947; Finsbury Park Empire £2493; Newcastle Empire £2678; Nottingham Empire £2190; Swansea Empire £1694).

³³ 'Cheerful Charlie Chester in Stand Easy!' *Radio Times*, September 10 1948

<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/page/efad6ac5e4df467984cd21ec445c3b32> [accessed 2 Dec 2021].

6. 'Right Outside' – Company
7. Ken Morris goes Crazy – Murdering A Song
8. 'Carnival' – The Company introduce the Boliana Ivanko Four
- Intermission – Hippodrome Orchestra under Frank Hagley 'Melodious Medley No.5', arranged by Frank Hagley
9. 'Seeing Double' – The John Tiller Girls
10. Len Marten 'On The Cuff'
11. The Hambone Repertory Company – Company
12. Fred Ferrari – The Voice
13. Cheerful Charlie Chester 'The Chin-Up Boy'
14. Until We Meet Again – 'Keep Smiling' – The Company³⁴

Ignorance is Bliss was a British interpretation of an American show called *It Pays to be Ignorant*.³⁵ A sort of proto-panel show, it gave the impression of being spontaneous but was in fact precisely scripted.³⁶ The format involved asking incredibly simple or obvious questions about a subject which then became the indirect stimulus material for the comedy. It played well with audiences and was the highest earner at the New Theatre in Cardiff.³⁷ *Ignorance is Bliss* headlined at the Birmingham Hippodrome in 1947 and the bill took this format.

Variety Show featuring the Radio Show "Ignorance is Bliss"

Opening Night: 8 September 1947

Performance: 13 September 1947

1. Overture – The Hippodrome Orchestra
2. Danvers & Dolaine – In a Medley of Dancing
3. Ronne Conn – The Girl with the Unusual Voice
4. Deveen – The Debonair Deceiver with His New York Blondes
5. David Poole – The Schoolmaster Ventriloquist with "Johnny Green"
6. Pepino and his Miniature Circus– A Riot of Fun
- Intermission – Hippodrome Orchestra under the direction of Kevin Mallon play "Music While You Work" featuring "The Runaway Rocking Horse"

³⁴ George and Alfred Black present 'Stand Easy' *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, 29 September 1947, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/george-and-alfred-black-present-stand-easy-2/

³⁵ Foster and Furst, *Radio Comedy*, p. 86.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 96–99.

³⁷ V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10;

V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/719451947 (1947: New Theatre Cardiff £2130).

7. Danvers & Dolaine – Dance Time Again
8. Jimmy Robbins – The Refreshing Comedian
9. Maurice Winnick presents The Famous Radio Show “Ignorance Is Bliss” with Gladys Hay, Michael Moore, Harold Berens; Quiz Master – Bart Norman; The Foulharmonic Orchestra misdirected by Art Christmas and produced by Charles Henry.³⁸

In this line-up from 1947, the inclusion of a radio show as part of a variety show is evident, where the radio show was simply slotted into the line-up of a normal variety performance as an extended headline act, at the expense of repeat performances from some of the acts further down the bill.

There are many comedians and shows that can be categorised by the fact that they made their names on radio and continued to have broadcasting careers throughout their lives. In fact, they are not included in some histories of variety for this very reason.³⁹ This does not mean that they did not make money from the stage though and they are included here because they were amongst the top-grossing acts in the 1940s in the major variety venues. There was a clear desire amongst audiences to see in the flesh the performers that they had enjoyed on the airwaves. Arthur Askey made his name on the pre-war radio show *Band Waggon*. Authors such as Foster and Furst and Neale and Krutnik make the point that this was the first comedy series to be broadcast with regularity (at a set time and the same station every week), as well as the first to feature a ‘resident’/regular comedian.⁴⁰ It ran from 1938 to 1939 and Askey’s comic songs such as ‘The Bee’ made him a household name. Askey was the top-grossing act at the Shepherd’s Bush Empire in 1949. Performers like Askey were keen to add to the more modest wages offered by the

³⁸ ‘Variety Show featuring the Radio Show “Ignorance is Bliss”’, 17 April 1950, *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/ignorance-is-bliss-2/ [accessed 27 September 2019].

³⁹ Baker, *Old Time Variety*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Foster and Furst, *Radio Comedy*, pp. 13–17; Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, p. 221.

BBC, an organisation accountable to the government, which was working to a budget. The BBC offered large-scale exposure and consequent fame; it did not provide the lifestyle, glamour, or wealth that equated to such celebrity. This meant that the fame afforded by radio did not always translate into wealth in the earlier days of radio.

Frankie Howerd, who later became best known for his performances in the *Carry On* films and on television in *Up Pompeii!*, was one of the first demobbed comics to headline variety theatres after the war. His success was cemented on the radio programme *Variety Bandbox*. *Variety Bandbox* ran from 1944 to 1953 and was presented as 'the people of variety to a variety of people'. Tony Hancock, Dick Emery, Derek Roy, and Harry Secombe were also Bandbox discoveries.⁴¹

Howerd's comedy was noise-driven; he seemed intentionally outraged at the audience's assumptions (just like Miller, and similarly he employed the confessional aside in his humour). Yet he was a much more vulnerable figure, he would implore the audience not to 'mock the afflicted', which in the pre-legalisation of homosexuality era can be interpreted on many levels. According to his biographer, Graham McCann, Howerd's response to the BBC's Green Book regulations was simple, 'He simply took whatever the censors had left and then proceeded to corrupt it.'⁴² McCann explains further: 'Unlike most other comedians of the time, who remained prisoners of their patter (and whose patter consisted of most if not all topics that radio declared taboo), Howerd was not dependent on gags, and therefore found it much easier, during the course of his wireless ramblings, to slip in some of his own brand of sauciness just under the radar.' The 'oohs and aahs', the asides imploring the audience to 'cease' or 'titter ye not' or simply 'no' was a much more difficult style of camp to quantify and was not as openly rude as some of his

⁴¹ Foster and Furst, *Radio Comedy*, p. 73.

⁴² Graham McCann, *Frankie Howerd: Stand-up Comic* (London, 2004), p. 87.

later work. Important comedy writers Eric Sykes, Marty Feldman, and Barry Took all discovered that these exclamations had to be written into Howerd's script. They were not ad-libbed.⁴³ The suggestion in the noise was enough and this meant that Howerd enjoyed much success on the wireless. 'A completely new art form', his first producer told him after his successful audition for radio's *Variety Bandbox*.⁴⁴ The actor Simon Callow gives an eloquent description of Howerd's style in a *Guardian* article. 'He taught himself mastery of the microphone, painstakingly acquiring his characteristically wide vocal range, squeezing hilarious nuance out of a vast array of intonations.'⁴⁵ Andy Medhurst expands on this idea: 'To laugh at Howerd was to laugh at the gap between what is known and what can be said, at the ever-present unavoidability of that which must be hidden.'⁴⁶

Frankie Howerd could be slotted into a variety bill with relative ease. He had the ability to transcend the different media. He was able to use the microphone to create a sense that he was imparting secrets or gossip, just like Max Miller, and he could use his arsenal of 'oohs and aahs' to create a sonic patchwork of faux outrage. His face was also very amusing, rubbery and hangdog but playful and mischievous. He was able to work successfully across film, TV, radio, and stage and (like the versatile Max Wall) was repeatedly rediscovered whenever he had seemed to have exhausted a particular avenue.

Variety Bandbox was drawing in audiences of more than 15 million or 42 percent of the adult population in 1948.⁴⁷ This success transferred to the variety stage where Howerd was one of the first demobbed comics to appear in the lists of the highest-earning

⁴³ Took, *Laughter in the Air*, p. 87.

⁴⁴ Simon Callow, 'Titter ye not', *The Guardian*, 27 November 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/nov/27/biography.tvandradio> [accessed 28 September 2021].

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Medhurst, *A National Joke*, p. 95.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

headline acts, with the biggest takings and profit of 1948 for the Finsbury Park Empire.⁴⁸

Here is a bill from the Birmingham Hippodrome in 1950 that tried to harness the popularity of Howerd and *Bandbox*:

Jack Payne presents Frankie Howerd in 'Ladies and Gentle-Men'

Opening Night: 1 May 1950

Performance: 6 May 1950

1. Overture
2. Les Valettos – Acrobatique Danseurs
3. Charlie Clapham – Non-Consequential Comedian
4. The Three Robertis – Speedy Acrobats
5. Frank Cook – From The Golden West
6. Charles Warren and Jean – America's Crazy Couple
7. Intermission – Hippodrome Orchestra under Frank Hagley
8. The Skating Colorados – Thrills On Wheels
9. Carl and Roger Yale – Radio's Song-Writing Comedians
10. Jose Moreno and Assistant – Juggling On The Slack Wire
11. Frankie Howerd – Resident Comedian of the BBC *Variety Band Box*
12. The Flying Comets – Dare-Devil Aerialists⁴⁹

The BBC had developed shows that differed more from the variety template that they had originally mimicked. This made the translation of media to the stage more difficult. This time proved also to be a time when television and American performers were starting to have a deeper influence on popular culture and the variety theatres.

In 1953 and after, television became a bigger marketing tool for variety. At the same time, radio performers like Al Read did have significant success. Some of the biggest draws amongst comedians for variety theatres in their final years were shows starring Tony Hancock and Harry Secombe in 1957. This success continued into the early 1960s.

Have A Go with Wilfred Pickles was a successful radio programme that had been adapted for the stage and this popularity was demonstrated again in the 'radio year' of

⁴⁸ V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10. 12 (March 1948, £2894 with a profit of £1279).

⁴⁹ 'Jack Payne presents Frankie Howerd in 'Ladies and Gentle-Men'', 1 May 1950, *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/ [accessed 21 October 2022]

1947.⁵⁰ It was the top-performing headliner at many of the Moss Empire theatres, at the Leeds and Sheffield Empires.⁵¹

Educating Archie ran from 1950 to 1959 – the bizarrely successful radio comedy starring a ventriloquist's dummy, based on a successful American radio series, with ventriloquist Peter Brough, and Hattie Jacques, Max Bygraves, Sid James, Bruce Forsyth, Dick Emery, Tony Hancock, Harry Secombe, and Beryl Reid all appearing at some time or other, often as Archie's tutor.⁵² *Educating Archie* reached a peak audience of 12 million listeners.⁵³

In 1955, a variety show billed as *The Goon Show* toured theatres. It was not a revue version of the radio programme but a regular variety bill with the Goons, Harry Secombe, and Spike Milligan and the bandleader Max Geldray. Peter Sellers was not involved, and the show was variously billed with Secombe as headliner or as *The Goons* or *The Goon Show*. Harry Secombe was a more natural fit for the variety theatre with his singing ability and comedy sensibilities. The crossover between the surreal comedy of Milligan and the following act, the oddity of Duncan's performing collies enacting strange scenes on stage, seems particularly fitting. Hylda Baker joined the performance in Newcastle:⁵⁴

The Goons

Opening Night: 20 June 1955

Performance: 25 June 1955

1. Overture – Hippodrome Orchestra
2. Bea and Zelda Marvi – Open the Show
3. Nenette Mongadors and Anne – Ace of Clubs
4. Lowe and Ladd – Comedy Team
5. Eddie Gordon assisted by Nancy – The Silent Humourist

⁵⁰ Hennessy, *Never Again*, p. 313.

⁵¹ V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10, 1947 (Leeds Empire £2005 and Sheffield Empire £2137).

⁵² Foster and Furst, *Radio Comedy*, pp. 128–33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁵⁴ 'Calls for Next Week', *The Stage*, Thursday 7 April 1955, p. 2.

6. Spike Milligan – Late of the Human Race
7. Duncan’s Collies – Canine Actors
- Intermission – Hippodrome Orchestra under Arthur Roberts
8. Bea and Zelda Marvi – Dance Team
9. Lowe and Ladd – Men at Work
10. Max Geldray with his Harmonica
11. Harry Secombe – The Golden Voiced Goon.⁵⁵

Variety bills can demonstrate the integration and usage of radio shows and performers in variety. Radio was used as a promotional tool but also as a way of structuring performances and adapting material from a broadcast setting. The prior understanding that audiences brought from a radio broadcast meant that an amalgamation of the variety structure could occur with characters, sketches, and musical performers integrated into the short-form variety schedule. This revue format meant that radio performances could be more cohesive and easier to book and produce.

Max Wall throughout the 1940s and 1950s was consistently repackaged and presented by variety promoters. In the following bill he makes an appearance, as the face of radio this time. Wall’s versatility was demonstrated again as a dancer and as a stage performer, combined with his ability to be the resident comic on one of the BBC’s flagship variety shows. The rest of the bill was less star-studded. Alberto Semprini was a conductor, pianist, and composer and he featured heavily on BBC radio. This can be clearly seen as an attempt to harness the success of radio, although the inclusion of the ‘Tune-In Lovelies’ stretches the theme to almost breaking point.

Highlights of Radio

Opening Night: 23 April 1951

Performance: 28 April 1951

1. Overture
2. Marie De Vere’s ‘Tune-In Lovelies’ – Danse Militaire
3. Downey and Daye – A Whirl, A Twirl And A Girl

⁵⁵ ‘The Goons’, *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, 20 June 1955, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/the-goons/ [accessed 21 November 2021].

4. Jack Hubert – Watson from ‘Variety Fanfare’
5. ‘Tune-In Lovelies’ – Ballet – Acrobatique – introducing Jean Bradley
6. The Celebrated Radio and Recording Artiste – Semprini – ‘Old Ones, New Ones, Loved Ones, Neglected Ones’
7. Max Wall – ‘As Irresponsible As Ever’ – Resident Comedian of Radio’s ‘Variety Band Box’
- Intermission – Hippodrome Orchestra under Frank Hagley
8. ‘Tune-In Lovelies’ – Putting On The Ritz
9. Bobbie Kimber – ‘It Speaks For Itself’
10. From Radio’s ‘Your Song Parade’ – Lester Ferguson – the Romantic Singing Star; at the Piano – Reginald Warburton
11. Max Wall – More Nonsense
12. Swan and Leigh – Thrills and Spills

Ronday Productions Ltd. Present ‘Radio Times’ – Lyrics and Music by Max Wall, Dancers and Choreography by Joan Sherman-Fisher, Produced by Charles L. Tucker

Opening Night: 24 November 1952

Performance: 29 November 1952

1. Overture – The Spice of Life
2. ‘Radio Times’ introducing Beryl Reid, the Hedley Ward Trio, Jean Paul and the 8 Sherman-Fisher Girls
3. Paul and Peta Page – The Puppeteers
4. Max Wall – Irresponsible
5. Danse Militaire – The 8 Sherman-Fisher Girls
6. Beryl Reid – Gives You Her Impressions
7. ‘Just a Clown’ – Max Wall assisted by Jean Paul
8. The Five Speedacs – Whirlwind Acrobats
- Intermission – Hippodrome Orchestra under Frank Hagley
9. ‘Shelayla Swing’ – The 8 Sherman-Fisher Girls
10. The Hedley Ward Trio – ‘A Personal Call’
11. Beryl Reid Introduces Her Famous BBC Character ‘Monica’
12. Dick James – The Singing Star From ‘Top Score’, at the Piano Ray Harley
13. Max Wall – More Nonsense
14. ‘It’s In The Radio Times’ – The Company – ‘Orchestra Under the direction of Maurice Bromley’

Analysing the variety bills and shows that were shown at the Moss Empires-owned Birmingham Hippodrome, there was not an immediately discernible difference

between the pre- and post-war output at the venue.⁵⁶ There is clearly more reliance on radio but there were already stage shows of radio in the 1930s and *Band Waggon* with Arthur Askey was headlining in Birmingham in 1939 and before.⁵⁷ This could support the idea that entertainment and taste in comedy had not changed drastically. One could argue that the principal alteration had been in the number of radio sets owned in the mid- to late forties, due to the importance of the wireless as a means of receiving information during the war, and the growth of major radio shows such as *ITMA* and *Stand Easy*. In fact, the variety bills during the war had remained relatively similar, suggesting that perhaps talking about pre-war and post-war entertainment could be a fallacy. (See Appendix III for case studies of radio acts at the Finsbury Park Empire and Birmingham Hippodrome later in 1952.)

Radio did not precipitate a huge change in the composition or structure of variety. The first wave of post-war comics had a deeper respect for variety than some of the rock and roll performers that came later. They knew that, particularly with the wages and irregularity of income provided by the BBC, the live-circuit performances could supplement their incomes and provide a promotional opportunity for themselves and their shows.

This was the medium that had most impact on variety in the immediate post-war period. The relationship was obviously competitive but initially complementary. The aural / sonic nature of radio meant that audiences sought out their favourite performers

⁵⁶ 'Band Waggon', *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/band-wagon-2/ [accessed on 30 November 2021].

Number of Performances: 29. There was such a demand for tickets that extra matinées were put on and the show ran for a total of 29 performances.

in real-life. This relationship was similar to film stars and performers who carried a certain weight and glamour in their appearances on screen, either because of their stature from Hollywood or from their genuine star status. Variety had successfully incorporated film and radio performers into its fold, and this had helped box office takings.

The problem with the analysis could arise from the idea that variety had been quite slow and somewhat rigid in giving these younger comedians a chance. The BBC benefitted far more from these performers and this policy had moved the comedy language and performance style away from the traditional forms expressed in variety and towards a more imaginative and expansive range of settings and possibilities. Comedy was now no longer tied to the stage and it was no longer necessary to fit it into the structures of a variety performance.

Conclusion

The bills demonstrate the relatively harmonious way that radio products had been incorporated into live comedy performance or used to promote theatre bills. Even performers who were viewed as radio specialists turned their hand to the stage. The real problems for variety emerged offstage, as the radio shows became more abstract, and the situation comedy created a level of closeness that began to undermine the need to see performers in person. This would never truly alter, but the variety format did begin to look unwieldy, and it was a costly way to showcase talent. The relationship between radio and music hall was one with mutual benefits, but broadcasters did not rely on the variety theatres for talent or for content. Although radio did not undermine the variety format and many performers felt comfortable in the setting, it did place the emphasis of promotion on radio shows outside of the control of the major agents and chains. They had

no control over the BBC's output, the fame of the stars was derived from broadcasting, and the material was moving further away from variety all the time. It relegated variety beneath another more modern form. Variety was building audiences and success on the shoulders of other technologies and industries, which left it vulnerable to change and cultural irrelevance. The theatres became mirrors for popular cultural and technological fads within the confines of their variety format. In the Victorian era, music hall was the primary popular culture of the urban population but by 1945 it was just a physical space for performance, a prism for the new and aspirational forms of entertainment presented through the old music hall configuration.

In the 1950s, radio represented a shift to a younger generation of comedians who were not rooted so strongly in the music hall traditions or conventions. This divide did not affect the economic drivers or dynamics of the variety industry, as the two forms complemented each other. However, this dynamic had now created two long-term problems for variety. There was now a shift from the bricks-and-mortar of the theatres to broadcast studios. Milligan and Sellers had created a form of comedy that transcended the lack of physical connection to the audience and created an imaginary world that would not work within the limited time slots of a variety act.

Galton and Simpson, along with Tony Hancock and the rest of the cast of *Hancock's Half Hour*, had begun to perfect the situation comedy. The familiar nature of this setting had begun to undermine the necessity of the live experience and the closeness that performers like Gracie Fields and Max Miller had attempted to engender. It also meant that performers and writers saw that they could make money from other forms of media, and many would have expected that television would flourish soon. As they had made their names on radio, this transition was not frightening for these performers, for whom variety had just represented an extra income stream. Hancock was poised to make this

step to the small screen and *Hancock's Half Hour* appeared on television in 1956 on the BBC. Arguably, many performers still needed the active link to their audience, particularly because they had initially appeared in the entertainment services during the war and were not 'pure broadcast' performers. The sound of real laughter was still important, but comedy had begun to venture into realms that did not need the theatres or the format of variety to succeed.

This meant that comedy could now fill much longer periods of time and it did not need to fit into the short attention spans of variety audiences. Variety had restricted comedy to short turns on the stage; film had already expanded the horizons of comedy but in the unrestricted imagination of radio it could explore more places, it could conjure a huge number of incongruous and odd situations or, conversely, it could be slower, more mundane, and relatable. The following BBC report, written by J.C. Thornton, illustrates how the experience of radio could be a more intellectually challenging one than many entertainment media before or since. Hence, music hall relays were often a lazy reproduction of an experience which really required the ability to see the performer and sense the atmosphere in the live arena.

Television extends our physical experience; sound our imaginative experience. Sound succeeds best when it creates a mental image beyond what can be adequately, or artistically, stated or visually reproduced. Hence, the triumph of the *Goons*, Handley in *ITMA*, and Arthur Askey in his "Flat" in Broadcasting House.⁵⁸

This report by Thornton indicates the change in thinking at the BBC that had occurred in the ten years after the war. It highlights the maturity of the sitcom and the fact that audiences had become familiar with the idea of dramatised comedy that could

⁵⁸ BBC Written Archive in Caversham: J.C. Thornton, *Home Services Policy, File 2a, 1955–1956, Notes On Sound Broadcasting*, 30 August 1955, R34/422/2.

operate outside the confines of the variety format and away from the physical theatres. Television and film needed to look visually convincing whereas radio, like a novel, could suspend belief and offer half an hour to an hour's worth of room to explore a narrative with twists and turns. Variety sketches were too short and films challenging in terms of sustaining gags and situations over two hours. On the airwaves, the comedy could ebb and flow, laughter was important, but it no longer needed to be constant. Reithian ideals had successfully transformed comedy from the music hall setting and given it more cultural capital and gentrified it. The problem was that although these early stars of radio still worked the theatres and the popularity of live shows for broadcast comedians continues to this day, the newer material had become harder to adapt for the variety stage.

The problem for both broadcast comedians and actors was that they had used plenty of their material on radio and either had to compile a 'greatest hits' act from their radio appearances or come up with something new and possibly inferior. The high quality of broadcasting was therefore detrimental for many live performers. Material that could have been used in 25 theatres was being used up in one broadcast appearance. The adaptation of situation comedy presented similar changes of recycling material or writing something for the stage that may abandon the atmosphere of the original.

This is part of a process of gradual massification where the ephemeral and conspiratorial nature of music hall, encapsulated in the idea of 'knowingness' is now controlled and mediated by broadcasters. Bourdieu's ideas of cultural capital now begin to seep into how variety was viewed. Outside of the work of Radio Luxembourg, the BBC now had a monopoly on the kind of culture that was being consumed. The dominance of middle-class bosses and the Reithian mindset led to more university-educated performers and changed the tone of comedy that was broadcast. Some of these attitudes persisted in the initially tightly-controlled commercial television.

The BBC wanted their variety programming to pivot away from the traditional music hall and had fully embraced situation comedy. It can be seen that many of the more elitist management at the BBC was pleased to be able to produce entertainment with those from their own circles. Road-weary, stage comics could be supplanted by educated and more highbrow performers and writers; this paved the way for the Oxbridge-dominance of the Satire Boom and Monty Python.

The demobbed comedians that dominated this initial movement had a foot in both camps: they respected the traditions of variety entertainment and enjoyed the financial incentive of performing on stage around the country but were of a different mindset to many of the established comedians. Many had found it hard to transition from ENSA and other service entertainment organisations into mainstream variety meaning that they both relished the chance to perform on the Stoll Moss circuit but had also demonstrated that there were other routes to success. The career path of Peter Sellers showed this and many of the radio performers had their eyes firmly fixed on film and television rather than honing a live act.

The major circuits were able to make short-term gains from radio broadcasting, but radio programmers aimed to produce a type of comedy which would be increasingly difficult to transfer to the stage.

4. Aspiration and Americanisation until 1955

In the 1950s, tastes began to change. Younger audiences demonstrated a strong appetite for all things American, but this move was much broader than the narrow assumptions of teenage fads and crushes. Much broader audience demographics wanted to see American performers. This shift was accompanied by a growing demand for what many would describe as 'high culture' being shown at variety theatres: opera, operetta, ballet, and choirs.

It was not just cultural and entertainment preferences that were changing. After the war, there was a distinct change in the overall consumer habits of the British. This was driven by technological improvements and the availability of new consumer products, but also by a change in attitudes and expectations. The Labour government of 1945 had demanded that the nation now 'win the peace' and successive Conservative governments wanted to improve the affluence of the nation and held onto the welfare reforms of the Attlee government. The demand for improved living standards developed from the austerity and rationing in the early 1950s, towards a greater affluence and expectations in the mid-1950s, which was mirrored in the demands of the variety audience. There was a sense that the war had involved such significant suffering and sacrifices that, after the conflict, ordinary people deserved more, an opportunity to improve their lives, including seeking out newer and more modern entertainment forms that had not been available during the 1930s. There was a desire from many of the population to distance themselves from the old-fashioned British identity that was symbolised by Victorian society, and modernity in terms of culture and living standards was desired. Working-class urban spaces that had been destroyed by bombing offered an

allegory for Victorian culture and it left areas that were scarred canvases that needed to be rebuilt in a new image.

The presence of American troops and the nature of the 'special relationship' during and after the war meant that Britain looked increasingly over the Atlantic for cultural inspiration. American troops came from a booming economy with a strong consumer culture that drew on an exciting and multi-ethnic nation. From the melting pot of New York to the exotic West, America was highly appealing to a British audience that lived in the relatively austere United Kingdom of the 1950s.

The increased availability of air travel made visits from top-tier transatlantic performers more viable in this period. This was another technical innovation that made performers more accessible to the audience and disrupted the traditional circuits and made distance less relevant.

The process of Americanisation needs to be divided into two clear areas: external and domestic. The first is the process of American acts being imported and the influence that these acts had on the variety industry and on comedy within this industry until 1955. This will be covered in this chapter. Rock 'n' roll and post-1955 music and changes will not be included in this section. Instead, they will be examined in the next chapter, looking at the process of American-style acts, or performances using a new genre that originates in the United States, either aping it or developing and altering it, in the post-1955 era. There is a significant overlap between these two areas, but the distinction is useful for the purpose of analysis.

This chapter will be organised chronologically from 1945 to 1954 and will examine the changes the gradual process of Americanisation generated during this period. It will analyse the takings for different theatres in the Moss Empire and Stoll Theatre chains, identifying patterns of Americanisation over this period. The method will

first be formed of an analysis of the number of American acts that earned the most money throughout the calendar year at these theatres, and then, using the Birmingham Hippodrome as a case study, looking at how these acts were integrated into a variety bill. A similar process will occur for 'high art' that appears in the ledgers of the major theatres, looking at how successful it was financially and how often it featured. I will primarily focus on Americanisation but will also examine how and why opera and ballet were successful. The idea emerges that audiences were interested in aspirational culture, whether it be American or seen as having more 'cultural capital'.

To discuss Americanisation and the ascendancy of American culture in the 1940s and 1950s as a new phenomenon is a mistake. This process had been long underway, and Peter Bailey has discussed how some of this influence affected music hall and pre-war variety for at least a hundred years with the rise in stature and importance of the nation.¹ However, the post-war period marks the time that the industrial capacity of the American popular culture machine diversified and expanded. Hollywood had already fought off the challenge of European rivals and now Anglophone and specifically American culture could flourish as it had not suffered so much. During the war, Hollywood had flourished. Jazz and dance bands had taken a hold of the music scene in the 1930s and 1940s and at first this style could be replicated by local musicians. Popular music and the vinyl single powered by radio and television were now able to create a new breed of individually identifiable stars. Just like jazz, other Black American music was to become very successful along with the influence of country music and Western films. Comedy too was

¹Peter Bailey, "Hullo, Ragtime!" West End revue and the Americanisation of popular culture in pre-1914 London' in *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin 1890 to 1939* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 135 – 152, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107279681.011>;

Peter Bailey, 'Fats Waller Meets Harry Champion', *Cultural and Social History* 4:4 (2007), pp. 495–509, <https://doi.org/10.2752/147800407X243497>.

about to undergo great changes and performers such as Bob Hope, Milton Berle, Jack Benny, Danny Kaye, Jerry Lewis, and Dean Martin were about to become international stars.

Early American Influence

In the early years of cinema, it was not expected to move beyond the fairground sideshow, and similarly many other sensations that had swept Britain (including ragtime, roller-skating, different dances, jazz) were viewed as mere fads. And, although local norms of entertainment would maintain a significant presence, they were not able to keep pace with the success and bankability of American culture. The rise of American culture was a social and cultural issue at the time, and this was reflected in the concern of performers and management. Bigger agents and promoters were not worried and realised that there were significant amounts of money to be made from tours of major American stars, including comedians. However, many British stars did not like being treated as second-class acts to the glamorous foreigners and did not see them as more talented or deserving of praise. Oliver Double explains that the process of Americanisation had begun in earnest before the Second World War and there had already been an outcry from both press and performers alike.² Arguments surrounding the import of foreign acts had been present since the 1930s. The number of foreign acts was a problem in the 1930s. The Variety Artistes' Federation wanted a quota imposed on the number of imports or the imposition of a joint agreement of one British artist gaining

² Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 66.

work in the US for every two working in Britain.³ The Cinematograph Films Act of 1927, covering British cinema initially established a quota of 7.5 percent for exhibitors, but this was raised to 20 percent in 1938. A British film had to be made by a British company with studio scenes filmed in the British Empire, alongside British-authored screenplay or original work and 75 percent of the salaries to British staff, at least one of whom must be an actor.⁴ 15 percent of films shown in Britain had to be British or Empire made. According to Lawrence Napper, this led to a rise of music hall and variety material on film that would otherwise have been lost.⁵ Double explains that the Variety Artistes' Federation (VAF) campaigned against foreign acts since markets were closed for their members in Germany, Hungary, Italy, Russia, and the USA, due in no small part to 'nativist arts' programmes or desires for cultural autarky in the cauldron of 1930s ideological battles.⁶ Many variety performers worked all over the world.⁷ There was resentment at the prevalence of American acts on the bills of the prestigious Palladium, and it is difficult to deny that even in the 1930s and 1940s, American acts were a huge draw at the principal theatre.⁸

Variety could integrate touring acts into the bills very successfully. Many Americans relocated on a full-time basis because there was sufficient demand for American acts. Those who could make a name for themselves in the United Kingdom could make more money than in their home country.

³ 'Too many Foreign Acts - Disclosures at VAF Meeting', *The Era*, 10 March 1937, p. 3, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000053/19370310/018/0003> [accessed on 13 December 2021].

⁴ Cinematograph Films Act 1927, ch. 29, *UK Public General Acts*, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1927/29/contents/enacted>.

⁵ Lawrence Napper, "'Quota Quickies': the Birth of the British 'B' Film", *Screen* 48, 4 (Winter 2007), pp. 551–554, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjm061>.

⁶ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 66.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.* Double highlights *The Stage* and its trumpeting of six out of ten acts appearing on a Palladium bill and the new wave of comics that emerged after the war.

Talent agents and theatre managers were at the forefront of securing American acts. After George Black's death in 1945, Val Parnell took over the job of managing director, General Theatre Corporation (GTC) and Moss theatres.⁹ Oliver Double claims that 'the booking policy he would pursue at the Palladium and in his lesser theatres would bring continued prosperity to variety theatre, even if it would create divisions among its performers.'¹⁰ The Grade family began to sign up foreign talent as soon as the war ended. Bert Knight, general manager for Lew and Leslie Grade, explains the growth of their business after the war:

Britain had been cut off completely from Continental and North American artistes during the war, just as we had been cut off from foreign foods and exotic fruits ... [the population] longed for some new delights and razzle-dazzle to brighten up our grey, war-battered lives.¹¹

The number and regularity of American acts increased after the war. The scarcity of American acts immediately after the war can be attributed to the cost of bringing over acts in a time of austerity, despite the rising popularity of American culture by the late 1940s and early 1950s. The first act, albeit Anglo-American, to make an appearance in the top-grossing acts after the war was Laurel and Hardy in 1947. Although past their heyday, they performed a highly successful tour that mainly featured on the Moss Empire circuit.¹² The two performers took the highest takings of the year at the Stoll Chiswick Theatre (£2606) and the Moss Glasgow Empire (£3240).¹³ Despite claims that they did not fill all the theatres, their headlining performances drew in the most money of the

⁹ Mitchell, *Adult Responses to Popular Music*

¹⁰ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 62.

¹¹ Davies, *The Grades*, p. 120.

¹² Alan Johnson Marriot, *Laurel & Hardy: the British Tours* (Blackpool, 1993); V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10 1947 (Laurel and Hardy Glasgow Empire, £3240; Birmingham Hippodrome £3300).

¹³ V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/71945

V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, GB 71 THM/303/1/10.

calendar year at the Glasgow Empire and large takings at the Birmingham Hippodrome.¹⁴ Initially, the booking at the Palladium was dominated by Harry Foster, who was not only Val Parnell's golf partner, but was linked to the powerful American William Morris agency.¹⁵ This was a key hurdle for the Grades in their attempt to attract the biggest American stars and to get a foothold at the Palladium.¹⁶ However, Foster focussed quite heavily on theatre and film stars and largely ignored singers that people wanted to see 'in the flesh'. Lew Grade went to America in 1948 in the hope of securing a big name for Britain. He tracked down Bob Hope and secured his services for the 'enormous fee of £5000' and a £500 share for himself to perform at the Palladium.¹⁷ To exploit this gap in the Fosters' talent pool, the Grades forged a deal with the General Artists Corporation of America (GAC), 'an agency run by Buddy Howe which represented a lot of the big recording artists – something that William Morris lacked.'¹⁸ As a result, Parnell and the Grades began working very closely together and the brothers truly took over bookings at the Palladium, effectively removing the Foster monopoly. This, and a growing reputation, began to launch the Grades to new heights.¹⁹

British theatres raced to secure the biggest American acts. Val Parnell and the Palladium competed against Bernard Delfont (brother of Lew and Leslie Grade), who had taken over the Casino, but the Palladium, relying on the American acts supplied by the Grades, proved the more successful of the two.²⁰ Roger Wilmut notes that, although from 1948 Val Parnell began to include more American acts at the Palladium, not all were

¹⁴ Derek Malcolm, 'Tea and buns with Laurel and Hardy: Derek Malcolm on the day he met his comedy heroes,' *The Guardian Online*, 11 Oct 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/oct/11/tea-and-buns-with-laurel-and-hardy-the-day-i-met-my-comedy-heroes> [accessed on 13 December 2021].

¹⁵ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 64.

¹⁶ Davies, *The Grades*, p. 120.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 64.

¹⁹ Davies, *The Grades*, p. 121; Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 64.

²⁰ Davies, *The Grades*, p.121; Double, *Britain Had Talent*, pp. 62-63.

successful: Mickey Rooney did not win over the local audience and was forced to plead illness.²¹

In 1949, another American act took British audiences by storm. Danny Kaye was a massive success on his tour and was able to create a great rapport with his audience, which had not always been the case for big American acts visiting the London Palladium.²² Danny Kaye was an all-round performer as well as being a Hollywood star. His act was as much about silliness as charm, a straight man and fool rolled into one.²³ He had experience of working in the American equivalent of cine-variety and was comfortable in front of a live audience along with his celebrity from some of the biggest Hollywood comedies of the time. The original fear that Kaye was going to struggle with British audiences was replaced with full houses and the adulation of spectators. Roger Wilmut expands on the start of Kaye's Palladium performance:

Kaye was nervous, understandably enough, before going on, and, after being introduced by Ted Ray, had to be pushed to get him started on the walk from the side of the stage. Reaching the microphone, he said 'I'm shaking like a leaf, honestly.' There was immediate applause and Kaye never looked back. His success was immediate and extraordinary; the critics raved, and the Palladium was booked solidly for the six-week run with tickets changing hands for inflated prices on the black market.²⁴

The excitement around the 1949 tour drew strong media attention, with *The Manchester Guardian* reporting on 9 May, 1949, that:

A state of siege, which lasted for twenty-four hours, at the Palace Theatre, Manchester, was lifted last night when the last of the tickets for the Danny Kaye show, which opens June 13, was sold. All day long a six-deep queue of

²¹ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 157.

²² Double, *Britain Had Talent*, pp. 122–125.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁴ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 157.

people had stretched along Oxford Street into Portland Street, and Whitworth Street, completely surrounding the block.²⁵

Kaye's headline slots drew in large earnings across the country: the London Palladium took £13,507 in one week when he performed, the Birmingham Hippodrome took £8,382, Glasgow Empire £8,016, and the Liverpool Empire £9,378.²⁶ This opened the floodgates to the opportunities that agents and theatres could make from American performers. Danny Kaye's appearance marked a sea change in the history of variety. It marked a whole new era, of interest to all commentators on variety, 'shaping British variety until the circuit collapsed a decade later'.²⁷

Oliver Double argues that Kaye's success and popularity at British variety theatres foreshadowed the Beatlemania of the 1960s. Ian Bevan, in his book about the Palladium from 1952, records that at the Royal Variety Performance in November 1948 there were fewer than 3,000 tickets available, but there were over 80,000 applications.²⁸ Kaye was a major film star at the time and the press were very excited about the visit of such a star in the post-war era. He was offered £7,140 a week to perform at The Palladium for 12 weeks for the Festival of Britain programme by agent Harry Foster.²⁹ He returned for the Royal Variety Performance in November but did not play at the Palladium again, such was the overwhelming success of this experience.³⁰ *The Yorkshire Post* even confirmed on its

²⁵ 'All Day Siege of Box Office: Danny Kaye Tickets Black Market Men Reap Harvest', *The Manchester Guardian*, 9 May 1949, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/all-day-siege-box-office/docview/478906663/se-2?accountid=13828> [accessed on 13 December 2021].

²⁶ Moss Empires ledger, London Palladium week of 4 June, £13507 with a profit of £4932, Birmingham Hippodrome week of June 25th £8382 (profit?), Glasgow Empire week of 11 June, £8016 with a profit of £1925 and Liverpool Empire £9378 with a profit of £4476.

²⁷ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 63.

²⁸ Ian Bevan, *Top of the Bill: The Story of the London Palladium* (London, 1952), p. 168.

²⁹ '£7,140 a Week London Palladium Offer for Danny Kaye', *Western Morning News*, Tuesday 12 December 1950, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000329/19501111/009/0001> [accessed 13 December 2021].

³⁰ '1948, London Palladium', The Royal Variety Charity, <https://www.royalvarietycharity.org/royal-variety-performance/archive/detail/1948-london-palladium> [accessed 13 December 2021]; David Bianculli, 'The Many Lives of Danny Kaye', *New York Daily News*, 10 December 1996.

front page that Kaye would **not** be visiting Leeds during his tour but would be going to Liverpool and Manchester instead.³¹ The same happened in the *Nottingham Journal* too.³²

In 1949, Danny Kaye's success is further underlined by the fact that his variety shows took the most money at the most prestigious Moss theatres around the country and these shows were generating the equivalent of current-day millions for the theatre chain.

Table 4.1: *Danny Kaye takings during the 1949 tour, and the current-day equivalent. Based on the Moss Empire Returns records for 1945–1964*

Theatre	Performer	1949 Takings	Current-day equivalent
London Palladium	Danny Kaye	£13,507	£488,109
Birmingham Hippodrome	Danny Kaye	£8,382	£302,905
Glasgow Empire	Danny Kaye	£8,016	£289,678
Liverpool Empire	Danny Kaye	£9,378	£338,897

Source: GTC - General Theatre Corporation, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns 1945–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10.

Performances in Britain, therefore, were attractive and lucrative for many American performers and they could provide a boost for both careers and for the theatres that engaged them. The success of these imports papered over the cracks of the creaking variety format and reinforced a move towards innovative and desirable attractions that destabilised the traditional foundations of British variety. Roger Wilmut sees a wider

³¹ 'Danny Kaye', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, Thursday 3 March 1949, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000273/19490303/011/0001> [accessed 13 December 2021].

³² 'Danny Kaye not for Nottingham', *Nottingham Journal*, Tuesday 26 April 1949, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001898/19490426/109/0005> [accessed 13 December 2021].

change in the structure of variety shows and how American acts were starting to alter the time-honoured format. This trend would be exaggerated later: 'unlike previous top-of-the bills in ordinary Variety, who normally played for twenty minutes or so, Kaye was on for forty-five minutes (which he sometimes over-ran) – this began the trend towards performers, particularly Americans, playing the entire second half of the bill.'³³ This structure can be discerned from shows at the Bristol Hippodrome that reduced the number of acts from ten to 12 down to six to allow more stage time for Kaye.³⁴

Most American and Hollywood performers understood vaudeville and music hall. Vaudeville, the American equivalent of music hall and variety, had provided experience for many of the stars who were now touring Britain. Stan Laurel, like Chaplin, had experience in British halls, while Jack Benny, Abbott and Costello, and Bob Hope, amongst others, had taken advantage of the Golden Age of Radio commencing in the pre-war years in the United States.³⁵ The comedy that Hollywood was producing in the 1940s was a descendent of the live comedy performance and most of the performers that made the transition to film had experience of the stage. Their appearance on the variety stage was not odd for them. Danny Kaye and Jerry Lewis had a different experience from some of the other performers in that they had tested their skills in the so-called 'Borscht Belt' of Jewish holiday resorts in the Catskill Mountains. The grounding that these performers had in live entertainment was very important to their success, but this period marked a shift away from the skills of live performance steeped in these traditions, and towards a culture of star performers that excelled in individual fields (the film star, the singer, or

³³ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 157.

³⁴ 'Variety Show - Opening Night: 20 June 1949, Performance: 25 June 1949', *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage* https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/variety-show-299/ [accessed 13th December 2021];

The Birmingham Hippodrome digital archive indicates that all the Danny Kaye performances were sold out.

³⁵ Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, pp. 104–105.

comedian). The post-war American performers were versatile, like their British counterparts, but there was increasing specialisation in entertainment. A performer like Frank Sinatra could sing, act, dance, and tell jokes but the success of massive record sales meant that attracting more fans to buy records and tickets for concerts was of overriding importance. Although music stars were often encouraged into film (Elvis Presley's film career, for instance), the next generation of performers were not urged to expand their skills until they were established stars.

In 1950, Nellie Lutcher, a black American R and B and jazz singer took the most money at the Finsbury Park Empire and cinematic comic legends Abbott and Costello were the most lucrative act at the Glasgow Empire. 1951 welcomed two huge names to the country when both Judy Garland and Danny Kaye performed on the Moss Empire circuit. The following table demonstrates the prevalence and popularity of American acts that made the most money at theatres on the Moss circuit. The ownership at these theatres had begun to see the success that big American acts could achieve in the most prestigious and large-capacity auditoria. Danny Kaye and Bob Hope only performed at limited venues, but Judy Garland toured. The Deep River boys were an American Gospel act that had gained popularity in Europe and Canada. They embarked on multiple tours of the UK.

Table 4.2: A comparison of top takings and top profits at the Moss Empire theatres in 1951

Theatre name	1951					
	Top takings			Top profit		
	Act	Date	£ Sum	Act	Date	£ Sum
London Palladium	Danny Kaye	17 Jun	13,908	Danny Kaye	17 Jun	3,908
London Prince of Wales	Bob Hope	5 May	10,958	Judy Garland	3 Jun	1,643
Glasgow Empire	Judy Garland	26 May	7,923	Judy Garland	26 May	1,643
Sunderland Empire	Judy Garland	17 Jun	7,605	Judy Garland	15 Jul	1,342
Edinburgh Empire	Judy Garland	3 Jun	6,231	Deep River Boys	12 Aug	500
Birmingham Hippodrome	Judy Garland	15 Jul	5,962			
Sheffield Empire	Deep River Boys	12 Aug	1,948			

Source: V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns 1945 – 1964, GB

71 THM/303/1/10.

Integrating American Acts

The variety bills at the Birmingham Hippodrome demonstrate how comedy was integrated into variety bills that included major American stars:

Variety Show featuring Judy Garland

Opening Night: 9 July 1951

Performance: 14 July 1951

1. Overture
2. Clayton and Ward – Open the Show
3. Jose Moreno with Assistant – Juggler on the Wire
4. Morton Fraser's Harmonica Gang – A Riot of Comedy, Music and Song

5. Kay and Joe Stuthard – Canadian Funatics
6. The Bedini Troupe – Springboard Acrobats
- Intermission – Hippodrome Orchestra under Frank Hagley
7. Clayton and Ward – Steps In Tempo
8. Duncan’s Collies – The Canine Actors
9. Clifford Stanton – Personalities on Parade
10. Judy Garland – with Buddy Pepper at the Piano.³⁶

The line-up for this 1951 show headlined by Judy Garland is the epitome of the variety format. It opens with some dancers and moves on to a tightrope-walking juggler. Afterwards were Morton Fraser’s Harmonica Gang, who played popular instrumentals whilst indulging in comedy high jinks with Tiny Ross, a harmonica-playing dwarf.³⁷ Then there were the Canadian magicians Kay and Joe Stuthard, who specialised in card tricks, using a trick ‘Svengali Deck’. They were followed by springboard acrobats and, after the intermission, dancers again and then Duncan’s Collies. This act had been operating since the nineteenth century and had been inherited by Vic Duncan from his father, ‘Professor Duncan’.³⁸

Duncan’s dogs had amazing balance, instilled by teaching them to stand on their hind legs on the back of a chair. Highlights of the act included a dog rescuing a baby (in reality, a doll) from a burning building, and a car accident scenario that must have taken years of training. This involved one dog driving a car and another playing dead under the front wheels, while a third, the canine passenger of the car, stood on hind legs at a public telephone calling for an ambulance.³⁹

³⁶ ‘Variety Show featuring Judy Garland - Opening Night: 9 July 1951, Performance: 14 July 1951’, *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/variety-show-244/ [accessed on 12 December 2021].

³⁷ ‘Morton Fraser And His Harmonica Rascals’, *British Pathé* 1947, accessed via YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLPuUnVQ5DY> [accessed 12 December 2021].

³⁸ ‘Professor Duncan’s Marvelous Collie Dogs’, *National Purebred Dog Day* (March 4, 2018), <https://nationalpurebreddogday.com/professor-duncans-marvelous-collie-dogs/> [accessed 12 December 2021]; Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, pp.11–12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

This alarming scene was followed by Clifford Stanton, a celebrity impressionist.⁴⁰ Finally, Garland took the stage. The audience certainly got their money's worth but most of them came to see Garland and the magicians, acrobats, anthropomorphic dogs, harmonica-playing dwarves, impersonators, and dancers may have detracted from the experience for those patrons. This was still a typical variety line-up, at times evocative of the circus, every act instilled with an understanding of the genre, fun and not taking itself too seriously, a cavalcade of camp. Ironically, this was topped off with a woman who was famous for taking herself quite seriously (the very reason she became a camp icon). It is entertaining to imagine the great Hollywood star wading past the motley crew of performers that preceded her on the way to the stage. The carnival legacy of the music hall was still in evidence when Hollywood glamour was on offer, a juxtaposition between the slick allure of American stars and the odd turns provided by some variety veterans. The clash between novelty acts that had originally established themselves in the late Victorian and early Edwardian period and new cultural phenomena characterised this period in variety. This echoes a wider trend in popular culture where entertainment moved away from its primary purpose in urban environments and in collective spaces and towards a demographic-targeted, highly organised, and concentrated international industry.⁴¹ The evolution of music hall to variety was now being both challenged and shaped by the power of Hollywood, the recording industry, and broadcasting. Just as magicians, acrobats, and animal acts had provided novelty at the turn of the century and the comic singers began to look outdated, the arrival of American stars and acts aimed at teenagers began to make novelty acts look outmoded.

⁴⁰ 'Clifford Stanton 1937', [online film ID:1236.31], *British Pathé*, first broadcast 29 April 1937, <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/clifford-stanton-1> [accessed on 13 December 2021].

⁴¹ Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London, 2019); Geoffrey P. Hull, *The Recording Industry* (Boston, 1997).

The Rise of American Music

The recording industry identified new markets for younger customers. A similar system of stars was transposed onto the music industry. In the years before and during the war, popular music (mainly swing and jazz) was presented by big bands and orchestras that had featured singers. The bandleaders, such as Billy Cotton, Henry Hall, Joe Loss, and Charlie Kunz, were the names at the top of the bill, rather than the singers. The quality of the whole orchestra was more important than the individual skill of the singers. Domestic acts like Donald Peers and Vera Lynn, along with Americans Allan Jones, Martha Raye, and Pearl Bailey, had been profitable in the late 1940s. Most of these singers were still establishing themselves and often took second-billing to comedians and other headliners; bandleaders were still more likely to take this position until 1952.

In the domestic sphere, there was a progression from the big band era to the first wave of popular post-war singers that were often balladeers. Donald Peers was a Welsh singer who had originally worked as a singer with a dance band before the war and had a recording contract before wartime service. He became more successful in the years after the war. Josef Locke was an Irish tenor and former policeman who sang in seaside summer seasons and variety theatres. Vera Lynn had originally been a singer with dance bands before becoming a wartime icon for her famous records, 'We'll Meet Again', '(There'll Be Bluebirds Over) The White Cliffs of Dover', 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square' and 'There'll Always Be an England'. Anne Shelton had a similar background, singing at military bases before her career as an individual singer blossomed after the war.

The arrival of the first UK singles charts in 1952 was dominated by American artists. Klaus Nathaus explains how theatres began to welcome more American singers

after 1952: 'A ... successful strategy was to target an audience between 16–24 years of age, unmarried, living with parents and earning good wages. This clientele was attracted by "modern rhythm singers" from America who were booked by top tier theatres like the London Palladium.'⁴²

There was a great growth in the number of individual singers. At first, they produced simple popular songs or followed a particular style such as country, whistling or yodelling, or light operatic. This then developed into the swing and easy listening genre before a rock 'n' roll influence began to take hold in the mid-1950s. This process happened quickly, and the trend was driven by the technological developments in the popular music industry. The popularity of singers was driven by the rise of the 7-inch 45-rpm single during this period, the infiltration of radio, and consequent increased record sales orchestrated by an increasingly savvy recording industry.

This shift began to put pressure on variety. Variety could accommodate one or two singers, but it also required a versatility and a sense of fun to ensure swift and seamless transitions between different acts. This division in cultural formats began to undermine the varied nature and some performers were limited to their specialism and would not engage in comedy. The atmosphere and unwritten rules of variety were secondary to the commercial imperative, as younger audiences wanted to see singers and American stars show their skills on stage. The integrity and stylistic thread of variety was not crucial to their enjoyment.

A performer like Max Wall who valued his ability to tailor his act or change his act to suit new styles was being phased out. There were still plenty of performers that had been brought up in this era, but the growth in popularity of individual singers and the

⁴² Nathaus, 'All dressed up and nowhere to go?', p. 48.

desire to see them in the flesh meant that singers did not need to be humorous or as willing to partake out of their comfort zone. They had not been coached in the culture of the 'complete show' of variety and the idea that they needed to be a part of the carnival atmosphere was lost on many of these performers that had simply been identified by producers because of their ability to sell records.

It is possible to view these changes to the variety industry and the pressures that were being exerted on the industry from a viewpoint that supported the homegrown performers or objected to the importation of foreign acts. Music hall was the symbol of industrial Victorian Britain and was now being undermined by the glitzy allure of the American offerings. It is fair to say that, from an economic point of view, showbusiness and the employees of variety theatres were being 'squeezed from all sides' in the 1950s and the increase in the popularity of American acts taking top billing from British ones was unwelcome to many. However, this would ignore the fact that new technological forms had destroyed vaudeville and were dealing heavy blows to continental cabaret. It was the economic strength of Hollywood and the recording industry and how they harnessed radio and television to market their new products that was driving young people to newer cultural forms of celebrity and fame. Moreover, the protectionist attitude towards British film or music was not extended to variety and the BBC could not hold back the desire for American music, especially after independent television arrived.

There were repercussions amongst performers and acts were upset at having their fees cut to accommodate American stars or were perturbed by the fact major American theatres were willing to highlight their talents when British theatres were not.⁴³ The matter was raised in the House of Commons on 18 December 1947, where

⁴³ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 66–67;

there was a question regarding substandard and cheap foreign variety artists undercutting domestic performers and consequently causing unemployment.⁴⁴ The Labour MP for Bolton, John Lewis (who later revealed the Profumo Affair) asked the following question:

Mr. J. Lewis asked the Minister of Labour if he is aware that low-priced foreign vaudeville acts are being allowed to work in this country at a time when our own acts are suffering considerable unemployment; and will he, in the circumstances, withhold permits from all foreign performers who are receiving payment of less than £75 per week.⁴⁵

This echoed concerns that had been present in the pre-war period, but there was discussion about the relative skill of these domestic performers and whether they should be 'propped up' or should find work in other industries.

It is possible to see the growth and proliferation of American acts and American productions throughout 1952. This was driven chiefly by the successful tour of Laurel and Hardy but also by the popularity of singers like Frankie Laine and the great success of Betty Hutton, an actress, comedian, and singer, who had starred in the film musical *Annie Get Your Gun*. The trend towards individual singers can be clearly seen.

'Flotsam on the Importation of American Artists', *The Stage*, 10 October 1957, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19571010/040/0005> [accessed 13 December 2021].

⁴⁴ 'Foreign Variety Artists', HC Deb 18 December 1947, vol. 445, cc 1869–70, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/dec/18/foreign-variety-artists>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Table 4.3: *Top takings at the Moss Empire theatres in 1952*

Theatre name	Top takings 1952		
	Act	Date	£ Sum
London Palladium	Frankie Laine	30 Aug	13,457
Manchester Palace	Betty Hutton	8 Nov	8,322
Glasgow Empire	Betty Hutton	25 Oct	8,004
Liverpool Empire	Betty Hutton	1 Nov	7,966
Birmingham Hippodrome	Betty Hutton	15 Nov	7,895
Edinburgh Empire	New York City Ballet	30 Aug	6,336
Brighton Hippodrome	Kings Rhapsody	2 Mar	3,929
Nottingham Empire	Laurel and Hardy	19 Apr	3,727
Bristol Hippodrome	Laurel and Hardy	6 Sep	3,655
Leeds Empire	Laurel and Hardy	12 Apr	3,070
New Theatre Cardiff	Laurel and Hardy	27 Sep	2,902
Newcastle Empire	Laurel and Hardy	23 Mar	2,844
Swansea Empire	Laurel and Hardy	27 Sep	2,635
Chiswick Empire	Rhythm is our Business	18 Oct	2,337
Shepherd's Bush Empire	Rhythm is our Business	15 Nov	2,188
Hackney Empire	Rhythm is our Business	25 Oct	2,175

Sources: V&A-TPC, Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964. Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, GB 71 THM/303/1/10; V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/7

In 1952, the Judy Garland experience of true variety from the previous year was still on the menu for the visit of Betty Hutton, including comedians, dancers, singers, animals, balancers, and ventriloquists.

Variety Show featuring Betty Hutton

Opening Night: 10 November 1952

Performance: 15 November 1952

1. Overture – The Hippodrome Orchestra
2. Clarkson & Leslie – “Scotch and Tonic”
3. Laurie Watson – Unusual Comedy
4. The Skylarks – American Singing Group
5. “Daisy May” assisted by Saveen – The Captivating Starlet
6. Louise with her Dogs & Pony
- Intermission – The Hippodrome Orchestra under the direction of Frank Hagley
7. Jackie – Precision in Balance
8. Betty Hutton – Hollywood’s Incendiary Blonde – with The Skylarks.⁴⁶

Betty Hutton’s description indicates the way that Hollywood glamour was used to market acts. The use of sex appeal and the objectification of women hints how this would be increasingly used throughout the 1950s to market female performers.

In 1953, American musicals and singers, along with comedy and music from Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, dominated the main takings of variety theatres. This can be seen with the rise in the sales of popular music and the success of Hollywood films as the beginning of an American cultural hegemony, that is often associated with the rise of rock ‘n’ roll and teenagers in milk bars. In fact, this more ‘middle of the road’ situation had taken hold in the first years of the 1950s.

Musicals were also included in this list because this indicates simultaneously an American influence and an appeal to a much wider demographic than crooners or musical groups.

⁴⁶ ‘Variety Show featuring Betty Hutton - Opening Night: 10 November, 1952 Performance: 15 November 1952’, *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/variety-show-215/ [accessed on 12 December 2021]; Bill Green, ‘Annual Edinburgh Lunch’, December 2007, Scottish Music Hall & Variety Theatre Society <https://scottishmusichallsociety.webs.com/events-articles> [accessed 13 December 2021]; Séan Street, *Historical Dictionary of British Radio* (London, 2015), p. 299.

Table 4.4: *Top takings at the Moss Empire and Stoll theatres in 1953.*

Theatre name	Top takings 1953		
	Act	Date	Sum
London Palladium	Frankie Laine	5 Sep	13,483
Glasgow Empire	Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis	Jun 20	8,669
Liverpool Empire	Frankie Laine	19 Sep	8,004
Manchester Palace	Guy Mitchell	22 Aug	6,510
Birmingham Hippodrome	Guy Mitchell	15 Aug	6,321
Newcastle Empire	Billy Daniels	12 Sep	4,467
Bristol Hippodrome	Guys and Dolls	30 May	4,422
Manchester Hippodrome	Billy Daniels	13 Jun	4,201
Leeds Empire	Billy Daniels	26 Sep	3,197
Brighton Hippodrome	Oklahoma	24 Oct	3,030
Swansea Empire	Rose Marie on Ice	21 Nov	2,860
Palace Leicester	Oklahoma	11 Apr	2,631
Chiswick Empire	Oklahoma	7 Mar	2,628
Grand Derby/ Hippodrome	Oklahoma	21 Mar	2,386
Wood Green Empire	Carousel	14 Feb	1,545

Source: V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10; V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/7.

By 1953, the structure of the variety show starring Guy Mitchell had been streamlined. Mitchell was a pop singer and a precursor to some of the recording artists that followed – his career was masterminded by record companies and studios. He was

something of a prototype for the teen idols and rock 'n' rollers that followed. The show still featured dancers and jugglers, but the headliner was allowed more time on stage. This was very understandable as audiences were turning up to see the American star rather than the workaday variety performers. This can be clearly discerned by the overwhelming popularity of the major American performers contrasted with the low takings of more traditional variety bills.

Variety Show

Opening Night: 10 August 1953

Performance: 15 August 1953

Guy Mitchell – 'The World's Top-Selling Diskster' [A recording artist]

The Allen Brothers and June – Dancers

The Three Hocus – Jugglers.⁴⁷

Another successful tour by Guy Mitchell ensured that 1954 had another large tranche of American names amongst the most popular acts, such as Frankie Laine, Roy Rogers, the singing cowboy, and his wife Dale Evans, and Billy Daniels. Billy Daniels was a singer of African-American origin and had worked in the New York nightclub scene. Compared to some of the other singers on before 1955, along with Betty Hutton, he provided the public with something genuinely different, more raucous, visceral, and less influenced by Hollywood and Western ballads than Guy Mitchell, Roy Rogers, and Frankie Laine. Pop singers were so successful that *The Stage Year Book of 1955* rejoiced that 'the crooners won many new patrons for variety in 1954.'⁴⁸

Table 4.5: *Top takings at the Moss Empire theatres in 1954. Based on the Moss Empire Returns records for 1945–1964.*

⁴⁷ 'Variety Show - Opening Night: 10 August 1953, Performance: 15 August 1953', *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/variety-show-196/ [accessed on 12 December 2021].

⁴⁸ Nathaus, 'All dressed up and nowhere to go?', p. 48.

Theatre name	Top takings 1954		
	Act	Date	Sum
Liverpool Empire	Roy Rogers and Dale Evans	13 Mar	8,810
Glasgow Empire	Frankie Laine	30 Oct	7,643
Birmingham Hippodrome	Frankie Laine	23 Oct	7,635
Manchester Palace	Love from Judy	24 Apr	5,978
Newcastle Empire	Guy Mitchell	21 Aug	5,506
Brighton Hippodrome	A Good Idea	7 Aug	4,518
Finsbury Park Empire	Guy Mitchell	29 May	4,319
New Theatre Cardiff	Guy Mitchell	11 Sep	4,122
Sheffield Empire	Love from Judy	3 Apr	4,045
Manchester Hippodrome	Guy Mitchell	27 Nov	3,756
Leeds Empire	Guy Mitchell	16 Oct	3,589
Chiswick Empire	Billy Daniels	24 Jul	3,303
Nottingham Empire	Guy Mitchell	23 Oct	3,283
Swansea Empire	Oklahoma	11 Sep	1,785

Source: V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10.

The Birmingham Hippodrome's top performing headliner of 1954 was the American singer Frankie Laine:

Variety Show featuring Frankie Laine (Mr. Rhythm)

Opening Night: 18 October 1954 Performance: 23 October 1954

Frankie Laine (Mr. Rhythm)

with Vic Lewis and His Orchestra

Fran Dowie and Kandy Kane – Comedians⁴⁹

⁴⁹ 'Variety Show featuring Frankie Laine (Mr. Rhythm) - Opening Night: 18 October 1954, Performance: 23 October 1954', *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/variety-show-165 [accessed 12 December 2021].

The format for this show with Frankie Laine was pared down even more, as now he was only supported by comedians. This was much more similar to modern concerts where musicians will have one or two support acts (normally but not exclusively musicians). This resembled what would become the norm. The nature of the comic support betrayed the vaudevillian roots of the Canadian husband and wife team. Fran Dowie was the grandson of a performer in a minstrel show that was on at the time at the London Palladium. He included giant puppets in his act and later taught puppeteering. As an act, he and actress Kandy Kane were still an eccentric opening act for a pop star.

Domestic pop singers like Dickie Valentine were also beginning to make their mark. He was a traditional pop singer and included impressions and comedic elements in his act but was a chart-topping singer and the most profitable act at the Finsbury Park Empire and the Swansea Empire in 1954, as well as appearing in the West End at the Prince of Wales Theatre in 1956. However, there was still a discrepancy between the audiences and these relatively mainstream newcomers, as the Managers' Report Card for a summer appearance in Morecambe reveals:

Very good reception. As there is not a great teen-age public in this town[,] the normal following for this artiste is lacking but through sheer hard work and competent performing this all gets over very well. His impressions are not appreciated as much as they should be for the obvious reason that the majority of the weekday audience have never see the people he is impersonating. An alternative, therefore, to such impressions when playing to a family audience would probably make this artiste a very commercial proposition to all types of theatre-goers.⁵⁰

His impressions of American singers were welcomed as was his 'likeable personality' and vocals at an appearance a few weeks later in Newcastle.⁵¹ The disparity

⁵⁰ Stoll Moss Theatre Managers' Report Cards, 1938–1966, PN2597, Dickie Valentine.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

between the younger urban audiences and more parochial crowds is apparent. Even in 1956 and in a traditional holiday resort, audiences were not fully receptive to Americanised acts. Mollie Ellis in *The Stage* discussed the dilemma facing variety in the late 1950s:

... again the vexed problem of importation of foreign artists has reared its head. The VAF and the Association of Circus Proprietors are worried, on behalf of their members, about reports of a foreign circus coming into the country. While firmly of the opinion that Buy British is an excellent slogan and that tremendous care should be taken to ensure that wherever possible a British artist should have preference over an American or foreign artist of equal calibre, we cannot agree that a relentless closed shop attitude towards foreign artists, which is what many British performers would like to see, can help British variety in the long run. Haven't we all, performers and public alike, felt the richer for watching artists like Danny Kaye, Jack Benny. Bob Hope, Judy Garland. Rudi Cardenas, Victor Borge, and the Chinese Variety Theatre? Had importation restrictions been more drastic, we wouldn't have seen them and we would have missed great artistry and great entertainment. Don't accuse us of being pro-American and anti-British, because we're not ... But we don't want to see an inferior British artist there at the expense of a first-rate American. All we're asking is that the profession should be sensible about the whole business.⁵²

This opinion from later in the period illustrates the major issues facing variety during the 1950s, the conflict between profit, tradition, and maintaining a successful domestic variety circuit with sufficient desirable local artistes. In the years from 1951–54, American acts were taking the most money at the biggest theatres on the circuit in Glasgow, Birmingham, London, Liverpool, Leeds, and Manchester. As theatre operators and agents realised the potential of the American imports, it became commonplace to bring them over. It was not always possible to get the top stars to do more than a few shows and there was obviously a desire to replace these expensive imports that delivered strong profits with cheaper imports or homegrown talents that could appeal to the 16–24-year-old audience, as advantageous from a recording industry, variety theatre, and

⁵² Mollie Ellis, 'Horror Comics', *The Stage*, 28 November 1957, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19571128/028/0003>, [accessed 23 January 2022].

booking agent viewpoint. Where this left the traditional variety comic is more dubious. While Hollywood stars of the early 1950s era did follow the traditions of vaudeville and variety, the next generation of performers were not taught at the variety school of all-round entertainers.

High Culture

In parallel to the increasing popularity of American entertainment, there was also a clear desire to see events that normally would be reserved for the London audience and often an exclusively wealthy one. Opera, operetta, ballet, and choirs often made more money than conventional variety and even some pop music performers on the variety circuit. Important companies visiting from the Soviet Union (the Bolshoi, Red Army Choir) or the United States (New York Ballet) were particularly popular. Variety theatres realised that touring shows from these high culture goliaths could attract healthy audiences that may have been listening to the BBC Third Programme and wanted to experience some world-class entertainment that was not on the normal variety menu.

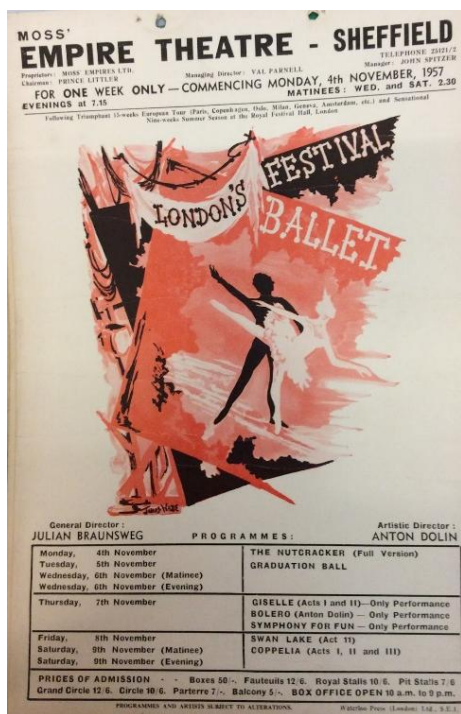


Illustration 4.1: Poster Bill 4th November 1957, Poster Collection - Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive

These imported shows ranked as particularly successful throughout this period. The appearance of these as featured acts at the variety theatre is important to note because it indicated a further shift away from traditional variety. Opera and ballet, both domestic and international, were extremely popular and, just as musicals, offered glamour and spectacle.⁵³ In Liverpool in 1951, a week of *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty* was performed by the Sadler's Wells ballet company with prima ballerina Margot Fonteyn, although she missed some days due to injury. In 1960, the

Empire played host to a week of different operas from the Sadler's Wells Opera Company. The programme looked like this: *Die Fledermaus* (Monday); *Tannhauser* (Tuesday); *The Marriage of Figaro* (Wednesday); *Cinderella* (Thursday); *The Marriage of Figaro* (Friday); *Die Fledermaus* (Saturday matinée); and *La Bohème* (Saturday evening).⁵⁴

These productions could provide an audience with an aspirational experience, and variety takings in the post-war era display a desire for new, rich cultural experiences. The fact that these shows were available in the formerly working-class bastions of variety shows that audiences were not only aspirational, but that there was a significant commercial incentive in offering high culture to a mass audience. The visiting tours from

⁵³ 'Fonteyn Dances Cut', *Liverpool Echo*, Tuesday 24 July 1951 p. 3, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000271/19510724/022/0003> [accessed 13 December 2021].

⁵⁴ 'Liverpool Stars with the Sadler's Wells', *Liverpool Echo*, Friday 13 May 1960, p. 5, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000271/19600513/075/0005> [accessed 9 December 2021].

the Soviet Union, New York, and Scandinavia from major opera and ballet companies and choirs demonstrate the possibilities of air travel (transporting large groups) and the curiosity of British audiences. The exotic nature of communist performers from the Soviet Union would have intrigued the British, just like the Dynamo Moscow football tour of 1945. The political motivations of the Soviets could not mask the commercial success of these shows.

Table 4.6: *Stoll Theatres – Top performing acts – ballet or opera*

Year	Theatre	Top takings for this year	Sum
1949	Chiswick Empire	International Ballet	£3,008
	Grand Derby	D'Oyly Carte	£2,271
1950	New Cardiff	Markova Ballet	£3,280
	(Incomplete year)		
1951	Wood Green Empire	Wood Green Operatic Society	£1,711
	Bristol Hippodrome	Festival Ballet	£4,704
	(incomplete year)		
1954	Bristol Hippodrome	Sadler's Wells	£5,061
	Grand Derby	Sadler's Wells	£2,386

Source: V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/7.

Table 4.7: *Moss Empire Theatres – Top performing acts – ballet or opera*

Year	Theatre	Top takings/ profit for this year	Sum	Profit
1947	Edinburgh Empire	Sadler's Wells	£6,266	£1,726
1949	Sunderland Empire	Inter Ballet	£2,867	
1950	Edinburgh Empire	New York Ballet	£6,350	£1,716
	Liverpool Empire	Markova/ Dolim	£4,510	
	Sheffield Empire	Royal Ballet	£2,916	
1951	Liverpool Empire	Sadler's Wells	£7,545	£1,084
1952	Edinburgh Empire	New York City Ballet	£6,336	£1,766
	Swansea Empire	Welsh National Opera		£551
1953	Edinburgh Empire	Sadler's Wells	£6,198	£1,700
1954	Edinburgh Empire	Sadler's Wells	£9,415	£1,932

Source: V&A-TPC Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10.

Eric Hobsbawm however draws attention to the fact that this high culture needed state support to operate. 'It is a political decision that has ... allowed the Holborn Hippodrome to disappear but built municipal theatres in the provinces.'⁵⁵ He also points out that classical music accounts for only two percent of record sales, yet philharmonic orchestras and operas are afforded expensive state-funded theatres.⁵⁶ Internationally, communist regimes placed great emphasis on the political importance of funding opera and ballet, and the state organs of other countries were also providing funds. Set against the backdrop of variety theatres that were commercially failing and not given the support

⁵⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Fractured Times: Culture and Society in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2013), p. 53.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

of conventional theatre, ballet, or opera, it is ironic that these performances were popular amongst mass audiences at the time. The longevity of this success could be challenged, although the price of tickets and locality may have attracted more customers.

By the late 1950s, there were still traditional comics performing on the circuit. However, at the very top of the bills across the country, non-variety performers now secured the key positions, whether it was individual singers, groups, ballet, or opera. The average customer at the variety theatre was no longer looking for what could be described as old-fashioned variety and, unlike the common generational characterisation of this period, this also applied to an older age-group. Audiences would rather see a spectacle like ballet, opera, or the Red Army Choir, that would not translate well to radio or television. If audiences were to leave the house for entertainment, they now demanded an experience rather than something that could be easily accessed at home.⁵⁷ A Mass Observation report from April 1949 noted that two-thirds of respondents said that their cinema visits would be curtailed.⁵⁸ A 27-year-old insurance clerk stated:

I feel television might affect my weekly visit to the cinema – I should much prefer to see a good play than some of the recent films I have seen. And it would be much easier (and less expensive) to switch off a poor play than to walk out on a shoddy film.⁵⁹

However, the loss of a collective atmosphere was still seen as an issue by some observers. A 23-year-old engineering statistician sums it up succinctly: 'It will always be impossible to provide the atmosphere of being amongst a large body of people enjoying

⁵⁷ Douglas Gomery, 'The Coming of Television and the "Lost" Motion Picture Audience', *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 37, no. 3 (1985), pp. 5–11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20687670>.

⁵⁸ *Mass Observation's Panel on Television*, [Report 3106], April 1949, p. 22, available through: Mass Observation Online, <http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/sheffield.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/FileReport-3106> [Accessed April 27, 2023].

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

the same spectacle as oneself in comfortable surroundings which provide a change from the too well-known home sitting room.’⁶⁰

The presentation of high culture material blurred the lines for variety theatres as bastions of working-class culture. The punters were now willing to put big money into forms that were decidedly high culture. That is not to say that a chain of 25 opera and ballet houses would make more in takings than variety theatres, but it does exhibit that there was a considerable appetite for this type of performance, and the novelty was clearly welcomed in the major cities of Britain at a time when more conventional variety was struggling.

Variety theatre owners and agents were willing to accommodate high culture, but this left the variety format in an even more challenging position. Incorporating the expensive spectacle of opera or ballet into a variety show was not practical. The highly paid musicians and dancers needed to stage the show meant that it needed to occupy a whole bill (unlike individual American stars and singers). These shows could be displayed in conventional theatres, and it blurred the lines and purpose of variety theatres now increasingly stripped of their unique selling point. Opera and ballet could be adapted to variety theatres, but it was an uncomfortable fit: the orchestra pits were too small, and players would spill over to stalls and boxes, there was not enough space for conductors, and the acoustics were poor.⁶¹ Comedy was even more stranded by this trend in booking. There was an increasing rift between what was serious and frivolous, and stage comedians were being marginalised. A big spectacle could book the major

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶¹ *The Opera in Britain*. [File Report], Political and Economic Planning vol. XV, No 290, November 8 1948, p.155–6, available through: Mass Observation Online, <http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/sheffield.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/FileReport-3061> [Accessed December 17, 2021].

theatres and provide something extraordinary for the audience. Individual singers created a different atmosphere in the theatres, there may have been the frenzy of fans but there was a lack of the unpredictability and ethos of variety. The carnivalesque elements of the music hall had been tamed by economic interests. The wildness of youth and the 'teenager' was a rationalisation of an industry that was designed to sell records and promote artists. Peter Bailey and Dagmar Kift have argued that the original music halls were designed to tame the unruly urban masses in Victorian cities; 'the business of pleasure' was now robbing the theatres of their original essence that had already been reduced by the attempts to make the industry more respectable in the early 1900s and in the battle with cinema in the 1930s. Entertainment had changed and with it an essence of working-class culture was being discarded, although the working class had little interest by the 1950s in preserving or promoting this aging trope of Victoriana or Edwardiana. The capitalist entertainment machine was moving on and it had found other ways to make money.

Conclusions

That variety was slowly evolving to accommodate these prominent acts and had begun to abandon its signature format because it did not meet audience demands was significant. Variety theatres had been willing to be flexible in the past and include musicals, operas, or ballets, but these were always special events. Now performers that used to form a constituent part of a bill were forcing change. The individual singers that emerged, either American or British, needed to be given more time and attention than variety could normally afford. This signalled the arrival of a celebrity culture. The theatres needed to listen to their customers but this in turn undermined the music hall

format, which, although altered and sped up, was still recognisable from the late nineteenth century. This swing away from the core business of variety meant that it had begun to lose not only what nostalgists would call 'a part of its soul' or 'the unique music hall legacy' but from a more hard-headed viewpoint its unique selling point. The theatres became vessels for whatever booking agents wanted to exhibit rather than the smorgasbord entertainment. It abandoned music hall in favour of what we would recognise as the modern usage of a theatre. This was more challenging for comedians who relied on the format, as there was little tradition to watch a comedian for more than five to ten minutes (as most stand-up comedians will perform nowadays). Their acts had been crafted for variety and, now that they had to adapt, the obvious new home was on radio or television.

This does ignore the Hollywood comics that made their appearances in the theatres, such as Danny Kaye, Jerry Lewis, Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, and the Marx Brothers. Despite all these comedians having a grounding in vaudevillian or music hall traditions, the younger the comic and the bigger the Hollywood star, the more they strained the variety format, in the same way that individual singers or actors did. Variety struggled with the kind of superstardom that Hollywood was able to create, which made the appearance of these performers into large-scale events. Obviously, some performers could not survive longer sets without lots of help. Variety had to accommodate a situation where the headline act was all the audience wanted to see and everything else became a distraction. However, incorporating big-name Americans into their bills had been a successful commercial experiment and had given variety a boost. The industry was nowhere near ready to abandon the format; too many people relied on it for a living, and it was still making a profit. The big names were a way of ensuring that theatres posted good figures and offset any weeks that were less

successful, but this was not a long-term strategy, particularly as the glamour and novelty of one-off spectacles and touring Americans made the regular weeks look more old-fashioned or, frankly, dull. 'In the wake of American stars, home-grown recording talent, among them Dickie Valentine, David Whitfield, Joan Regan and Frankie Vaughan, got an opening in variety theatres too.'⁶²

The development of popular culture is subject to many stereotypes that seem to have become embedded in the academic narrative. The idea that popular culture exploded into subversive life in the 1950s with rock 'n' roll and was formed in a clichéd milk bar with jukeboxes that is evoked in the *Uses of Literacy* by Richard Hoggart is overly simplistic, and the wheels had been in motion for this sociological evolution for over 50 years.⁶³ Hoggart's views on the rapid rise of Americanisation can seem naive in hindsight. There were many legitimate concerns about the entertainment industry in the United Kingdom but protectionism was not at the heart of many of his sentiments. A feeling of losing touch with native forms of culture, the assumed vacuous nature of American culture and a sense of loss of direction in the young people of the 1950s. The variety theatres were happy to have American stars, if they could secure them and they often delivered great results.

The process of Americanisation began in the nineteenth century and accelerated in the early years of the twentieth century. In the post-war years there was the rapid commercial opportunism and consolidation of the recording industry. This initially manifested itself in the big bands and swing records, before individual singers, crooners, country, gospel, and doo-wop performers, all had an impact on the British market and made regular appearances in the variety theatres. The creation of the circumstances and

⁶² Nathaus, 'All dressed up and nowhere to go?', p. 48.

⁶³ Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*.

styles for a teenage audience had been primed for several years and tested by years of commercial strategies. Rock 'n' roll had not emerged fully formed but had been part of a much more cynical campaign to engage youth audiences to buy vinyl records.

Klaus Nathaus explains the tensions that emerged between the newer entertainment forms and the older variety artistes and comedians:

While pop singers attracted young people, their presentation should not be mistaken for an exclusive reorientation of variety to this audience segment. Regardless of their 'headliner status', these performers were slotted into the existing show format, thrown together with dance acts, comedians, and acrobats. Many of them were ridiculed by condescending critics who feasted on the fact that their limited musical skills stood in stark contrast with their fees and enthusiastic adulation of teenage girls. Comedians parodied their distinct performance styles and seasoned variety acts, who prided themselves on craftsmanship, had little time for "crooners", skiffers and rock 'n' rollers who were - in their view - unable to sing "properly".⁶⁴

In this period, the theatre chains were flourishing and used new American acts and touring high-culture spectacles to supplement their schedules. Traditional variety was not struggling yet, but it was facing up to a group of talent agents who were now looking to exploit new opportunities. The rise of influential talent agents began to subvert the format of variety because a traditional bill of diverse acts was not as popular as some

⁶⁴ Nathaus, 'All dressed up and nowhere to go?', p. 49.

of the individual stars they represented. Radio performers who adapted their shows for the stage, either by offering a live version of their show or by performing a more conventional music hall act, also demanded changes to the variety format or increased time on the stage. Financially, this was a successful period for variety and one that offered audiences an exciting range of acts from around the world. In the twentieth century many of these top acts on the bills were genuine star attractions, and that was probably due to the successful marketing of glamorous Hollywood and music 'legends'.

Variety had begun to introduce a level of flexibility into the booking process and had accommodated more technological challenges (cinema and Hollywood, the recording industry). This was no mean feat, and the Winogradsky family and Val Parnell were canny and able to judge the shifts in audience tastes. The role of these men demonstrated the increasing ability of a small number of individuals to shape popular culture. The faces behind the scenes at the heads of record labels and Hollywood studios were able to shape the cultural landscape and soon many of the same figures come to dominate television. It is tempting to look at variety as failing throughout the fifties, but this is not true, and for those interested in live comedy, this was an exciting time. Double delineates the Golden Age of Variety as ending in 1952.⁶⁵ However, the traditional make-up of the bills began to change, reflecting trends and tastes. American acts rubbed shoulders with radio stars and music hall legends, sometimes on the same bill.

The accessibility of home entertainment formats, recorded music and radio in the first instance, offered consumers an intimate experience for the audience. The individual, both performer and audience member, had become the subject of commercial calculation – music could be targeted to age-groups and emotional states. In the first instance,

⁶⁵ Double, *Britain had Talent*, p. 68

popular music singers could use romantic love songs to connect with their audience. This played on the appeal of heartthrobs but also divorced these singers from the need to be tongue-in-cheek, all-round performers. The nature of the act was serious, the marketing was there to exploit the idea that they were romantically available, and their music would engender a personal emotional response. This is very unlike the music hall songs that were designed to encourage patrons to drink more, such as *Champagne Charlie* and *Glorious Beer*. These were unadorned attempts to incite the audience to revel in a collective experience that could sell more alcohol. The popular music in this period was designed to elicit an emotional response from the individual, music that would be listened to through headphones. Dance bands still existed but the possibility to drink and revel in the variety theatres made passive enjoyment of music more appropriate. Individual singers were well-suited to the auditoria, but they demanded more stage time and shifted the atmosphere towards introspection. The variety theatres had been advertised as 'palaces of pleasure' and the younger audience wanted a wider range of experiences, rather than the non-stop 'fun' of variety.

Musicals were a particular challenge to the variety format; nonetheless, they were heavily exploited by the theatres. They presented similar problems to revues but had some key advantages. They presented glamour, often American songs that could be familiar to audiences via radio, record, or film. The works of Ivor Novello and major American musicals, *Carousel*, *Oklahoma*, and *Guys and Dolls*, could be major draws for the variety theatre. They offered the same joyful atmosphere and audience recognition that was a key component of music hall performance.

The legacy of vaudeville was important in the approaches and understanding of American performers. Live performance experience in a similar environment was common for many stars that came to dominate top billings, charts, and box office takings.

However, this shared heritage was increasingly challenged by different expectations that placed less emphasis on versatility and the ability to interact with a live audience.

There is a crossover between how far the mainstream audience wanted high culture or glamorous American content and questions about the decline of variety. This can be explained by a variety of profit-based motivating factors, material from the US and high culture, which provided both the glamour and aspiration could bring in large audiences. The 'cultural capital' and glamour of these shows brought in audiences but there is also an argument that theatres, audiences and impresarios needed to support a domestic stable of performers rather than rely on importing performers or relying on expensive productions from opera and ballet companies. Variety once again formed a prototype-space where a range of performers from home and abroad, high and low culture, young and old, regional and national acts could be sustained in one space.

In the ten years after the Second World War, a popular cultural hegemony became fully formed. The growing success of television would shape the cultural landscape until the end of the twentieth century. The success of Hollywood was augmented by a recording industry that promoted American stars and musical styles that would promptly be adopted and adapted by young British audiences. The composition of variety bills and the introduction of both highbrow and mainstream entertainment demonstrate an experimental approach to popular culture. Variety theatres were the testing ground for how different acts and formats would fare in a mainstream setting. This approach created dynamic and shifting patterns within theatres that reflected social and cultural changes and marketing patterns outside theatres. Different groups – teenage girls and boys, the aspiring middle classes – were targeted with specific acts and marketing but with an eye on constructing a new vision for mainstream entertainment that would be showcased on

commercial television. The trial and error of putting together light entertainment on screen was conducted on the variety stage. The separation and Balkanisation of different interests for different demographics was balanced with the desire to market and advertise to the largest possible audience. Variety was displaced by new technology and marketing strategies, but not before it had been a testing ground for many of the new innovations and fashions.

5. Youth, Rock and Roll, and Variety

By the mid-1950s, variety had to ensure that it had a clear strategy to accommodate material aimed at a younger market. In studies of youth culture, it is necessary to tackle the fallacy that teenagers did not exist before the 1950s. David Fowler explains that '... the concept of Youth Culture permeated the literary journals of the 1950s and it was a deeply flawed and ahistorical vision of Youth Culture that few people at the time questioned; including Richard Hoggart'¹ Osgerby follows on from this idea by discussing how many commentators discussed a 'youthquake' or a further offering of the idea that before the 1950s 'there was no such thing as youth'. He goes on to elaborate that, 'rather than representing a dramatic break with the past, the youth culture of the fifties and the social responses it elicited are more accurately seen as an extension of phenomena long a feature of British society'². David Fowler explains how this was pioneered between the two world wars amongst the middle classes and university-goers as disposable income became more commonplace in the lifestyle of younger people.³ Osgerby does concede that youth and youth culture became more 'visible' after World War Two and therefore, for many at the time, this seemed 'palpably different'.⁴ The relationship to the variety theatres and its output is put more succinctly by Adrian Horn, who had initially assumed that '...the period was especially glamorous and exciting for young people because of increasing popular cultural influences from America that revolutionised their visual and aural world for teenagers. What I uncovered, however, was a more humdrum way of life

¹ Fowler, *Youth Culture in Modern Britain*, p. 115.

² Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945*, p. 5.

³ Fowler, *Youth Culture in Modern Britain*, p. 115.

⁴ Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945*, p. 17.

in which young people found their 'kicks'...'5. This more nuanced picture is one that can be identified in much of the evidence from variety theatres. The experience of variety suggests a more gradual and less revolutionary or confrontational change that mixed old and new, American and British influences.

Variety was faced with many challenges in the 1950s, as integrating young acts and audiences with new performance styles was a major obstacle to creating a coherent experience within the format. During the 1950s, new genres regularly emerged within popular culture; entrepreneurs and impresarios realised these new phenomena could be profitable but were unsure which ones would flourish. Thus, popular music and culture were driven by capitalist forces that harnessed, and in some times directed, a burgeoning youth movement with new values and a new outlook on society. Record companies profited from 'middle-of-the-road' acts and the targeted marketing cycles of this period highlight the way it harnessed youth culture and exploited different trends in American culture, often black music and dance culture, jazz and the blues being actively repackaged for white audiences. This tendency often diluted the vibrancy of the product and even though the acts can seem stiff, dull, and distant relations to the inspiration, many acts were appropriating the sound of Black America and had been for many years before the war too, from ragtime, jazz, swing, the blues, and rock and roll. These genres provided new sounds, but racism and commercial interests meant that the frontmen and women often did not represent Black America. Even the crooners of the late 1940s and early 1950s were using sounds that came from jazz. This meant that, although this represented something different to audiences of the time, to a modern eye the acts can seem quite middle of the road. It is not until the second half of the decade that record companies

⁵ Horn, *Juke Box Britain*, p. 187

began to promote acts that understood the essence of the product, either black artists or younger white performers who had grown up listening to black performers.

During the mid-1950s there was a wave of American rock performers: white American teen idols Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Eddie Cochran, Gene Vincent, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Bill Haley, along with often overlooked black performers like Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Klaus Nathaus explains that American music had taken a stranglehold on the British music market. 'British publishers lost their key position partly because Americans took a firm hold in the British publishing industry early on.'⁶'American imports ... made up nearly three quarters of the hundred bestselling records in 1956, a much larger share than anywhere else in Western Europe.'⁷ Nathaus explains the growth and changes in the record industry:

The decline of the older industry structure opened a window of opportunity for younger musicians who approached record companies directly and got the chance to make records. For record firms like the two "majors", EMI and Decca, who signed a lot of young acts, the skiffle and beat bands had the advantage of being cheap to produce, not least because the musicians and their equally young managers were relatively undemanding in regard to their payment and had very little knowledge of the worth of a copyright.⁸

The 1950s offered unprecedented opportunities for younger performers playing to young audiences. Teenagers began to seek a new cultural space both literally and figuratively; variety theatres were an awkward fit, as they were wedded to a structure and ambience that was inflexible to change.

⁶ Klaus Nathaus, 'Turning Values into Revenue: The Markets and the Field of Popular Music in the US, the UK and West Germany (1940s to 1980s)', *Historical Social Research* 36.3 (2011), p. 151, <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.36.2011.3.136-163>.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

The statistics from theatres paint a more nuanced picture of popular culture. In the interval between 1955 and 1960 many of the most financially successful artists at variety theatres were traditional popular singers like Joan Regan, Dickie Valentine, and Michael Holliday, pop-jazz acts like Billy Eckstine, country and western yodeller Slim Whitman, tenor David Whitfield, and comic singer Max Bygraves. Other successful performances at the time were the more progressive acts like rock'n'roll precursor Johnnie Ray, continuing his success, Frankie Lymon, and the teenager doo-wop and skiffle star, Lonnie Donegan. However, it appeared that variety was in limbo with traditional popular singers more available and easier to integrate into bills.⁹

Skiffle

'Rock Around the Clock' by Bill Haley and The Comets, in 1954, has been cited as the breakthrough act for American rock and roll music, but Britain was already developing an alternative style that had absorbed similar influences. In 1954, 'Rock around the Clock' was released on 20 May, on 5 July, 'That's Alright Mama' by Elvis Presley, and also in July, Lonnie Donegan's version of 'Rock Island Line'. There was an initial reluctance from many major rock and roll American acts to play in the UK, most noticeably black performers like Little Richard and Chuck Berry. In the absence of touring American acts, the conditions for the development of domestic acts were created. Influenced directly by blues and jazz, this era saw the discovery of American 'folk' music by young white musicians.

Musician Billy Bragg, in his book *Roots, Radicals and Rockers: How Skiffle Changed the World* says that 'Skiffle exists in the dead ground of British pop culture between the

⁹ 'This Day in History: 22 May 1958', *History* website, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/jerry-lee-lewis-drops-a-bombshell-in-london> [accessed 3rd December 2021].

end of the war and the rise of the Beatles'.¹⁰ This period does not fit with the common narrative of popular culture and social trends, and Bragg's characterisation of this as 'dead ground' is intriguing; this is where many of the traits of modern popular culture were prototyped and where a specific 'youth culture' emerged, both organically and commercially. The 'dead ground' was in fact 'fertile ground' to produce a new and unique form of popular culture that synthesised American culture and repurposed it for modern times.

The mid-fifties were a cultural turning point in many respects. As the previous chapter has explained, Americanisation and the commercial processes of record sales had taken a firm hold not only in terms of the innovation of popular music charts, but also on the list of the most lucrative acts for variety theatres. The early part of the 1950s had been characterised by individual singers, who at the time had plenty of sex appeal, but after rock and roll arrived their music seemed a little staid. New musical forms rapidly captured the imagination of younger performers, and rock and roll, skiffle, and doo-wop became fiercely popular. Popular music emerged relatively quickly in the United States but had a long history, and it became a genuine craze in Britain through the DIY aesthetic of skiffle. Integrating these relatively earnest forms into the eccentricity and comedy-driven nature of Variety was a challenge.

The initial response from British music to new styles coming from the United States actually began as an offshoot of jazz. Swing and jazz musicians dominated the ranks of professional performers. Traditional or Trad Jazz was a popular style that crossed over from what would commonly be understood as jazz nowadays into boogie-woogie and rhythm and blues. This interest in American black music, particularly the blues

¹⁰ Billy Bragg, *Roots, Radicals and Rockers: How Skiffle Changed the World*, (Kindle book, London, 2017), location 72.

performers like Leadbelly, helped to create skiffle, along with the crossover folk of Woody Guthrie, who also drew inspiration from roots, blues, and country. Skiffle drew from these influences and used improvised instruments. It involved a group of young performers that were interested in the styles of American blues and country music. Many young performers did not have the ability to invest in the rock and roll instruments of electric guitars and expensive drum kits, and the makeshift set of instruments was fashioned.¹¹ The many traditional songs provided a free library for performers to adapt, get their own song writing credit, and consequently profit.

Variety venues provided large capacities and the prospect of widening exposure. 'For those fortunate enough to be "discovered", and with influential agents, the crumbling Variety theatres, with their generous seating capacity, became particularly accessible venues for live performances. Skiffle and rock and roll began to appear regularly on Variety bills by mid-1956.'¹²

The Variety theatres did not provide ideal accommodation, and the issue of formats made them problematic in seeming relevant for younger audience members but, as Mitchell states, there was not a plethora of choice:

While, superficially, the fading theatres scarcely seemed the most logical venues for teenage music, in truth there were comparatively few obvious alternatives for skiffle and rock 'n'roll performers seeking larger audiences. Coffee bars, youth clubs and church halls certainly offered opportunities for amateur music-making, and some became prime territory for 1950s talent-spotting.¹³

Variety theatres had few qualms about including these new acts into their line-ups, although lots of popular music did present a generational challenge to the family-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Loc 89.

¹² Mitchell, *Adult Responses to Popular Music*, Loc 3510.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Loc. 3493.

oriented and entertainment-for-all-ages manifesto of modern variety. Fans and performers of skiffle and new musical forms were firmly rooted in a distinctly post-war identity. They had not suffered the hardships of war and they did not really care for the old-fashioned nature of variety. Some of these acts had a much stronger sense of what music hall represented but, commercially, incorporating comedians onto bills with rock and roll and skiffle music seemed a little more incongruous than the first wave of popular music acts that had emerged from the United States.

Marketing was now more of a challenge for theatres that had often served up well-rounded shows but not necessarily concerned themselves with the complexities of demographics and ensuring that acts appealed to the correct age groups. The idea of 'cool' was not fully formed yet and many artists in the 1960s would have to perform on strange bills and in smaller British town venues, but there was the beginning of a shift away from novelty acts and more traditional performers.

The key performer of the skiffle movement was Lonnie Donegan. He took the most money and was the most profitable act at the Sheffield Empire theatre in 1957. Donegan specialised in covers of blues and country standards that had been recorded by the likes of Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, and Blind Lemon Jefferson. He was very successful and had three UK number one singles and 2 US top 10s.

In 1957, homegrown British acts rubbed shoulders with American stars. A sense of ownership had been handed to British teenagers and the guardians of the music business and the variety theatres now had an almost organic movement to try to organise and make these acts profitable. The record companies and theatre bosses had more control than some cultural commentators would claim but it was a time when new media had emerged, and the young musicians could take advantage of new opportunities in an

informal and lively setting. This period would lead to the mass proliferation of British bands in the 1960s.

The effect on comedy performance was clear, as sometimes the top of the bill was reserved for the teenage upstarts, or they had to awkwardly share a bill that accommodated both performers. Klaus Nathaus points out that the success of skiffle and domestic rock and roll acts came as a surprise to the music industry, and it was often treated as 'cheap content'.¹⁴ This would fall in line with the contemporary thought that it was a fad. Despite these initial expectations, theatres' records show that Skiffle could delivered solid profits to theatres.

Rock and roll from the United States

Rock and roll had emerged from a combination of different musical origins in the United States. Much of this can be described as roots music that was becoming increasingly modernised, from gospel to Blues (jump, boogie-woogie, and rhythm and blues) combined with country and folk and jazz. It was essentially a fusion of black music, often from the South, and country music, such as bluegrass, and folk traditions that had their origins in British and Irish music exported and adapted in excluded locales like the Appalachians. Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, Hank Williams, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Arthur Crudup, Leadbelly, Robert Johnson, John Lee Hooker, and Sonny Boy Williamson are amongst important blues and country performers to have helped form the new style. There is therefore a great crossover between the origins of performers like Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard.

¹⁴ Nathaus, 'Turning Values into Revenue', p. 152.

Rock and roll was distinctly American phenomenon that was both familiar and exotic. Just as Westerns dominated the cinemas and fuelled the imaginations of young children, rock and roll would occupy a similar position for teenagers in the UK. However, although access to the recorded music was becoming easier, the appearance of this new wave of musicians was not as forthcoming as the traditional popular singers and transitional performers like Johnnie Ray, who represented a younger demographic. The initial transition into rock and roll within variety was more gradual than the effect was in society at large. The dominant act on the stage was Johnnie Ray, a performer who bore many similarities to some of the crooners and teen idols of the previous few years but a man that was known as 'the Godfather of rock and roll'. In the charts, rock and roll had begun to take hold and Johnnie Ray was a stepping-stone artist between the more family-friendly singers of the early 1950s and the more provocative performers like Elvis Presley (who never performed in Britain), Jerry Lee Lewis (toured Britain in 1958), Little Richard (toured Britain in 1962), Chuck Berry (toured Britain in 1964), and Bill Haley and the Comets (toured Britain in 1957). The year 1955 was when this music began its rise and Johnnie Ray was instrumental in its mainstream breakout in the USA and Britain. His music does not bear many of the hallmarks we would associate with this genre but to many in the 1950s there were subtle but significant developments. It took a few years for the major performers from the United States to perform in Britain and it is notorious that Colonel Tom Parker, Elvis' manager, would not allow Presley to tour abroad. This may have been due to Parker's immigration status or something more nefarious, but he did not leave the borders of the US and did not give Presley's fans around the world the chance to see the main star of the rock and roll genre.

There were tours by some of the major American acts in 1957 and 1958 but these were quite limited and were after, or simultaneous with, the breakthrough of the British

acts. In 1957, Bill Haley and the Comets performed mainly at cinemas, Odeons and Gaumonts. Jerry Lee Lewis did a small tour in May 1958 but the three shows he did perform drew poor crowds and the rest of the tour was cancelled after the British press uncovered that Lewis' new wife, Myra, was not only his first cousin (once removed) but was also only 13.¹⁵ In 1957, Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers were successful in touring the country. They were a popular doo-wop group from the United States. Their single 'Why Do Fools Fall in Love?' was a huge hit and remains an effervescent piece of popular music. They were a template for future outfits like the Jackson Five, with their young lineup and even younger singer. The band however broke up and Frankie Lymon was addicted to heroin by the age of 15 and died ten years later. In the year before his death, Buddy Holly toured in March 1958, with Des O'Connor as compère.¹⁶

Another shift took place around 1958, as rock and roll performers started to veer towards different venues, such as cinemas, rather than variety theatres. Both the previously mentioned tours were not held on the Moss Empire or Stoll circuits and, although Buddy Holly had some variety performers (such as Des O'Connor) included in the bills, they were held in larger concert halls, cinemas, and city halls. They were promoted by variety impresarios, Lew and Leslie Grade, who were increasingly expanding their remit. Gene Vincent's 1959 tour and Duane Eddy's 1960 tour were also held in cinemas. Cinemas were well suited for these performances, which only needed a

¹⁵ Ian Wallis, *American Rock n Roll: The UK Tours, All the UK tours by American Rock n Rollers, Bill Haley Feb/ March 1957*, <http://www.americanrocknrolluktours.co.uk/tour/bill-haley-feb-march-1957/> [accessed 5 January 2022];

'This Day in History: 22 May 1958', *History* website, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/jerry-lee-lewis-drops-a-bombshell-in-london> [accessed 3 December 2021].

¹⁶ Dave Bryceson, 'Concerts & Package Tours, 1958 March', *Music & Concerts of the late Fifties & Sixties for the late Fifties, Sixties & Seventies*, <https://www.bradfordtimeline.co.uk/mindex58f.htm> [accessed 5 January 2022].

small stage. Because these new venues were not associated with variety, they were also perceived as less unfashionable.

The ill-fated tour of edgy American rock and roll stars Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent took place in 1960. It was a culturally significant tour at a time when variety theatres were struggling – and it was financially profitable.¹⁷ However, the press was less than kind:

As they toured the country, the reviews were appalling. The Yorkshire Post described the tour as ‘a prolonged assault on the eardrums’. The Leicester Mercury said: “These “singers” seemed to get enjoyment out of leg-kicking, face-pulling and making the youngsters scream. I cannot believe this is true entertainment. Why do these idiotic teenagers behave in such a ridiculous fashion?”¹⁸

Tragedy struck when Eddie Cochran was killed in a car crash midway through the tour, before a break was scheduled and a second leg could commence. Unlike earlier American tours, this bill consisted solely of Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran (and any of Parnes’ acts that were available).¹⁹ Gene Vincent continued the tour on his own without his compatriot, which must have been a very difficult endeavour.²⁰ Vincent initially flew home but Parnes brought him back to complete the dates with the last legged billed as ‘A Tribute to the Late Eddie Cochran’. Gene Vincent did not make it all the way to the dates in July, as can be seen by the bill below.²¹

¹⁷ At the Leeds Empire, Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent made a profit of £169 on 5 March. They made a profit of £399 at the Glasgow Empire on 6 February. Birmingham Hippodrome takings were £4,009, with a profit of £866 on 12 March.

¹⁸ Spencer Leigh, ‘C’mon everybody: How Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent changed British music for ever’, *Independent*, Thursday 14 January 2010, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/c-mon-everybody-how-eddie-cochran-and-gene-vincent-changed-british-music-for-ever-1867305.html>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Just Gene Vincent had a loss of £12 on 11 Jun 1960 at the Glasgow Empire.

²¹ Spencer Leigh, ‘C’mon everybody: How Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent changed British music for ever’, *Independent*, Thursday 14 January 2010, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/c-mon-everybody-how-eddie-cochran-and-gene-vincent-changed-british-music-for-ever-1867305.html>.

Larry Parnes presents 'A Tribute to the Late Eddie Cochran'

Opening Night: 27 June 1960 Performance: 2 July 1960

1. Overture – Hippodrome Music Men
 2. Nero and His Gladiators – the New Sound From Italy
 3. Georgie Fame – Singing Pianist
 4. Keith Kelly – Hit Recorder of 'Tease Me'
 5. Lance Fortune – Pye's 'Be Mine' Recording Star
 6. Joe Brown – Dynamic Star of TV and Records
 - Intermission – Hippodrome Music Men
 7. Billy Raymond – Your Host and Compère
 8. Julian – TV Entertainer
 9. Davy Jones – Entertainer from USA
 10. Peter Wynne – The Golden Voice of the 1960s
 11. Billy Fury – The Rock 'n' Roll Idol of Millions
- Performance Times: Shows at 6:25pm and 8:30pm

Generally, in the 1950s the management of American acts wanted to focus on the USA and avoid the long trek over to the UK, so despite the importance and origins of rock and roll, for the British public the main interactions with new forms of music did not come directly from the US before the 1960s. This led to some important cultural shifts and allowed variety theatres more access to these new British performers, as many of the American acts had begun to use cinemas.

Lonnie Donegan performed at the Liverpool Empire on 11 October 1958 with takings of £3,125 and a profit of £501. He performed at the Glasgow Empire with overall takings of £2,589 and a profit of £221; and at Sheffield Empire, taking in £1,680 and a profit of £50 (however not taking as much as Vic Damone or Max Bygraves). Records show that Lonnie Donegan made healthy profits in 1959 (for example a profit of £452 on 7 November) particularly when contrasted with the overwhelming losses of other weeks.

Variety theatres also became venues for 'skiffle contests' and 'record parties'. The Vipers and National Skiffle Contest held on 21 September 1957 made a profit of £29.

However, the format was not always a guaranteed success – for example, the Chas McDevitt group made a loss of £129 on 26 October at the Nottingham Empire.²²



Illustration 5.1: Bill Poster, 24 September 1956, Poster Collection – Glasgow Empire 1956, British Music Hall Society Archive.

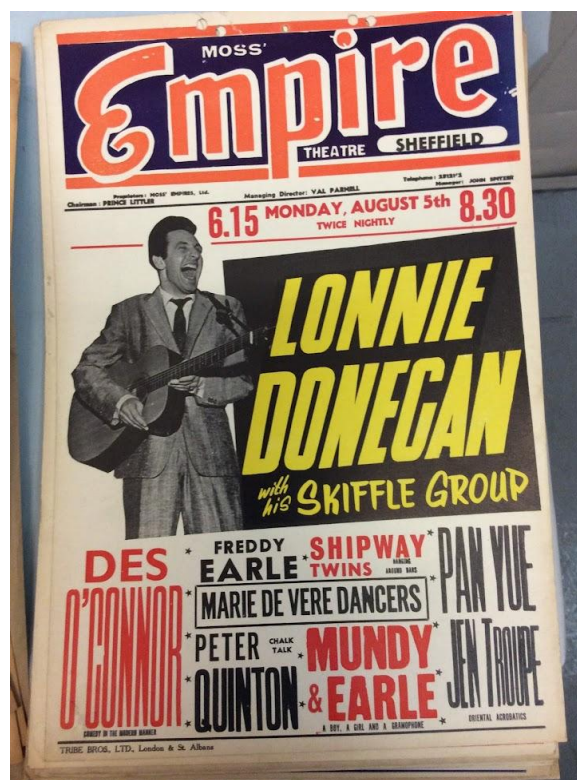


Illustration 5.2: Bill Poster, 5 August 1957, Poster Collection – Sheffield Empire 1957, British Music Hall Society Archive.

Gillian Mitchell argues that skiffle and rock and roll 'became central to the fading variety theatres, even though they were unable to reverse the wholesale decline.'²³ This is an acceptable argument in the post-1955 era but as she rightly points out the importance of integrating these acts was increased after the closure of most of the theatres and the abandonment of the variety format.²⁴

²² Mitchell, *Adult Responses to Popular Music*, Loc 3566.

²³ *Ibid.*, Loc 3527.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Pop rock and teen idols

On the back of the more makeshift and organic popularity of skiffle came a more hard-nosed approach. Impresarios and record executives realised that the success of Elvis Presley created the opportunity for good-looking and carefully managed rock 'n' rollers to appeal to teenage girls. Sex appeal had been an important draw for some older pop artists, but this new approach was much more specifically targeted at a female teenage audience that had an interest in rock and roll but appreciated the aesthetic and subversive nature of the music, rather than its provenance. The skiffles had a great appreciation of the history of the blues but lacked the finesse and polish of American performers. Socially and culturally, these rock and roll performers would have been more visible and seemed more significant to the general public, with the crowds and hysteria that surrounded their appearances. In reality, many of these performers followed a more traditional route, being driven by the managerial prowess of Larry Parnes. The performers had a rock and roll sound and aesthetic but were in fact manufactured pop



Illustration 5.3: Bill Poster, 19 November 1956, Poster Collection- Sheffield Empire 1956, British Music Hall Society Archive.

acts, like some of the Americans mentioned above. Tommy Steele, Billy Fury, Marty Wilde, Vince Eager, and Joe Brown had their names changed by the manager and were marketed for the sex appeal just like Elvis had been.

Parnes' performers were groomed as teen idols, rock music being a convenient way to eventually establish all-around entertainers who could also work in straight pop music, variety shows, and film.²⁵

The musicians in Parnes' stable employed a pop style with the vocal intonation

of rock. Many of the songs for these artists were written by Lionel Bart, who would later go on to write the musical *Oliver!* Tommy Steele was very successful in 1957 and his rise to stardom as Britain's first rock and roll star and teen idol meant that he appeared successfully at the major theatres around the country in 1957.²⁶

Cliff Richard was arguably the most enduring of the acts that emerged from this period. His boyish good looks made him a domestic music and film star and he was famous for achieving number one records in five consecutive decades and 67 top ten hits. Richard's backing band The Shadows and the guitarist Hank Marvin were highly accomplished and provided an authentic sound. Despite this, Richard himself was always

²⁵ Richie Unterberger, 'Larry Parnes Biography', *AllMusic.com*, <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/larry-parnes-mn0001009359> [accessed 6 January 2022].

²⁶ V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945 – 1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10.

a teen idol with a pop sensibility and as he aged, he became more than comfortable with light entertainment. In the 1950s and 1960s he was a huge draw for teenage audiences.

The *Coventry Evening Telegraph* reported on the problems caused at the Coventry Theatre by the appearance of Cliff Richard at the venue. They feared riots and struggled to manage the crowds after performances, in a foreshadowing of similar scenes that would emerge in the 1960s.²⁷ This hysteria was described even more vividly in the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus* in March 1959, on a bill that also included Chas McDevitt:

Like a thousand tortured canaries screaming for freedom from the cage the yells went up at St George's Hall last night. But this, they told me, wasn't agony: it was ecstasy. Or was it? For me and perhaps for two or three more in this audience aged mainly between 14 and 18 it was agonising - and perplexing and a little frightening.²⁸

Roy Hudd explains that the 'non-stop screams' unbalanced the 'normal reactions' of a variety crowd. He says that when he performed on the same bill with Cliff Richard, he and his partner were given a forgiving reception because of their relative youth.²⁹ Hudd's explanation that youth was a factor is key. Variety needed to have more faces on stage that matched a younger audience and not to view youth as negative or opposed to their core ethos. This attitude seemed suicidal. Either integration or separation was necessary and a more dynamic view from the owners of theatres was needed to ensure commercial success.

²⁷ 'Variety Back at Coventry Theatre', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, Tuesday 31 March 1959, p. 4, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000769/19590331/049/0004?browse=true> [accessed 6 January 2022].

²⁸ Peter Holdsworth, 'Yells of Ecstasy Sounded Like Tortured Canaries', *Telegraph & Argus*, March 1959, consulted in Dave Bryceson, 'Concerts & Package Tours, 1959 March to April', *Music & Concerts of the late Fifties & Sixties for the late Fifties, Sixties & Seventies*, <https://www.bradfordtimeline.co.uk/mindex59f.htm> [accessed 6 January 2022].

²⁹ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 86.

Gillian Mitchell describes how rival gangs fought at a Cliff Richard and Des O'Connor show, and food was thrown at supporting performers: 'Far from saving the theatres, therefore, the young popular performers were increasingly seen to be destroying all that they had traditionally championed.'³⁰ This is a bold claim: the idea that rock 'n' roll and younger performers would save variety is contradicted by the wide variety of different shows that were being included on the bills at variety theatres.

There was mixed success for the pop acts, as the variety circuit was struggling to attract customers, and many agents began to move major acts to the cinemas. This is shown by Marty Wilde's financial performance at the Newcastle Empire on 12 July 1958, a total taking of £778 and a loss of £403. At the same venue, Adam Faith took £1,988 with a profit of £148 on 4 June 1960.

Mitchell explains how the pop and rock and roll performers like Cliff Richard took on the sensibilities of the variety entertainer. Philip Hindin complained of the problems caused by booking Cliff Richard at the Metropolitan in Edgware and in Walthamstow on the advice of his 12-year-old niece. He disliked the fact that Richard's act was inaudible over the 'screaming kids'.³¹

³⁰ Gillian Mitchell, *Adult Responses to Popular Music*, Loc 3651.

³¹ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 218.

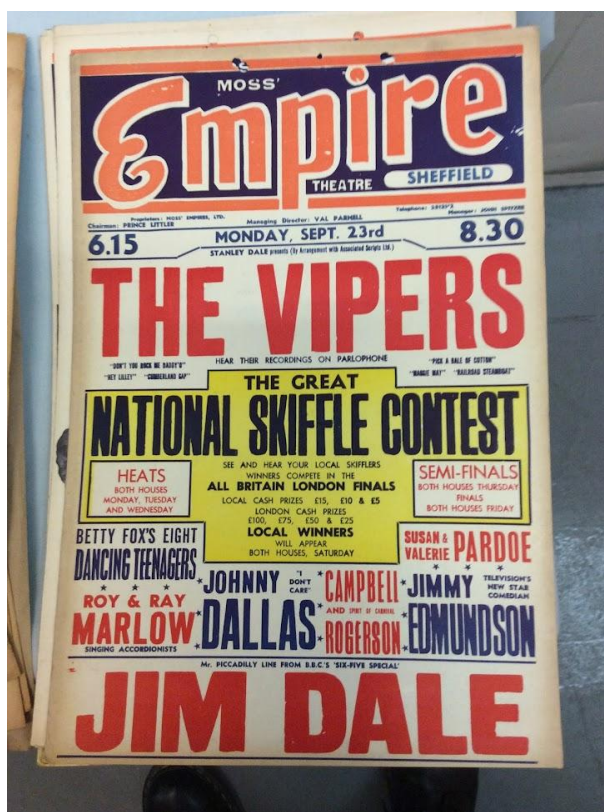


Illustration 5.4: Bill Poster, 23 September 1957, Poster Collection- Sheffield Empire 1957, British Music Hall Society Archive.

Cliff Richard was consistently successful during the late 1950s and turned good profits, with big takings in Leeds, Finsbury Park, and Glasgow during 1959.³² He overshadowed the takings of many of Larry Parnes' acts (such as Marty Wilde, Adam Faith) but they still proved popular in some theatres. Including pop acts into variety performances could not throw a lifeline to all struggling theatres. Cliff Richard later noted his regret that the fact he could not commit to a prolonged season at the Finsbury Park Empire likely

contributed to its closure.³³

Even in the case of the variety programmes that did continue into the 1960s (although as an increasingly rare appearance, such as at the Sunderland Empire, at the Palladium, or in broadcasting), pop music performers were featured prominently on the billings. Mitchell notes how "Their presence in theatres gradually seemed less jarring as popular music styles diversified further, and as concerns about the triviality and moral dubiety of pop gradually grew less pronounced."³⁴

³² Cliff Richard and his Drifters took £2,714 and made a profit of £386 at the FP Empire on 23 May, 1959. However, this paled in comparison with Liberace's takings of £5,638 and profit of £1,613. Cliff Richard took £3,399 and made a profit of £628 at the Leeds Empire on 17 October 1959; he took £5,555 and made a profit of £1,432 at the Glasgow Empire on 9 April.

³³ Mitchell, *Adult Responses to Popular Music*, Loc 3982.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Loc 4002.

Jim Dale is a good example of this transition. He started his career in 1952 at the age of 17 in the music halls and touring with Carroll Levis Discoveries.³⁵ He would go on to become a pop star under the tutelage of George Martin before starring in the *Carry On* films and eventually working in the West End and Broadway, writing an Oscar-nominated song and working in serious theatre before finding fame as a narrator of the Harry Potter books in the US in later life. This potted biography is not extraneous information but indicative of the kind of performer that might have stayed much longer in the variety theatres if they had continued to provide work. Dale had the talent and would not necessarily have been confined to the variety circuit, but his options were narrowed by the change in the circuit. Popular music offered a better route into stardom by the late 1950s, although as Gillian Mitchell illustrates many of Parnes' stable of acts needed to diversify to survive once they reached the end of their shelf-life. Dale found that the *Carry On* films could express his comic talents and his literacy in the bawdy language of music hall made this an easy transition. It is also good evidence of where the saucy humour of Miller and others would find its home in the 1960s and beyond. Until the 1970s and the advent of the working men's clubs and then the alternative comedy scene of the 1980s, those with comic talent had fewer opportunities and had to be cannier or more media-savvy to make a living. Not all would be as lucky as Dale.

The *Birmingham Daily Post* explains the popularity of Jim Dale, who was performing as part of a skiffle night at the Hippodrome:

Holding the show together is singer Jim Dale, whose current record hit is 'Be My Girl'. He is in the accepted pattern of popular singers of the day, drawing shrill screams from his young admirers, but he sings easily, grins as if realising that it is

³⁵ Michael Billington, 'Just Jim Dale review – Carry On star had me weeping with laughter', *The Guardian Online*, 1 June 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/01/just-jim-dale-review-vaudeville-london> [accessed on 6 January 2022].

all a good joke and possesses a personality that gives him an inestimable advantage over most of his rivals.³⁶

Pity the poor guitar, one felt, at the Birmingham Hippodrome last night when professional and amateur skiffers and one of the latest and better of the popular singers strummed with inexhaustible vigour at this much-abused instrument. The Vipers Skiffle Group, quite remarkably tuneful and the best advertisement that this latest form of melody making has, play their instruments with some feeling. Their casual confidence was also displayed by some of the local skittle groups who took part in the opening round of the local section of a national contest, the difference being, unfortunately, that of about a dozen of these players at the first house, only one seemed to have any knowledge of his instrument.³⁷

The author goes on to complain about the condition of the 'badly worn' washboard of one of the contestants 'whose dented and torn surface revealed the beating it had taken'.³⁸

Impact on Variety

There were clear challenges for variety presented by the emergence of new styles and audience demands. However, initially, as Nathaus points out, the success of skiffle and domestic rock and roll acts came as a surprise to the music industry, and it was often treated as 'cheap content'.³⁹ This would fall in line with the contemporary thought that it was a fad. Variety wanted to capitalise on the success and potentially pull in audiences at a time that it was struggling but this led to a dilemma – how far were they willing to go to accommodate skiffle, rock and roll, and teenage audiences? The clear target for many in management and promotion would have been the variety format and the dated novelty acts that seemed so incongruous with artists that aimed for sex appeal and edgy personas.

³⁶ 'A Variety of Skiffle at the Hippodrome', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 10 December 1957, p. 19, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002134/19571210/518/0019> [accessed 6 Jan 2022].

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Nathaus, *Turning Values into Revenue*, p. 152.

The effect on comedy performance was clear – sometimes the top of the bill was reserved for the teenage upstarts, or they had to awkwardly share a bill that accommodated both performers. The headline acts for the final years of variety look much more like a modern theatre’s offerings. The modern city did not need to have a clear distinction between the straight theatre and the variety theatre, although the proliferation of music venues somewhat undermines this argument. A theatre that showed plays and musicals now found itself in a similar position to a variety theatre and needed to diversify and show more musical and comedy acts to ensure economic survival.

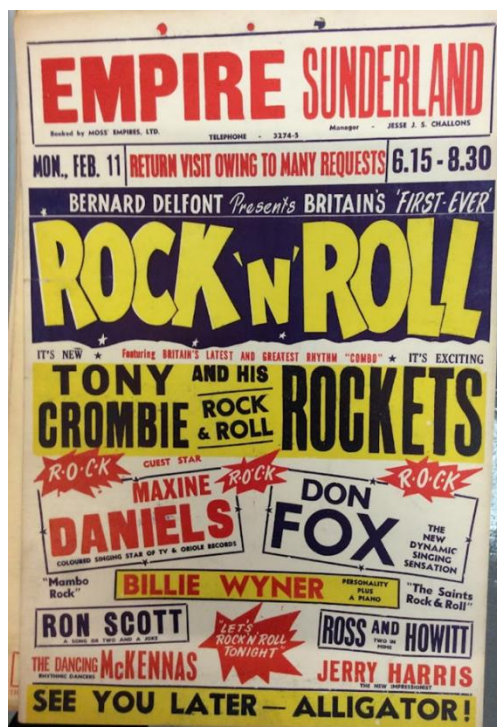


Illustration 5.5: Bill Poster, 11 February 1957, Poster Collection – Sunderland Empire 1957, British Music Hall Society Archive

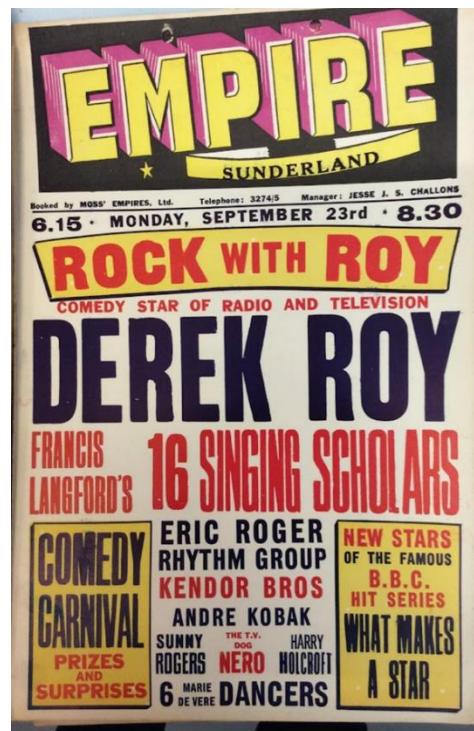
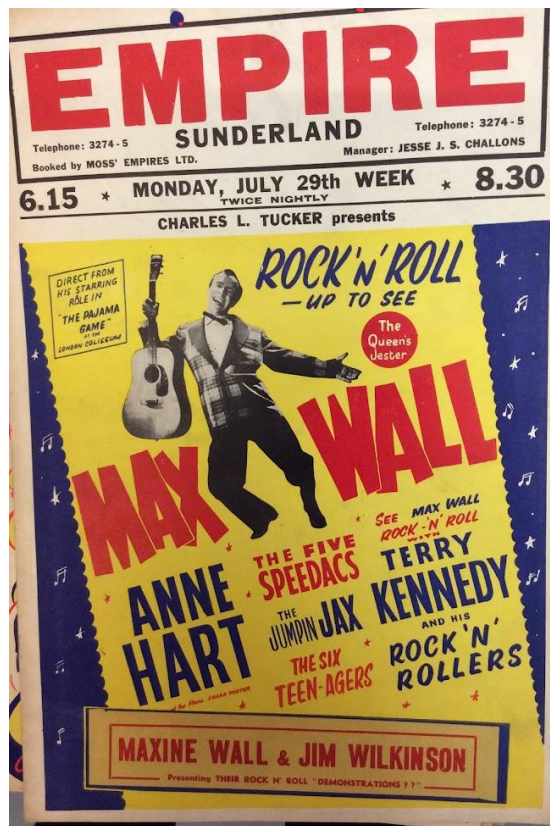


Illustration 5.6: Bill Poster, 23 September 1957, Poster Collection– Sunderland Empire 1957, British Music Hall Society Archive

The younger performers on the circuit were able to turn strong profits for the theatres at the end of the 1950s. This meant that more and more of these performers were incorporated into the regular variety circuit, often without large amounts of thought

put into how they would integrate with other acts. Roger Wilmut explains that variety was becoming increasingly reliant on popular music.⁴⁰



‘Illustration 5.7: Bill Poster, 29 July 1957, Poster Collection - Sunderland Empire 1957, British Music Hall Society Archive

A successful week with rock stars could be followed by a normal week that did not attract the younger fans and the older audience discouraged by the ‘noise and hysteria’ of the rock performers.⁴¹ James Towler explained his view of the ‘problem’ in the *The Stage* in February 1959.

Variety Halls have catered for minority sections of the community. The teenage rock gimmicks attracted full houses -for a while- but they also frightened the regular adult audiences away and left the empty vacuum that now needs to be

filled. ... Any manager will tell you that the first six rows of the stalls are of far more value than a gallery full of screaming teenagers’⁴²

Another problem with booking pop singers to top the bill was that it upset the traditional hierarchy built into the structure of a variety show. Acts that traditionally occupied the star spot had been usurped.⁴³ For example, an article in *The Stage*

⁴⁰ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 216.

⁴¹ Mitchell, *Adult Responses to Popular Music*, Loc 3663.

⁴² James Towler, 'Variety - Where do we go from here?', *The Stage*, 26 February 1959, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001180/19590226/021/0002> [accessed 23 January 2022].

⁴³ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 85.

complained that 'the comedian is, or he should be, the most important person in light entertainment' but his or her place was being taken by 'the current rock and roll hero or recording artists on the bill'. Naturally enough this led to tensions between the acts.⁴⁴

Youth audiences had been integrated into variety theatre bills with varying degrees of success. The example of Max Wall being promoted as part of a rock and roll show is the most obvious and shows the desperation in some quarters. The question that looms over the late 1950s (and that must be addressed separately from the wider developments of television and strip shows), is how much did the growth of Americanisation and youth acts undermine the variety theatres? It is possible to argue that the frivolity of variety was incompatible with the seriousness of the new musical forms. Popular music ceased to be fun or a joke, to be merely danced along with, and became something that involved screaming at the top of one's lungs. Variety then had little choice but to spin off its relative components into different shows. Comedy could no longer co-exist as easily with the newly emerging forms of light entertainment. The marketing of Max Wall as a rock and roller is addressed by Gillian Mitchell; Wall himself explains that this stunt was unsuccessful and his tour generally lost money. It is another example where pre-war stars were shoehorned into awkward roles to fit the current fashion. We can only speculate whether variety bosses did not understand these changes in audience attitude, or were cynically biding their time, hoping for the pop and rock fads to disappear and for a return to the old tried and tested format.

Max Wall seemed to agree. Despite the efforts to present him, albeit semi-comically, as an artiste for the rock and roll age, he believed that his tour with Terry Kennedy ran at a loss because, while Kennedy was 'a nice boy', '[t]he elders in the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

audience ... did not like [his music], and as most of my fans ... were people above the thirties, attendances were not good.’⁴⁵ As many theatres persisted with mixing these forms, the gulf became bigger.

The relationship with the rock upstarts amongst comedians led to impersonations performed by Bruce Forsyth, Bob Monkhouse, and Dickie Valentine.⁴⁶ Max Wall would dress up and impersonate Bill Haley.⁴⁷

There were two more attempts from bills at the Sunderland Empire shown above where the words ‘Rock’ or ‘Rock and roll’ are required to do some rather heavy lifting. Just as television and radio were used to promote shows and any performer that had appeared on either medium could be ‘Television / radio’s own ...’, rock and roll was exploited. Although the desperation apparent on these posters – just like with Max Wall – goes even deeper: there were no obvious acts that would fit this description, jazz bandleaders (Tony Crombie) and comedians (Derek Roy) have been awkwardly rebranded, and the description plastered onto a straightforward variety bill. In the context of the time, variety was promoting a wide range of material that it had not tried in the past and promotion had become broad and often unsuccessful in reaching target demographics.

Overall, just as traditional popular singers and American stars began to demand more time on stage and higher fees, Gillian Mitchell explains they ‘disadvantaged and marginalized’ comics and other acts.⁴⁸ There is a claim that there was a generational split; older audiences did not want to see ‘pop stars’ and the younger audiences were

⁴⁵ Mitchell, *Adult Responses to Popular Music*, Loc 3583-3599.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Loc 3859.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Loc 3909: “Indeed, older performers tend to find that dressing up as young pop stars could almost guarantee laughter for its sheer absurdity - this may have inspired Max Wall to don Bill Haley's outfit in 1957.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Loc 3583.

not interested in variety or the 'family atmosphere' of variety.⁴⁹ From a macroeconomic level, these barriers had been artificially created in the 1950s and in a relatively short period from roughly 1952 onwards. These demographics had been heavily marketed and there is another key question regarding the nature of popular culture, namely was it a true expression of rebellion and a new cultural outlook that created a cultural barrier between young and old? Or rather, had the aggressive marketing and fomentation of generational conflict been hijacked by record executives that realised the potential of compartmentalising and harnessing 'teenage rebellion'?

The unique selling point of variety had been undermined by the popular culture phenomena of the mid-1950s. The format and demographics that had been tweaked to fit a family atmosphere that had been cultivated to stave off the problems of the early twentieth century now worked against the variety theatres. It could be argued that the more intimate, grimmer, and risqué halls of the nineteenth century suited a rock and roll aesthetic and provided a more suitable atmosphere for teenagers than the Matcham theatres with chandeliers and gilded ceilings.

Popular music triumphed culturally but lost many of the key spaces in which it could be performed. The problems of finding commercially viable properties for entertainment without government subsidy continues.

Comedy, live orchestras, and novelty acts were the forms of entertainment that suffered in the rise of popularity of acts that did not conform to the variety format. The rise in the makeshift skiffle bands and the electrification of rock music meant that the orchestra pit became underused or filled in. Novelty acts began to look dated and did not

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Loc 3583.

fit into the more modern offerings and became sidelined as oddities rather than an integral part of the bill.

Comedians who could not transition to television or did not have a particularly modern style or outlook could become marginalised, although many did survive, and the working men's clubs provided them with work. These comedians had had their primetime spot taken away and, along with the working-class music hall in general, no longer occupied such a central spot in British culture. Later, these acts came to represent a bitter and somewhat controversial brand of humour. The decline of music hall was replaced with rock music as a working-class pursuit; however, this was not a fully successful transition. The middle and upper classes became more interested in rock and roll music and it became intellectualised to an extent that it excluded many. This is mirrored by a decline of the traditional industries that maintained the livelihoods of the working classes, such as coal mining, textiles, and steel. The music hall was part of this cultural transition, and the lack of a suitable replacement meant that many felt isolated in modern Britain.

Variety bosses were willing to go where the money was and the 'phenomenon of the teenager' represented an 'affluent' new group that could help stave off some of the economic and creative staleness in the theatres.⁵⁰ Mitchell points out that although initially they seemed like unlikely bedfellows, this partnership often had positive outcomes: 'Nevertheless, and quite remarkably, considering the animosity with which the popular music styles were initially received by some theatrical representatives, the two cultural worlds proceeded to develop a fruitful, interesting and mutually influential relationship.'⁵¹

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, Loc 3271.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Loc 3271.

There was a significant overlap and friendship between the older variety performers and the younger pop, rock, and skiffle performers. Many of the older performers may not have appreciated the style of their acts but unlike the major American performers they recognised the graft and talent of younger British performers.

Mitchell highlights many examples of cooperation between older performers and younger pop artists. She particularly highlights the relationship between Des O'Connor and Lonnie Donegan, and the role of O'Connor 'in assisting Donegan in using humour in his act.'⁵²

The definition of the variety theatres as spaces was under review. What was their purpose, what was their clientele, and what was the pecking order? In the end, a lot of compromise between the younger acts and the established acts took place and it certainly was not an incompatibility or refusal to work alongside each other that really spelled trouble for the theatres or for the comedians that worked them. Larger economic factors and more powerful businesses and individuals would decide how these spaces would be used and defined. Variety had proved to be versatile, and all the performers were willing to be flexible to ensure that they could make a living.

The performers of skiffle, pop, and rock and roll were certainly influenced by fraternising in the theatres and some of the bravado and faux American posing had softened to reveal talents in comedy, dance, and songs aimed at the family audience.

It was natural for performers to develop some of the skills required to succeed in variety and many of these skills were necessary for a similar mainstream success for television and light entertainment. This is how Tommy Steele and Adam Faith went from teen idol, rebel status to musicals and all-round entertainment and shed their serious

⁵² *Ibid.*, Loc 3722.

personas. Most notably Lonnie Donegan, instrumental in the development of popular music for the next 50 years, began performing songs like 'My Old Man's a Dustman' and, even more telling, 'The Market Song', recorded with music hall royalty, Max Miller.⁵³ These recordings are odd in the similarities of the performers, but Donegan represents the origins of the so-called 'British Invasion' that would go on to revolutionise pop music on both sides of the Atlantic. He is a bridgehead between the era of music hall and modern rock music.

This became an intrinsic part of Donegan's stage persona, and the practice of adding humorous asides to his songs, in which O'Connor had encouraged him, became a stylistic trademark. He found it difficult to accept that former fans... had been unable to appreciate this at the time, and wondered why they had scorned so much his later, more humorous repertoire.⁵⁴

Mitchell notes that pop and rock and roll did not reverse the decline of the variety industry. Like the other innovations from cine-variety onwards, they often merely provided short-term respite rather than long-term success.

Gillian Mitchell explains that newcomers were frequently helped by veterans of the theatres, although this did not stop them 'exploiting the comic potential of such a culture clash'.⁵⁵ She adds that performers such as Tommy Steele and Lonnie Donegan drew inspiration and 'remodelled' themselves as all-round entertainers in line with the training that they received in variety.⁵⁶ Mitchell argues that many of the rock and roll performers of this period settled comfortably into a variety or light entertainment field and broadened their appeal with 'comedy, dance routines, and songs aimed to appeal to

⁵³ Lonnie Donegan and Max Miller – 'The Market Song', accessed on Spotify <https://open.spotify.com/track/4RiUXqotbx1rZhL7k0vR69>. (Pye, 1962).

⁵⁴ Mitchell, *Adult Responses to Popular Music*, Loc 4334.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Loc 3998.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, Loc 4319

... “the family audience”, possibly under pressure from their management.⁵⁷ Friendships developed too: Joe Brown became ‘very friendly’ with Bud Flanagan of the Crazy Gang and Tommy Steele formed strong relationships, too.⁵⁸

Mitchell notes how performers like Richard, Steele, and Donegan realised that a

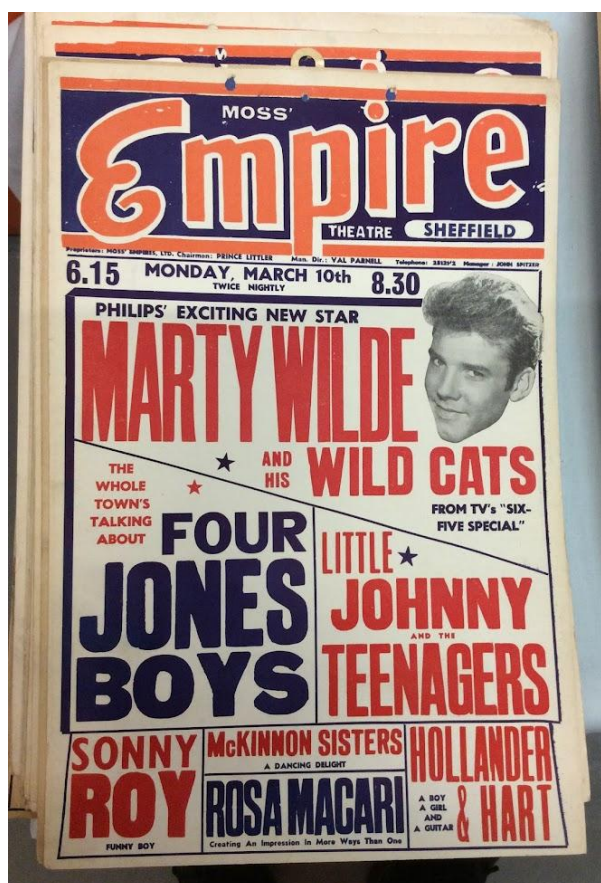


Illustration 5.8: Bill Poster, 10 March 1958, Poster Collection – Sheffield Empire 1958, British Music Hall Society Archive.

successful way to ingratiate themselves with a variety audience was to ‘get laughs’, as Des O’Connor termed it. An increased level of ‘performance skills and professionalism’ was also a way to integrate into the theatres.⁵⁹ Mitchell outlines how some rock and roll performers sought to move away from the subversive image of their genre and embrace more mainstream success as they began to be usurped by younger acts.

Mitchell compares the situation of younger (but not the youngest) performers like Marty Wilde with that

of Bruce Forsyth. They needed to maintain a freshness with their audiences and ensure their economic survival.⁶⁰ They need to adapt and for the rock and rollers, particularly

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Loc. 4158.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Loc 3842.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Loc 3998.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Loc 4219.

those who had emerged from the more managed / manufactured / Larry Parnes routes, transitioning from music to 'entertainer' was a sensible route.⁶¹ They expressed a willingness to break away from the initial 'musical identity' but Mitchell speculates that this was introduced to them by managers and agents.⁶² The challenge for many of the 'teen idol' generation was that they did not want their careers to be short-lived and their popularity limited by their youth and the faddy appeal of the genre. At the time, rock and roll did not seem like a steady profession, particularly for the popular performers that were in the stable of Larry Parnes and dependent on being marketed to teenage girls. As Bragg notes, 'Donegan himself apparently saw no great divide between his early career and wider variety interests -pantomime cabaret and Theatre would be pursued in the early 1960s, perceiving them as complementary facets of his musical identity'.⁶³

Even Elvis Presley, in line with many 1950s performers, would move towards mainstream entertainment. This was often at the behest of management that were seeking to monetise their stars. Major stars like Elvis and before him Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby sought to move their careers towards serious filmmaking, but the lucrative mainstream often dragged them back in to projects that could be seen as more family-friendly or 'schmaltzy'. By the 1960s, many acts like The Beatles fought similar pressures to pursue the 'middle of the road' market and many performers were marketed to the centre – Tom Jones, The Monkees et al. – before music split into true pop, rock, and alternative categories. Lonnie Donegan embarked on a significant tour of variety theatres in 1956; it was in the traditional variety format.

Beginning in Nottingham on 10 September 1956, the Lonnie Donegan Skiffle Group played two shows a night, six nights a week across the UK, with week-long stands in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Birmingham, Sheffield, Newcastle,

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Loc 4219.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Loc 4219.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Loc 4334.

Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Sunderland, Hanley and Bradford. The bill consisted of a troupe of dancing girls, a ventriloquist, a trio of comedy acrobatic cyclists, two comedians, a calypso pianist and Mundy & Earle, whose act was simply described as 'A Boy, a Girl and a Gramophone'.⁶⁴

The importance of the tours by Lonnie Donegan are highlighted by the attendance of many future Beatles at his show at the Liverpool Empire in November 1956. George Harrison borrowed money from his parents so that he could attend every night and Paul McCartney attended a show and both hounded Donegan for autographs.⁶⁵ John Lennon would form his own skiffle group later in 1956. Billy Bragg explains the significance of these early skiffle tours:

Up until this point, there had been no rock 'n' roll tours ... Bill Haley was still four months away from his UK debut. Lonnie was the first to take the message to the provinces, to let loose all the teenage energy that had been building since they tore down the bunting after VE day.⁶⁶

Variety was changing and the role of the comic mirrored this. Comics could not rely on the type of employment offered by variety theatres and either needed to diversify or specify. The stand-up comic in the true sense of the word, 'front-cloth' comics of the variety era, had performed a different role and the late 1950s was an era where all eyes began to turn to television and for comedians this meant transitioning towards a screen-friendly approach. The role of compère was still needed but it was to fall to a more wholesome family entertainer than the Max Miller type – Bruce Forsyth and Des O' Connor, along with the peerless Morecambe and Wise, filled these roles expertly. There was still work for old-fashioned comedians, but it required the versatility of someone like Max Wall and a new generation was not looking to solely make a living from variety.

⁶⁴ Bragg, *Roots, Radicals and Rockers*, Loc 3453.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Loc 3464-3469.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Loc 3458.

Conclusions

Increasingly, towards the end of this era, the younger performers began to fit a mould. They were often more photo- or telegenic: Bob Monkhouse, Jim Dale, and Des O'Connor had a more clean-cut and Americanised image. They were intended to appeal to teenagers and families alike and had the ability to connect with both. This presented a problem for some of the performers that did not fit this description and that did not possess this mass appeal. Some of these comics had their natural homes taken away and ended working in working men's clubs in a slightly dreary and bitter atmosphere. They would resurface on *Opportunity Knocks* and *The Comedians*.

Variety was inevitably an ephemeral form. The lack of recordings of performances and the recording of the content of acts is similar to how modern stand-up comedy exists, sometimes recorded, but in a live setting as a constantly evolving and unpredictable form.

However, popular music did represent a deviation for many in variety. Mitchell calls it 'mass-produced, immature, focused on money at the expense of art, and the apparently vacuous performance devoid of individuality or natural ability.'⁶⁷ This view is contradictory as variety could be described as many of the things above, hence the reason that it is not remembered today. The familiarity of the music hall songs has faded, the stagecraft discounted and seen as fundamentally ephemera; the solid state of musical recordings has ensured they retain much more cultural capital over the long term. Bruce Forsyth reinforces this view: '[M]ost of the musicians were not impressed [by the groups]. They always felt that they were getting paid far more for knowing nothing.'⁶⁸

On a wider level, the emergence of newer forms of youth culture were simply another wave that variety had to integrate and adapt into its format. The money men of

⁶⁷ Mitchell, *Adult Responses to Popular Music*, Loc 3634.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Loc 3753.

showbusiness had successfully added the more mainstream acts from America and even the popular singers. Variety seemed to have made a surface attempt at modernisation, it had engaged with the popular acts but had avoided those performers that had been trained in the Entertainments National Service Association and other service entertainment groups and struggled truly to connect with performers that represented disdain for the past. The war years had boosted the power of the radio performer and created a new raft of performers that had been through military experiences and found they had a knack for making people laugh. These young men may not have found their way into the variety theatres and still struggled to get work after the war, until many found fame on the radio. Therefore, variety was still closer in its sensibilities to the 1930s than it was to the 1960s. A more progressive attitude towards the performers who emerged from the services would have paved the way for a smoother transition into the years after 1955 when the landscape of popular culture seemed to shift so rapidly. The war and new popular culture developments meant that there was an increasing generational gap between those that had worked in the pre-war theatres and those that were former service personnel or younger musical performers.

The tension between the seriousness of the musical performer and the light-hearted nature of the music hall is clear. There was disquiet that many of the younger performers did not respect the traditions or did not hold the requisite skills needed in variety. This contradicts the idea of the rowdy, carnivalesque music hall but there is the alternative viewpoint that this was always a tightly controlled and clearly organised space that imitated danger.

The variety theatre had already developed into a more national commercial network, and this was long-established. The skiffle acts initially undermined this and brought it back to a more local and unpolished folk-art aesthetic, more akin to the smaller

music hall acts. This was then replaced by a much larger network that was dominated by larger record companies, an extension of American stars and the commercial appeal of telegenic teen idols.

In general, the pop rock and American rock and roll performers were successful at making a profit in a challenging time for the theatres. Other performers like Liberace, Bobby Darin, and Vic Damone were making more money but they were consistent in providing some of the few profitable weeks outside of pantomime season for the major theatres around the country.

Teenagers were not themselves a huge problem for the variety industry, although their attitudes and actions sometimes baffled stalwarts of the circuit. The problem was integration and establishing a new identity and accepting a possible repurposing of the major theatres. Closure of the smaller theatres had been ongoing for the previous 50 years and consolidation and adaptation had been a key component of the business plan during that time.

The discussion of collaboration and co-operation between older variety performers and younger rock and roll and skiffle acts seems to indicate that there could be a successful partnership between the two. Events outside the theatres were moving on all the time, television was growing, and variety bigwigs moved their interest to this end. Light entertainment on television was a natural successor to the variety environment and figures like Parnell, the Grades, and Prince Littler were in a good position to marry together popular music and some of the more modern elements of variety entertainment.

The Beatles were great fans of the music hall and started their careers performing in variety theatres and with an eye on teenage appeal. Their act went through various stages but in the end, they wanted to be taken seriously. Music in the 1950s and 1960s

became a battleground between the popular performer who often traded on sex appeal and the large-scale audiences they might attract, and serious musical and artistic endeavour. Ken Dodd and Max Bygraves still sold millions of records – Dodd had the third-biggest selling single of the 1960s – but eventually, music and comedy were becoming more distinct.

The cultural transition to rock and roll and skiffle had happened incrementally, but it is not accurate to call this process gradual. In the mid-1950s variety had incorporated both American and British individual singers into its repertoire; these singers could still appeal to a broad audience and could often fit the requirements of ‘all-round entertainment’. These clean-cut figures were still prevalent in the charts and on the variety stage in 1955, but then a more specific and younger demographic dominated the music charts, and this was not replicated in the theatres. Although skiffle did have significant tours, Donegan aside it did not make significant cash in the post-commercial television, fractured variety environment. The theatres now needed to think overtly about the demographic which they were trying to appeal to.

The transgressive, even revolutionary, rock and roll that we imagine taking hold in the 1950s in Britain was not driven by the major American artists, just as rock and roll in the United States was a sanitised version for white audiences. Major American artists did not make many visits to Britain; British skiffle and domestic performers such as Lonnie Donegan, Cliff Richard, Marty Wilde, Dickie Pride, Billy Fury, Terry Dene, Adam Faith, and Tommy Steele amongst others became successful artists. In very quick order, Britain had adapted rock and roll and produced its own acts. This laid the ground for the explosion of 1960s performers; the rough and unrefined skiffle had given young people the faith in their ability to make music and the pop idols had proved that mainstream success was a possibility too.

By the late 1950s, the top-selling acts at the struggling variety theatres were more varied again: Liberace, Connie Francis, Harry Secombe, Max Bygraves, *The King and I*, Bruce Forsyth, and Lonnie Donegan. The years of variety being dominated by exclusively American acts and pop artists were over, although this could be put down to the increasingly low status of the theatres. The argument put forward by Gillian Mitchell that skiffle and rock and roll had become integrated and influenced into the variety / light entertainment style is not strictly true. Many like Donegan and Steele had integrated and were not a disruptive influence or a transgressive force anymore but their influence on youth culture was to create much wider and more significant waves in youth culture in the 1960s. The push and pull factors between pleasing a mass audience and maintaining artistic credibility continue to the present, although many of these debates were first spawned in this early period, as young creatives either accepted the all-round entertainer tag or battled with their avaricious management for their artistic direction.

In 1950–1955, comedy and variety experienced a series of tremors that demonstrated the possibilities of new popular culture. The second half of the 1950s showed the undercurrents, the deeper desires, the fractures in society. Sex, rebellion, greed, and a hunger for new experiences were seen as commercial opportunities but were just as challenging for those running the variety theatres. In the post-commercial television era of desperation, variety was now at the will of those looking to make a quick buck, who had no real interest in the integrity or long-term success of the institution or even buildings. They became venues rather than a pillar of the cultural community. The competition with cinemas, which were also beginning to struggle in the multimedia age, meant that city centres seemed overpopulated by large arenas for entertainment.

Supply and demand are both factors to consider with youth markets in the mid to late 1950s. There was definite demand for rock and roll and other entertainment

targeting young people. However, wider business decisions shaped the outcomes for variety. The decline in takings and threat from television meant that major American acts began to tour cinemas instead. The incongruous and sometimes awkward variety bills could alienate some young audiences. Control was another motivation for some promoters, although there were still variety-style bills in many venues right into the 1960s.

Adorno's ideas of 'massification' of culture are also legitimate in the context of the 1950s, as globalisation and mass culture was in the ascendancy, but the desire for an authentic live experience was still very much present. The engagement and enthusiasm shown by young people to consume American and Americanised culture were driven both by clever marketing, a sense of novelty and genuine excitement at culture that was challenging in the 1940s and 1950s. The early works of Guy Mitchell and Frankie Laine amongst others could be seen as rather cynical attempts to capture the fads of the day, rolling Westerns, country and popular music into a convenient package. However, by the time Hoggart was critiquing it, there was a real edge to American music and a genuine attraction to the sounds of the blues, rock, roots and country from British youth. As Adrian Horn states:

'Import of American popular culture into Britain since at least the beginning of the twentieth century was far from being a cultural 'take-over'. There was no widespread defence of 'traditional' culture against imported American mass or popular culture, which had, in fact, been the subject of wide popular appeal in Britain'⁶⁹

Although the variety theatres were heavily influenced by the ebb and flow of popular culture, in the late 1950s there seems to be a distinct separation within popular

⁶⁹ Horn, *Juke Box Britain*, p. 187

music. The major acts in the sales charts do not seem to tally up with the top-performing acts at the variety theatres. This is due to several factors. Many American and rock and roll acts were moving their gigs to cinemas as these venues did not presuppose any restrictive format that would limit the performance time of the headliners. Secondly, the variety theatres were beginning to close or struggle in a more challenging climate, television had forced many theatres into the red and then the desperate authorities began to put on seedy nude shows to bolster profits. Other culture was also proving profitable during this period too – musicals, opera, and ballet were all being shown on variety stages and outside the constraints of the variety format. There is a question whether major agents were deliberately undermining the variety theatres by putting their major acts in other venues and putting their efforts into television.

6. Television – the Transition from Hippodrome to Living Room

Introduction

Television presented the biggest ever challenge to variety. It combined the key characteristics that challenged the appeal of variety. Firstly, it was new, both technologically and in terms of a medium, and by the mid-fifties television production had improved. Secondly, it was visual, like cinema but unlike radio, so viewers could see the stars that they were interested in, and it could conjure up more a complex setting and even show films.¹ Thirdly, linked to its novelty was the fact that it was aspirational: people wanted a television set because it was the future. Fourthly, it was in the home and the glamour of the stage or big screen could be enjoyed from the comfort of an armchair.

The challenge of television to variety was as much about the structure of the entertainment as it was about the environment in which it was presented. Commercial television was not only populist but provided a choice of two stations. The variety theatre had, since the beginning of the twentieth century, offered a smorgasbord of entertainment, with various acts that would be over quickly and provided a taste of each offering rather than lengthy drama or opera. Variety theatres could offer these latter types of entertainment, but only for shorter runs. Between the BBC and ITV, television could now offer both high and low culture in the home. The proprietors of variety theatres were left confused as, despite their willingness to adapt their bills, television provided the same tasting menu of entertainment. Cinemas and theatres closed at a great rate during this decade and there was not a great deal of patience amongst the rattled impresarios and owners.

¹ Denis Blewett, 'The Final Radio "close-down" soon?', *Sunday Sun* (Newcastle), 24 November 1957, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001723/19571124/008/0008> [accessed February 2022].

Television can be considered a disruptive medium. Television co-opted many of the important elements of variety. Raymond Williams' idea of a continuous flow between different television programmes, this concept was an integral part of non-stop variety too. It functioned even better with the technological assistance of the television. The fact that programming could continually flow and you did not need to leave your sofa made it an irresistible leisure pursuit compared to the comparative strain of visiting a local venue.

Raymond Williams discussed in his work on television whether it had brought about 'a new world, a new society, a new phase of history' and compared it to the 'steam-engine, the automobile, the atomic bomb'.² He speculated on the role of television and its development. He placed television in the context of both technological and capitalist development³. Williams suggests that the manner in which television developed either reflected or had shaped both society and its structures. He discussed the idea of 'technological determinism' whereby the progress and the consequences of technological development are irresistible, and society is moulded by technology rather than vice-versa. Technology has played a key role in this story and it is important to consider how much influence those in society had over new technology. Technological change and the consequences that it has on both people and, in this case, variety theatre, are often deemed to be inevitable rather than fashioned carefully by big business or the state.

Television provided a transporting and transformative experience to viewers. It borrowed the talent and short-form, rotating acts of variety. At the same time, this experience was offered in a convenient and everyday environment and was not burdened with theatrical traditions.

² Williams, *Television*, p.9

³ Williams, *Television*, p. 12-13

“Television is markedly “commonplace”, whereas the cinema has from its earliest days invested in the extraordinary, with a proclivity towards spectacle and fantasy.’⁴ Krutnik and Neale go on to note that the cinema provides an *experience* in a similar manner to theatre and in a ‘theatrical context’.⁵ This originates from a time when the main feature was packaged with cartoons, shorts, newsreels, a serial, and a supporting feature and, as previously mentioned, in cine-variety often with live acts and, during the silent era, all to the sound of a live organist.⁶ Cinema inherited this format and style from the variety and vaudeville traditions.⁷

The address of TV is ‘intimate and everyday, a part of home life’, and its scheduling hinges upon the image of the average or ideal viewer who watches as part of a middle-class nuclear family (peak time or prime time is ‘family time’), whether the broadcasting organization is commercial ... or ‘public service’.⁸

Television had distinct advantages. It already had the ‘broadcasting blueprint’ of radio.⁹ It infiltrated the domestic space, it could structure ‘family time’ and create an occasion but without the need to leave the house, dress up, and pay money for transportation. Television had a sense of ‘directness’, even when recorded, that cinema could not muster; television was in the now and cinema in the past.¹⁰ This is the beginning of a new age of sedentarism but one which becomes deeply ingrained in modern society. The idea of leaving the house multiple times a week for entertainment would be

⁴ Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, p. 209.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 209–210.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

anathema to many people after the 1960s. Going out thus became a special occasion rather than a necessity.

Neale and Krutnik explain that the domestic setting and 'family atmosphere' of the sitcom were designed to bring the audience closer and create a sense of encompassing intimacy: the 'home enters the home' and 'demarcating... a community'.¹¹ Television is experienced in units of time.¹² Neale and Krutnik argue that television replicated many of the aspects of variety entertainment.

Television itself, with its separate segments, slots and schedules, and its different genres and types of programme, can be considered a variety form. It is hardly surprising that programmes of variety entertainment, sequentially presented acts and forms whose unity lies solely in a time span, a distinctive structure [were popular in the early years of television].¹³

However, television could not capture the live experience, the communality, or the immediacy and novelty of variety. The same material delivered in the flesh would not stand on television, where the shelf-life of performers depended on them being dynamic and charismatic. This encouraged the use of writers and rewarded those performers who could transmit a brand of intimate bonhomie through the small screen. Max Miller had not succeeded in film due to his dedication to playing to the crowd and he had been frowned upon by BBC radio executives, whereas figures like Frankie Howerd had flourished. Others who had done well on radio were old-fashioned on television, such as Arthur Askey and his Crazy Gang, and Flanagan and Allen. Initially, Tommy Trinder plugged the gap and presented *Sunday Night at the Palladium* until he was taken off the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 177-9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

air for an allegedly antisemitic slight against the Grades.¹⁴ Performers like Morecambe and Wise, Bruce Forsyth, and Tommy Cooper were breakthrough acts on television.

Neale and Krutnik argue that television is a direct ancestor of variety. The short attention span that variety assumed was directly carried over to television and this is why it presented such a direct challenge to variety. Television could offer good quality variety, drama, game shows, and much more and it would only require a short attention span. Plus, it could be stopped and restarted at any time. Unlike live variety, the audience can also chat and have half an eye on the screen, dipping in and out, just as the audience may have done seated at a table in the old music hall, except with a cup of tea in their living room rather than a tankard of ale.

Like the forms and institutions of theatrical variety from which they derive, the forms and types of television variety all differ slightly in structure, in the degree to which comedy is prevalent, and in the ways in which the four major forms of variety comedy – the comic song, the monologue, the double-act and the sketch- are combined in a programme.¹⁵

This is a compelling argument, but it does seem to ignore the development of the situation comedy, as a hybrid of theatre and variety. The radio template had used many variety tropes but extended these over a much-prolonged time period. However, the characters, tropes, and themes of many situation comedies could be argued to be expanded versions of music hall sketches and the cuts between scenes, the use of different characters, and sketches all served to satisfy those with a short attention span.

¹⁴ Matthew Sweet, 'You Lucky People: Remembering Tommy Trinder', *The Guardian Online*, 18 August 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/aug/18/tommy-trinder> [accessed 20 February 2022].

¹⁵ Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, p. 179.

The BBC years

Following the Second World War and the resumption of BBC television, it was decided that the BBC's Royal Charter would be renewed for 5 years and the possibility of changes to the system delayed until the end of 1951.¹⁶ Television was not in a technologically strong position in the initial post-war period, as sets needed testing to see if they still operated.¹⁷ In 1947 there were 14,560 television licences and 10.7 million radio-only licences.¹⁸ However, by 1960 television would increase to just under 10.5 million television licences whilst sound-only licences would drop to just under 4.5 million. A television licence cost £2 whilst a radio licence was 10 shillings.¹⁹

As with radio broadcasting, the variety department was a key starting point for programming, but it was not a straightforward transfer. The BBC were the first to try to handle the problems of juggling variety and television. They had navigated many of these problems with radio comedy but now had to try and adjust to the visual. Klaus Nathaus outlines how new strategies could ensure success in the multimedia age:

As variety had survived the interwar years, it was by no means certain that it would succumb to television, the new rival entertainment, during the 1950s. In fact, impresarios and performers had reason to believe that variety could benefit from synergies with the new medium, just as live appearances of radio personalities had attracted audiences to variety houses during the interwar period.²⁰

¹⁶ Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, p. 81.

¹⁷ Tony Currie, *A Concise History of British Television: 1930–2000* (Tiverton, 2000), pp. 26 and 31.

¹⁸ David Butler and Anne Sloman, *British Political Facts 1900–1979* (London, 1989; Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, p. 57; BBC Handbooks, Annual Reports and Accounts, 1927–2002, *BBC Written Archives Centre*, <https://microform-digital.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/boa/collections/6/volumes/10/bbc-handbooks> [accessed 9th December 2021];

'UK television households', *Terra Media*,

http://www.terramedia.co.uk/reference/statistics/television/television_households.htm [accessed 9 December 2021].

¹⁹ Louis Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, p. 57.

²⁰ Nathaus, 'All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go?', p. 47.

Roger Wilmut explains that, although radio had a great head start in terms of output of variety, by the late 1950s the quality of radio variety was declining with audiences more receptive to television variety.²¹ Wilmut also describes the drawbacks for variety on the small screen:

Television Variety was rather limited – many of the same objections were raised by performers and managements that had made life difficult for radio Variety in the 1920s – and entertainment programmes moved away from act shows into the fields of situation comedy, to which TV was more suited.²²

The BBC were bound by the same rules for television as radio. The key constraint for the BBC was the overarching aim of ‘inform, educate, and entertain’ that had had such an important role in altering the approach towards broadcasting variety. They had a remit to provide an intellectually and culturally nourishing product. This limited the material for a mainstream audience and left more room for rival forms of entertainment, which could promote commercially popular material without any constraints. The limits of broadcast variety and a desire to utilise the possibilities of the medium meant that the BBC had pivoted away from variety and towards creating original, often situation-based material. The idea that variety and music hall were lowbrow meant that the BBC were reluctant to rely on it too heavily.

Asa Briggs highlighted how many comedians were often overused or too expensive.²³ “‘Personality programmes’, like *What’s My Line*, a huge success, were in many respects easier to organize than screen variety, old and new.’²⁴ The term ‘light entertainment’ was beginning to be used by 1951.²⁵

²¹ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 210.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Briggs, *Sound and Vision (Vol. IV)*, p. 717.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 717.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 717.

Asa Briggs compares the 'public service' ethos of the BBC with the commercial focus of American broadcasters. This reveals the lack of variety entertainment on the BBC and the potential that was available for a new British commercial broadcaster:

No survey was made during the years 1945 to 1955 of television Variety output, although American commentators noted that on the eve of commercial television New York television stations were devoting 53.3 percent of their time to 'light entertainment' while the BBC was devoting 15.7 and that there were few British counterparts of the American stars of entertainment like Ed Sullivan, Jackie Gleason, Steve Allen or Imogene Coca.²⁶

Those who worked in television variety were not treated with huge respect within the Corporation and Louis Barfe notes that variety was viewed as a 'necessary evil' by the 'snobbery' of the BBC bosses.²⁷ The BBC was striving to move away from traditional variety because it did not fit with its core values and was seen as fundamentally working-class. However, situation comedy was still in development and the transition from merely broadcasting theatrical variety to a more bespoke televisual experience was incomplete. By 1951, there were ten light entertainment producers at the BBC.²⁸ In 1953, over 2.1 million households had television licences.²⁹ The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 increased the popularity and uptake of television.³⁰

The BBC expanded its capacity to produce television shows by purchasing variety spaces. Television desired the real estate of variety too, to use as studios. In 1953, Prince Littler sold the Matcham-designed Shepherd's Bush Empire to the BBC for £120,000. This was close to the BBC's main output sites in West London, and it had been hired at a cost of £1000-a-night that year.³¹ The BBC was also interested in the King's Theatre on

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 718.

²⁷ Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, p. 58.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁰ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave The Stage*, p. 210.

³¹ Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, p. 73.

Hammersmith Road, but this only took the form of a lease.³² This indicates the early broadcasting reliance on not only the concept of variety but on the variety spaces and the atmosphere generated within the walls of the traditional theatres. The BBC was not fully convinced by the idea of variety but the opportunity to exploit mass audiences with variety, gameshows, and talent contests was much sought after and lucrative. This material was not in the Reithian remit, but commercial television was on the horizon and could take full advantage of the desire for populist entertainment.

Development of ITV

Commercial television emerged in the face of the BBC's attitude to public service but also from the success and influence of commercially operated channels in the United States. The decision to relinquish control of the national airwaves to commercial interests was not a simple one. Many in the Labour Party were against the idea and some Conservatives too; Churchill described the idea as a 'tu'penny Punch and Judy show'.³³ Many in distinguished political circles were against the potential 'vulgarising influence' of commercial television.³⁴

The issue of quality control and the 'ideals' of the productions were significant. David Kynaston mentions that the rules placed on independent television were highly restrictive.³⁵ It drew criticism from across the political spectrum and many were critical of the medium itself.³⁶ There was significant opposition to independent television from Conservative MPs, despite its being proposed by the government. The decision was made not to allow sponsorship or spot promotions in programming but to have advertising at

³² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³⁵ Kynaston, *Family Britain*, p. 374.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

natural breaks in the shows. At the other end of the political spectrum but in a similar vein was Tony Benn, who warned in a parliamentary debate that the introduction of commercial television would be in thrall to sponsors and have little value for the audience. He expressed concern about the prospects for British performers and increased Americanisation too.³⁷ The bill passed its third reading in the Commons with a majority of 26 and further debate continued in the Lords.³⁸ The Television Act was passed on 30 July 1954.³⁹

The political battles and the fear of the implications of this new technology in commercial hands meant that companies were extremely cautious after being handed their franchises. They wanted to attract audiences through the glamour and quality of their offerings but also needed to show that they were offering a sort of public service. They did not want to be categorised as lowest common denominator and the franchises that were imposed also forbade this. This meant that each franchise had to offer quality drama and informative television, as well as producing material in each individual region and providing sufficient regional content.

Initial ITV services

The system for independent television was organised on federal, regional lines, and franchises were given for fixed periods.⁴⁰ The regions were also divided between weekday operators (Monday–Friday) and weekend providers to prevent domination of advertising revenue.⁴¹

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

³⁸ 'The Peers Pass Television Bill', *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, Friday 23 July 1954, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000687/19540723/136/0005>.

³⁹ 'Television Act 1954', Hansard 1803–2005, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/acts/television-act-1954> [accessed 27 April 2021].

⁴⁰ Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, p. 84.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

The most important regional franchises were London, the Midlands, and the North. Associated-Rediffusion held the franchise for London weekdays, Associated Television occupied the London weekend and Midland weekday rights. ABC Weekend TV oversaw the Midlands weekend television. Weekdays in the North of England were taken by Granada Television and ABC TV administered the weekends in the North. Smaller regional franchises were awarded from 1956–61 and did not require the weekday/weekend split due to reduced population and therefore decreased advertising revenue. These were Scottish, Southern, Tyne Tees, Anglia, Ulster, Westward, Border, Grampian, and Channel, along with Television Wales and the West, and Wales (West and North) Television.

Associated-Rediffusion was owned by a combination of conglomerate British Electrical Traction and Associated Newspapers (who later sold their stake). ABC Television replaced Kemsley-Winnick, which had financial backing from newspaper owner Viscount Kemsley and retail tycoon Isaac Wolfson. ABC TV was owned by the Associated British Picture Corporation, which produced films and ran over 500 cinemas in 1943; the ABC chain also owned Pathé News. ITV Granada was funded by Sidney Bernstein, the owner of a large chain of cinemas and theatres, which had begun to display tours of rock 'n' roll acts on its stages. Bernstein also had interests in publishing, property, retail, motorway services, bowling alleys, and television rental. The Grades entered the fray after initially being knocked back.

Lew and Leslie Grade formed a consortium which included Moss Empires, Prince Littler, and a commercial bank but it was rejected because it was feared to be too powerful a combination of interests.⁴² The Grades were eventually allowed to re-enter

⁴² Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 211.

the scene by bidding with Norman Collins for the Midlands franchise, which eventually became Associated Television (ATV), after its initial franchisee did not get sufficient financial backing.⁴³

Two separate companies came together to form what became Associated Television. One was The Associated Broadcasting Development Company, which had been formed in 1952 by Norman Collins, C O Stanley (chairman of Pye) and Robert Renwick to act as a pressure group for the introduction of commercial television into Britain. Not only had they succeeded in this aim, but they were also awarded one of the first franchises, the Midlands (Monday to Friday), and London on Saturday and Sunday. However, they had great difficulty in forming a production arm and securing their finance. To solve this problem they approached the Independent Television Company (ITC), who had failed in a franchise bid, paradoxically because they were considered too strong in their control of talent, through the involvement of agents Lew and Leslie Grade, Val Parnell, and Prince Littler of Stoll Moss Theatres, and others. The two entities merged to form ATV and were awarded their licence on 25 May 1955.⁴⁴

According to Gallup, on the first night that commercial television was broadcast, only 200,000 sets tuned in, but only one in ten were critical. The initial offerings from commercial television included sport (with boxing being well-represented), American imports like *Dragnet* and *I Love Lucy*, and gameshows like *Double Your Money with Hughie Green*. *Take Your Pick* was another important gameshow. Independent television could not show wall-to-wall populist shows but it did have some significant draws. There was

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ 'ATV (Associated Television) History', *Independent TeleWeb*, <http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/itw/ATV/index.html> [accessed 9 December 2021]; Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, pp.86–87; Richard Halstead, 'Making of the Grades: Profile: The Grade Dynasty', *The Independent*, 2 February 1997, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/making-of-the-grades-profile-the-grade-dynasty-1276495.html> [accessed 9 December 2021].

also material that took advantage of the innovative approach of radio performers with *The Idiot Weekly*, Price 2d, an attempt to replicate the success of The Goon Show on television with Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan on Associated-Rediffusion. One of the most important early shows was *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, which was hosted by long-time music hall comedian Tommy Trinder. Each region produced their own programming, but the most popular and prestigious shows were the ones that were syndicated across franchises.⁴⁵

The opening night for independent television was given 'almost wholly favourable reviews' according to Louis Barfe.⁴⁶ The *Daily Mirror*, which had chosen not to be involved in independent television, was positive about the first night and criticised the politicians, bishops, and killjoys who had questioned the venture, and maintained that it was the general public that mattered.⁴⁷ The *Daily Express* demonstrated more resistance, as Lord Beaverbrook felt he would be overlooked in his attempts to run a franchise.⁴⁸ The *Express* criticised the small-scale coverage as 'futile', as only new sets in London could pick up the station (but this would not stand as a long-term criticism) and sourly criticised the value of advertising on offer, in comparison to newspapers.⁴⁹ The next day, however, the output was described as 'brilliant, but brassy'.⁵⁰ There was criticism of the news and drama and the fact that the advertisements were 'irksome when the novelty had gone'. However, David Kynaston states that after only three months after the launch of ITV in December 1955, 57 percent preferred ITV to the BBC and only 16 percent felt

⁴⁵ Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, p. 99.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

the opposite and favoured the BBC.⁵¹ Kynaston describes this as a 'humiliating result'.⁵²

Louis Barfe explains further points in favour of ITV in its early stages:

With the regions all playing to their respective strengths in programming, the new service was an instant hit. In February 1956, ITV had between a 60 and 63 per cent audience share in houses that were able to receive the programmes. Qualitative research suggested that only 16 per cent of viewers actively preferred the BBC's output. The pattern was repeated as each new ITV region launched, with an average ratio of 67 per cent of viewers opting for ITV over 33 per cent opting in favour of the BBC. Only the Anglia region, which took to the air on 27 October 1959, was a relative failure at first, snaring 55 percent of the viewers to the BBC's 45 per cent.⁵³

The networks settled into a clearer pattern afterwards. ITV grew more slowly and some of the companies experienced financial problems because audiences had to buy new sets to receive a different waveband.⁵⁴ Louis Barfe explains how these networks formed new identities:

... the two networks develop their own styles. The BBC tended to be better at drama, serious documentary and outside broadcasts – particularly Royal occasions. Independent Television News maintained a high standard from the beginning, and there were some successful plays; but ITV's main strength lay in light entertainment programmes. Against the BBC's average of five programmes a week, ITV usually offered about twelve.

Variety was still the byword for popular entertainment. Variety shows encompassed theatre, popular music, sketch and stand-up comedy, and novelty acts and were the obvious place for major American stars to appear. The emergence of independent television would play a distinct role in further shaping variety theatre. Although there were restrictions on what the independent broadcasters could show, they

⁵¹ Kynaston, *Family Britain*, p. 607.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, pp.98–9.

⁵⁴ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 211.

had a much broader remit for variety compared to public broadcasting, and embraced the talent that emanated from theatres, gameshows, and soap operas, which would directly target an evening audience. Various attributed to Lew Grade, Roy Thomson, or Cecil Harmsworth-King, was the notion that those in the business of commercial television had almost 'a licence to print money'.⁵⁵ The groups that took an interest in the commercial contracts in television were familiar names in the world of variety.

However, producing good quality variety on the small screen was not initially straightforward. Associated-Rediffusion in London relied on former bandleader, now impresario, Jack Hylton to provide variety. Hylton had a good track record in the West End, discovering new talent like Tony Hancock and Jimmy Edwards, and was seen as a good alternative to the Grades and Parnell.⁵⁶ However, the actual output was described as 'dire'.⁵⁷ Much of the criticism revolved around 'music hall' feelings engendered by his variety offerings.⁵⁸ Hylton's productions were described as 'stagey' and the situation comedy that he produced had stolen material from a Sid Caesar show without permission and reused some of the scripts written by Mel Brooks, Neil Simon, and Carl Reiner. This was discovered and a licensing deal was set up.⁵⁹

Barfe explains that the television audience was less discerning than a paying variety audience, but Hylton's efforts were still mediocre at best.

Jack Hylton has very strong and personal ideas about what the television audience wants. He sees us – I'm deducing from what I have seen of his TV shows – as a typical Monday night audience at the Theatre Royal, Shuddersford ... It's, of course, a profound misjudgement. The provincial music hall audience is so used to making the best of its bargain that it will applaud the dimmest spark of talent or even effort.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁵⁶ Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, pp.93–4.

⁵⁷ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 211.

⁵⁸ Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, p. 96.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Hylton also produced shows with Arthur Askey and the first television appearance from Tony Hancock, with scripts written by Goon show writer Eric Sykes and Galton and Simpson. It also included the talents of June Whitfield.⁶¹

The Grades' material for ATV was much stronger. They had the flagship show *Sunday Night at the London Palladium*, which was partnered with *Val Parnell's Saturday Spectacular*. Eric Sykes wrote the scripts.⁶² It included stars like Mel Torme and former Goons Peter Sellers and Spike Milligan, but the major American stars dried up and the show soon relied on stalwarts of the domestic scene and regular visitors to variety theatres, like Dickie Valentine, Lonnie Donegan, and Tommy Steele. Sykes could rely on performers like Hattie Jacques to help out.⁶³

Commercial television had fewer qualms about using variety but by the second half of the 1950s, variety was not as popular, particularly with younger audiences. *Tonight at the Palladium* was the marquee programme, and it was willing to exploit a wider range of popular culture than the old variety format; this was exemplified by television producer Jack Good's shows *Six-Five Special*, *Oh Boy!*, *Boy Meets Girls* and *Wham!!*, that leaned heavily on rock and roll and pop music.⁶⁴

At Granada, executives Cecil and Sidney Bernstein wanted to replicate the Stoll variety theatre shows with clowns, classical musicians, famous actresses, and ballerinas on one bill on the show *Chelsea at 9*.⁶⁵ This show eventually succeeded in the coup of booking Maria Callas.⁶⁶

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Norma Coates, 'Excitement Is Made, Not Born: Jack Good, Television, and Rock and Roll' in *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 25.3 (2013), p. 302

⁶⁵ Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, p. 97.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

There were also television shows that showcased new pop music: on the BBC, this included a British version of the American radio programme *Your Hit Parade* in 1952 and in 1955 *Off the Record*, with 'performances more in the musical variety of Tin Pan Alley traditions'.⁶⁷ In 1955, commercial television came up with ABC TV's *Music Shop* with a focus on American performers and *Cool for Cats* in 1956, before in 1957 the seminal Jack Good's production *Six-Five Special* was launched by the BBC.⁶⁸ This was one of the major stepping-stones in marketing television to a youth audience and Good moved on to *Oh Boy!* (which was filmed in Matcham's Hackney Empire) with ITV in 1958 and paved the way for programmes like *Top of the Pops*. *Six-Five Special* included artists like Petula Clark, Jim Dale, Johnny Dankworth, Terry Dene, Lonnie Donegan, Frankie Laine, Joan Regan, Marty Wilde, and Tommy Steele.⁶⁹ Comedy performers included Trevor Peacock, who was also a script writer for the show, Spike Milligan, and Bernie Winters.

The Effect on Variety

Variety was in a difficult position. Although the major London theatres could attract the very biggest stars, simply just showing what was on at the local theatres as an outside broadcast made little sense to television producers. In addition, there was an increased desire for a well-rounded diet on television, with gameshows, soap operas, and detective stories, which had all been very popular on commercial radio. This left little room for variety, which was further squeezed to the margins by the development of situation comedy.

The logistics of variety meant that the spectacle of the show was limited on a small screen and some of its offerings were unsuitable or unappealing when not on stage.

⁶⁷ Norma Coates, *Excitement Is Made, Not Born*, p. 319.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Jeff Evans, *Rock & Pop on British TV* (London, 2017), p. 1932

Comedy could transfer but the element of knowingness and the restriction of censorship was much more significant in broadcast entertainment.

Television could recreate a decent facsimile of this collective feeling and, even though it could not fully dull the desire for live comedy, the possibility to record and create more elaborate situations was a clear advantage over the constraints of the variety stage. Television had the ability to ape the ambitions of film, even if it did not have the vast wealth to create a wide array of different settings for comedy. The realms of imagination that were explored in films (from Chaplin and Keaton to the *Road* films with Bing Crosby and Bob Hope) and on the radio (as explored by The Goons and Hancock) could now be applied to television, both visually and aurally.

The co-existence of variety and television presented different problems compared to the relationship between variety and radio. While radio broadcasts could be used as a draw to attract audiences to variety theatres, the same pattern ultimately did not function with television. Roger Wilmut describes how *Café Continental* at the Chiswick Empire tried to reuse the stage show that had been shown on television and present it to variety audiences. He explains that ‘this idea flopped badly – audiences had after all already *seen* it on television, so why should they go out to the theatre and *pay* to see it?’⁷⁰ Variety initially used television to promote many acts, in a similar fashion to its attempts to tie in with radio. After a while, this became somewhat redundant, as any performer worth seeing would have made an appearance on television. The major acts from *Sunday Night at the London Palladium* would have been the most valuable draws.

Here are some examples of how television was used to promote variety shows on posters for major theatres:

⁷⁰ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 210.

- Dynamic Singing Personality of stage, television and radio Betty Driver (28 June 1956, Sheffield Empire);⁷¹
- Britain's Foremost TV Comedienne Hylda Baker (11 March 1957, Sheffield Empire);⁷²
- Two Nuts on the Loose from TV's "Crackerjack" series, Joe Baker and Jack Douglas (29 April 1957, Sheffield Empire), Barry Took on the bill;⁷³
- Michael Holliday, 'Television's Friendly Voice', appeared with Hal Monty (Finsbury Park Empire, 24 March 1958);⁷⁴
- The Sensational TV Disc Show-In Colour 'Cool for Cats' including Jim Dale (Finsbury Park Empire, 11 May 1959);⁷⁵
- 'Star of TV's Oh Boy! Cliff Richard' (18 May 1959, Finsbury Park Empire).⁷⁶

Television had a deep effect on the integrity of variety; it sent panic throughout the system. The promotion of a much wider array of acts within variety bills began. This coincided with a change in attitudes and demographics, but the bookers felt that variety had to adapt. Some of the decisions made to try and counter television, such as the booking of acts that appealed to younger or exclusively male audiences, ultimately alienated clientèle. However, it is worth providing some context to the variety theatres. They had initially been highly profitable, successful, and culturally relevant, as well as adaptable to new cultural forms. The forces that emerged in the mid-1950s conspired to change this environment. The rapidity of the rise of rock and roll, after variety had

⁷¹ The British Music Hall Society, Music Hall Poster Archive, Sheffield Empire 1956 posters.

⁷² The British Music Hall Society, Music Hall Poster Archive, Sheffield Empire 1957 posters.

⁷³ The British Music Hall Society, Music Hall Poster Archive, Finsbury Park Empire 1959 posters.

⁷⁴ The British Music Hall Society, Music Hall Poster Archive, Sheffield Empire, 1957 posters.

⁷⁵ The British Music Hall Society, Music Hall Poster Archive, Finsbury Park Empire 1958 posters.

⁷⁶ The British Music Hall Society, Music Hall Poster Archive, Finsbury Park Empire, 1959 posters.

successfully integrated traditional popular singers and American entertainers, was not a solitary change. The swift success of commercial television drew audiences away from variety. This made quick fix alternatives more desirable. In the space of 50 years, the silent and sound cinema, the increasing sophistication of radio, the availability of recorded sound had thrust variety into a multimedia environment that provided alternatives inside and outside the home. At the turn of the century, before cinemas were established, the options had been limited to variety, spectator sport, and conventional theatre, music, and opera; all of these would have been live and were limited by geographical location and price. By 1945, variety held a strong position as the premier form of live entertainment. By 1955, the parameters had changed, and audiences wanted new and different forms.

Television could provide prestige acts and the most glamorous of performances and could present this in a snappy and instantly gratifying form. It could be switched off and on. It did not provide the buzz of the live theatre or the ability to interact with the audience, but the most skilled entertainers could navigate this and still create an intimate experience for the audience. Importantly, all these innovations eschewed the rigid timings and formats of variety. *The Stage* newspaper ran a competition to find ways for the public to offer their ideas to save variety. The premise was that they were the proprietor / manager of a brand-new provincial music hall and had to entice the reluctant public to their establishment.

Too Much Talk, Too Little Action

Everybody is always grumbling about the state of the business, but many make an effort to keep up with 1957 ideas, instead of complaining that time did not stand still in 1907? If Variety itself cannot produce practical ideas for keeping up with the times, is it worthy of a place in tomorrow?
Could You Run a Provincial Hall?

In order to stimulate members of the profession into thinking of ways in which 1967 can be a better year for the business than this disappointing one of 1957, THE STAGE invites readers to imagine they are the proprietors of a brand-new music-hall in a provincial town.

Write and tell us in not more than 200 words what you would present to the vast general public, the customers who are showing their dissatisfaction with present-day variety by not going to shows.⁷⁷

The suggestions were rather nebulous and even the winning entries did not stick to the brief. They wandered into large restructuring of the entire business. Although they made pertinent points, a substance over style approach that tried to ignore stars of screen and radio, they did not address the changing demographics, the rise of pop and rock acts. The star name was going to be a vital method in attracting audiences and without the other media forms, theatres even today would struggle to attract audiences. A move away from the old variety format was suggested but the alternative still sounds rather dated and ultimately quite similar; a revue may have a theme, but it is essentially a semantic difference, like cabaret or vaudeville. The lighting, the spaces and the spectacle could be improved but modern theatres offer separate shows every night and mixed bills of any sort seem dated with the exception of support acts for musical performers. The winning submission was sent in by C.A. Cowland of Wembley:

TELEVISION is creating a public with a higher standard of judgment in variety, and production technique must meet the challenge. The variety bill of a string of turns is dead, and artists must appear in a show or revue, where versatility, speed and general professionalism count. The trump card at present is colour, and costumes, lighting and settings must be impressive. Not least important – a strong first class pit orchestra.

So my theatre policy would be to book touring shows or revues built round star names and up-and-coming youngsters, and keep them two weeks if possible. Seat prices in a clean and comfortable house, would range from 2/- to 8/6d. I would ensure that the first house were “family house” and that any questionable material or nudes were cut for this performance (there would

⁷⁷Mollie Ellis (ed.), ‘What We Think: Too Much Talk, Too Little Action’, *The Stage*, 12 September 1957, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19570912/028/0003>.

be no solo nudes in any case – only showgirls in big productions of “Follies” style). Summer shows – “Twinkle” “Fol-de-Rols” the “Five Past Eight” shows, the Blackpool shows and others – could be booked for spring and autumn.⁷⁸

These suggestions were relatively weak attempts and those in the real positions of power had decided to prioritise their television interests. The major players began to wind down the bricks and mortar assets of the theatres. There was a surfeit of venues for entertainment but the decision to close and demolish these venues was taken very rapidly.⁷⁹ This began within four or five years of the launch of commercial television, and only shortly after individual variety theatres had become unprofitable.

These decisions to offload the performance venues were taken with little foresight and a clear eye on immediate income rather than the strength of performance spaces within urban areas or their architectural and cultural value. The governments of the time did not see variety or music hall as worthy of the types of subsidies which have preserved the dramatic theatres, such as those we see in the West End of London. The Palladium survived due to being the driving force of profits for the Moss Empire chain in the late 1950s.

There are several other reasons, of course, why the music-hall has not stayed the pace. Television has always been pointed out as the principal wicked uncle, both in keeping people at home and in making them more exacting as audiences. "They get used to seeing the top-liners," one comic said dolefully, "and you've got to be on your toes to keep up with the gags." Good top-of-the-bill artists (apart from nudes) are harder to get now and more expensive (...) and the smaller theatres cannot regularly afford the fees or compete with the theatre-chains in offering long contracts.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ 'Could You Run a Provincial Hall?' *The Stage*, 10 October 1957, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19571010/023/0003> [accessed 13 December 2021].

⁷⁹ 'Open up! Archive Project', a *Theatres Trust* project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/theatres-lost-and-saved-the-theatres-trust/ewIC8XoUFRn7Jg?hl=en>.

⁸⁰ 'Nude shows go round in ever- decreasing circles', *The Guardian*, 21 November 1957, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/nov/21/music-hall-variety-burlesque-nudes-1957> [accessed 23 January 2022].

Technology often reinforced class structures and although the variety theatres were tightly controlled and conservative spaces, they were places that belonged to working-class performers and audiences.

Loss of physical space

The effect of television begins to become apparent at the start of the 1950s, but it is in the years after 1955 that this trend accelerates. The issue that hangs over much of this period was whether the major players that had moved their attention from theatres to television, *actively* let variety die. There is a possibility that a more flexible approach could have still yielded a profitable network, as could have government intervention to save the major theatres from destruction. Frank Mort explains that in London and elsewhere ‘a collapse of public confidence in the planned society’ and ‘speculative development’ led to an ‘aggressive phase of ... post-war transformation’.⁸¹

The reasons for closure or demolition varied from war damage, to being sold or converted to other uses such as TV studios, bingo halls, or office blocks. Theatres that were bombed during World War II were subsequently demolished. The Finsbury Park Empire was closed in May 1960 after Moss Empires claimed that the theatre had lost £14,000 during the 81 weeks of variety to the end of 1959. They alleged that top performers refused to play (many denied this) and that they demanded excessive fees. The last show featured the singer Emile Ford and the VAF tried a rescue bid by encouraging major acts to play there and bring in audiences. Moss wanted the VAF to purchase the building. The borough council considered buying the building and turning it into a municipal theatre and cultural centre. Ultimately, they bought it, it was

⁸¹ Frank Mort, *Capital Affairs*, p.92.

demolished in April 1965 and turned into flats, and now all that remains is the name Vaudeville Court.⁸²

⁸² London Metropolitan Archives, London Music Halls, LMA/4237.

Table 6.1: *Variety Theatres: Closure and Demolition*

Theatre	Closed	Demolished /Current use
London Coliseum – Plays and Musicals	Still open	
Opera House Leicester	1950	1950
Grand Derby – Variety	1950	Now a Chinese restaurant
New Cardiff Variety	Still open	
Bristol Hippodrome – Variety	Still open	
Manchester Hippodrome – Variety		Demolished 1964
	Closed as theatre 1955.	
Wood Green Empire – Variety	Converted to TV studios by ATV.	A branch of Halifax
Chiswick Empire – Variety	Closed 1959. Final performance by Liberace to packed house.	
Shepherd’s Bush Empire – Variety	Still open	
Hackney Empire – Variety	Still open	
Stoll Kingsway – Theatre	1957	Demolished 1958, now an office block
Palace Leicester – Variety	1959	Demolished
London Hippodrome - Plays	1958	Still standing (Converted to a nightclub, now a casino)
Birmingham Empire	War Damage 1940	Demolished 1951
Birmingham Royal – Plays	1956	Demolished 1956
Cardiff Empire	1961	1962

Edinburgh Empire – Variety	Converted to Bingo Hall, 1963	
Finsbury Park Empire – Variety	Closed 1960	Demolished 1965
Glasgow Empire – Variety	Closed 1963	Demolished 1969
Hull Palace – Variety and Cabaret	Bombed 1939	
Leeds Empire – Variety	Closed 1961	Demolished 1961
Liverpool Empire – Variety	Still in use	
Newcastle Empire – Variety	1963	Demolished 1963
New Cross Empire	Sold by Moss Empires 1947 Closed as theatre 1954	Demolished 1958
Nottingham Empire – Variety	Closed 1958	Demolished 1969
Nottingham Royal – Plays	Still in use	
Sheffield Empire – Variety	Closed 1959	Demolished 1959
Southampton Empire	Still in use as the Mayflower	
Stratford Empire	Bombed 1940	Subsequently demolished

Sources: Matthew Lloyd, 'Theatres in Derby, Derbyshire, East Midlands',

<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/DerbyTheatres.htm> [accessed 15th January 2022];

'The Ardwick Empire', Our Manchester,

<http://manchesterhistory.net/manchester/gone/empire.html>;

'Wood Green Empire Theatre', Cinema Treasures, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/32746>
[accessed 15th January 2022];

London Metropolitan Archives, 'London Music Halls', LMA/4237;

'The Empire Theatre, Corner of Smallbrook Street and Hurst Street, Birmingham', Arthur Lloyd,
<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Birmingham/EmpirePalaceTheatreBirmingham.htm>;

'The Birmingham Royal', Arthur Lloyd,
<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Birmingham/TheatreRoyalNewStreetBirmingham.htm> [accessed 6 January 2022];

'The Festival Theatre', Arthur Lloyd, <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Edinburgh/Festival.htm> [accessed 6 January 2022];

Mackintosh and Sell (eds.), *Curtains!!! or A new life for old theatres* (Eastbourne, 1982), p. 159; pp. 219–224;

'Liverpool Empire', ATG Tickets - Venues, <https://www.atgtickets.com/venues/liverpool-empire/> [accessed 12 January 2022];

Howard, *London Theatres and Music Halls*, p. 158;

London Metropolitan Archives, London Music Halls, LMA/4237;

'Who We Are - Theatre Royal', Theatre Royal - Royal Concert Hall website, <https://trch.co.uk/who-we-are/> [accessed 15th January 2022];

'About us', Mayflower Theatre, <https://www.mayflower.org.uk/about-us/> [accessed 17 January 2022];

'The Empire Palace of Varieties, 55 Broadway, Stratford East', Arthur Lloyd, <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/StratfordEast.htm> [accessed 6 January 2022].

The development of television and variety are intertwined. It was apparent that those at the top regarded television as the future of variety, and that the 'live experience' of the theatres could be adequately recreated in living rooms through television sets. Oliver Double entitles his chapter on this subject, 'Television murders variety'.⁸³

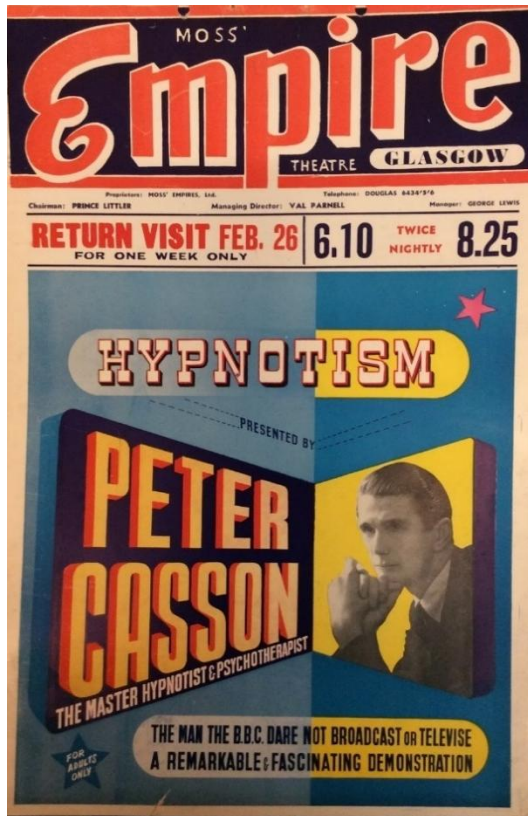


Illustration 6.1: Bill Poster, 26 February 1951, Glasgow Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive.

There were crossovers between television and variety. Variety attempted to use the success of television in the same way that it had done with radio, essentially using television as a promotional tool. The example of hypnotist Peter Casson being too controversial for television was the most interesting.⁸⁴

However, this was a different type of broadcasting compared to radio; the kind of crossover show that was possible for radio performers, who could bring their acts or perform their shows *in situ*, was not as desirable. Singers and comedians could

bring their acts, but this was less of a symbiotic relationship and variety now needed to exploit the success of television.⁸⁵ Acts were now promoted as 'stars of television' in a hope that the lure of seeing performers 'in the flesh' would maintain audience numbers.

⁸³ Double, *Britain Had Talent.*, p. 72.

⁸⁴ BMHS Poster Archive, Glasgow Empire, 26 February 1951; Stephen Amidon, 'Obituary: Peter Casson', *Independent*, 28 October 1995, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-peter-casson-1579819.html> [accessed 13 December 2021].

⁸⁵ Double, *Britain Had Talent.*, p. 73.

Teddie Beverley, of the Beverley Sisters, believed that initially variety experienced a similar impact to radio, and many wanted to see those who were on television in real life at the theatres.⁸⁶ Beverley believes this meant that her group were able to sell out venues.⁸⁷ However, the fact that the live experience of performers did not have the added extra of visual appeal meant that, as Beverley states, these performances could be viewed by audiences as 'disappointing'.⁸⁸ Double states the case of Benny Hill having made his name on the small screen, which helped him to establish his name in variety.

Conclusions

That television would never possess the innate frisson and immediacy of live entertainment was insignificant against the advantage that it could be enjoyed from the comfort of one's home. This was also beneficial to the performers, to whom bigger pay-outs for less time and travel presented an appeal.

This did undermine the structures of variety and the many subsidiary workers and economies that were reliant on performers moving from theatre to theatre every week. For those at the top though, this did not damage their bottom line and, if they acted quickly, they could transfer their contacts and product to the small screen and still retain the profits.

Those willing to switch to television rapidly had not fully reckoned on the limitations of a studio-based performance. Situation comedies, variety shows, and satire still required studio audiences most of the time. The silent echo of the television studio did not replicate the atmosphere or experience to which people were accustomed. The collective warmth and rapport with an audience is still used in television and radio today.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

When audiences are taken away, the same problems apply. The unique experience of comedy, even more so than music, is heightened by the group experience and mentality. Robert Provine amongst others has contended that laughter is infectious, and the group dynamic makes laughter stronger and makes people more likely to begin laughing.⁸⁹ In the short term, the collective experience of the music halls and variety theatres seemed outmoded, but in the longer term, anthropologists and scientists would recognise that television was unlikely to fulfil the same need in society. Variety theatres packed to the rafters had a unique energy. The declining audiences and enthusiasm had blunted this and made those in charge of variety more willing to let go of this performance style and the space.

By this stage, in 1957, the number of profitable weeks at the Moss Empire theatres was dwindling. This shows that at these major venues around the country the real dropping off point for many of them was the mid-1950s. After 1955, the profits for variety theatres were severely affected. Television was a formidable competitor and not one that variety could use as a promotional tool.

These figures show that by the end of this period the profits of the Moss Empires chain had dropped significantly. However, it is important to note that the chain was still profitable, although it had reduced the numbers of theatres, and a lot was now being made by the London Palladium and non-variety West End theatres in their portfolio. Moss Empires was the major player in variety theatres and, considering smaller chains and independent theatres, variety was a financially significant operator in the world of entertainment.

⁸⁹ Robert Provine, 'Laughter' in *American Scientist*, 84, 1 (1996), pp. 38–45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29775596>.

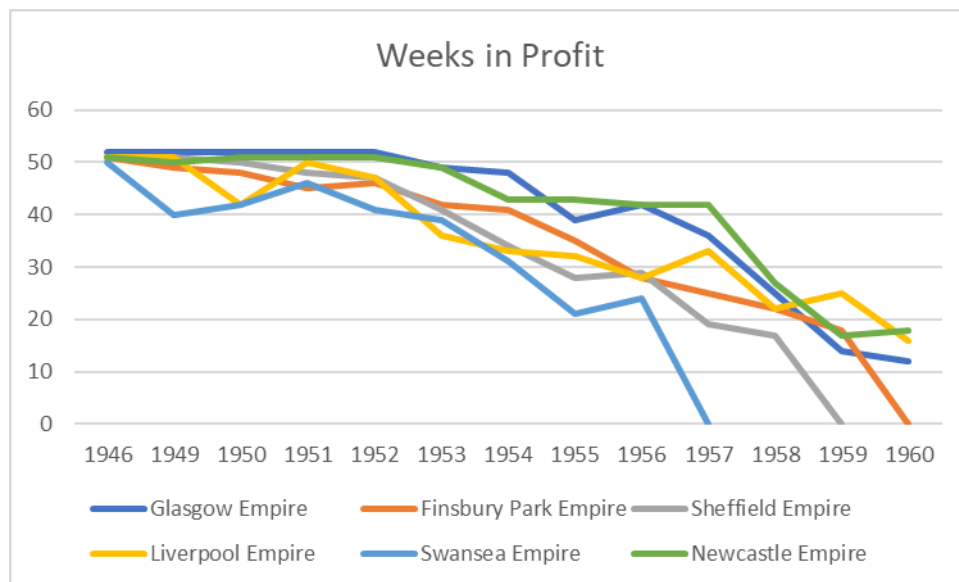
The landscape of entertainment had shifted and the impresarios that had procured and developed talent for variety theatres had focused their attention on television. There was sufficient competition in the early television franchises between these competing interests to preoccupy the industry moguls and provide work for major variety performers. The rest of the industry would be allowed to wilt. The significant talent pool of variety comedians was drained.

The immediate post-war period experienced a comedy boom. There were opportunities for comics, comedians, and comic actors on the variety stage, in theatrical productions, on the radio, on film, and finally on television. At the same time, many comedians had found their feet in the services in organisations such as ENSA. At the start of this period, there was a significant network of theatres, British film was still running, and radio comedy was thriving. Television promoted the most successful and popular acts. It is almost analogous to letting the lower divisions or grassroots of football wither because they are not as profitable. The breeding and testing ground for honing an act had disappeared and it meant that the route to becoming a professional comedian changed. An experience in a university troupe, like Footlights for more affluent performers, or the emerging working men's clubs, offered new routes into entertainment.

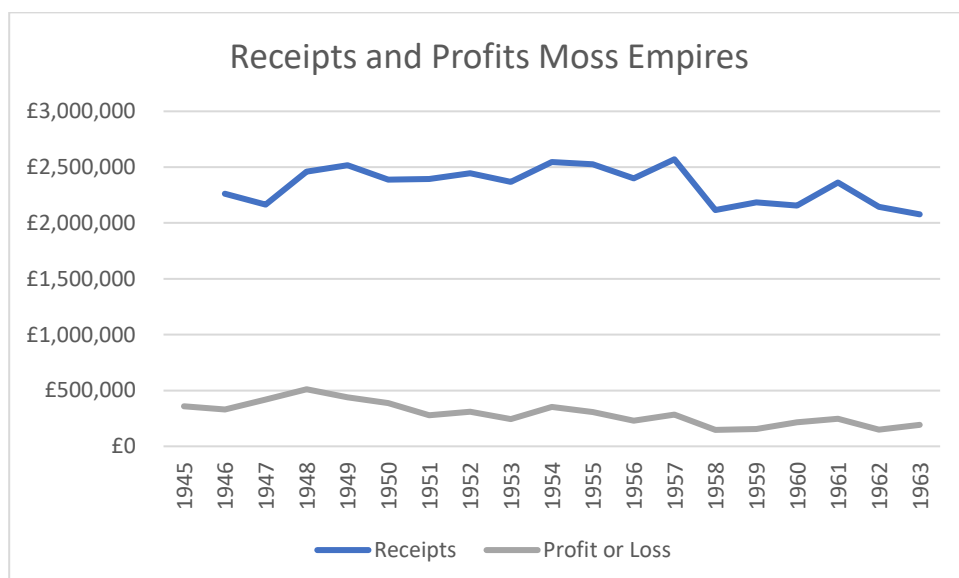
Television continued to rely on those developed within the traditions of variety entertainment. Until the twenty-first century, performers like Bruce Forsyth were on Saturday night television, as top draws. This was not mere nostalgia, as light entertainment had been developed from variety and the skills in connecting with a live audience were essential to creating authentic entertainment. The studio audience for situation comedy, recorded stand-up, and talent shows, and light entertainment is a standard. The kinds of compères and performers that have been successful at this –

Forsyth, Morecambe and Wise, Les Dawson, Mike and Bernie Winters – had some background or schooling in variety and live performance on the stage.

Graph 6.1: *Weeks in Profit for Selected Moss Empire Theatres, 1946–60*



Graph 6.2: *Total Receipts and Profits Moss Empire 1945–1963*



The figures for receipts and profits are not adjusted for inflation.

In 1946, the Moss Empires receipts adjusted for inflation (for 2019) were £95,451,525; this dropped to £43,826,21 in 1963.

Table 6.2: *Moss Empire Receipts, Profit and Loss including comparison to previous year and figures adjusted for inflation based on 1946.*

Year	Receipts	Adjusted for inflation	+/- on previous year	Profit or Loss	Adjusted for inflation	+/- on previous year
1945				£357,791	£346,608	£78,138
1946	£2,262,083	£2,262,083		£329,000	£329,007	£28,784
1947	£2,163,178	£2,020,962	£98,905	£418,843	£391,307	£89,836
1948	£2,460,667	£2,136,270	£297,489	£511,089	£443,711	£92,246
1949	£2,518,025	£2,124,583	£57,358	£438,068	£369,620	£73,021
1950	£2,389,362	£1,954,933	£128,025	£388,193	£317,612	£49,875
1951	£2,394,165	£1,795,624	£4,803	£277,895	£208,421	£110,298
1952	£2,444,699	£1,679,564	£50,534	£310,767	£213,504	£32,872
1953	£2,368,028	£1,578,685	£76,671	£243,712	£162,475	£67,055
1954	£2,545,927	£1,664,407	£177,899	£353,243	230,934	£109,531
1955	£2,526,803	£1,582,916	£19,124	£306,241	£191,845	£47,002
1956	£2,399,633	£1,430,245	£127,170	£230,115	£137,155	£76,126
1957	£2,570,482	£1,479,808	£180,849	£283,132	£162,997	£53,017
1958	£2,115,564	£1,180,170	£454,918	£147,200	£82,1156	£135,932
1959	£2,183,974	£1,213,319	£68,410	£153,749	£85,416	£6,549
1960	£2,156,947	£1,186,101	£27,027	£216,094	£118,830	£62,345
1961	£2,363,141	£1,256,000	£206,194	£247,372	£131,477.	£31,278
1962	£2,144,356	£1,092,408	£218,785	£148,979	£75,895	£78,393
1963	£2,077,254	£1,038,627	£67,102	£192,621	£96,311	£43,642
1964 (Until ATV Takeover Oct 1964)	£1,684,740		£126,535 (based on previous year's takings on October)	£146,333		£31,416

Sources: V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964, GB 71

THM/303/1/10.

1945 profit £15,558,446 (adjusted for 2019 prices)

1948 profit £18,722,948 (adjusted for 2019 prices)

1962 profit £1,631,456 (adjusted for 2019 prices)

1963 profit £4,063,946 (adjusted for 2019 prices).⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Bank of England Inflation Calculator, <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>.

7. Naughtiness, knowingness, and nudity

Attracting audiences became an increasing problem as the 1950s unfolded for variety theatres. The use of variety spaces had already begun to be segregated by the introduction of pop and rock and roll audiences. This left variety operators with a conundrum: the family-oriented, twice-nightly format was still the core part of the business, but it had begun to fail. A realistic alternative was to specialise nights to niche audiences even further, as had already happened by catering to young men and women. Changing attitudes towards sex and nudity after the war and the commercial success of the Windmill Theatre and subsequently Paul Raymond offered a tempting proposition for variety theatres that was not universally welcomed.

Music hall had always flirted with what was acceptable. It tested the bounds of decency but pulled back from the precipice. Peter Bailey has offered an excellent description of 'knowingness' and the unwritten codes of these establishments, where comedy, striptease, and nudity often found themselves sharing the same space.¹ Both music hall and cabaret culture were afforded a relatively low status in terms of cultural capital, and their shared blurred boundaries of acceptability meant that they were often paired together. Sometimes this led to unlikely or unflattering combinations and circumstances for both forms of entertainment.

¹ Peter Bailey, 'Conspiracies of Meaning', pp. 138–170.

The Windmill Theatre

One of the most significant locations where comedy and nudity collided was the Windmill Theatre in Soho. It also revelled in the public attention that it garnered. In 1932, *Revuedeille* opened, a show that featured both traditional variety and nude women in static displays or *tableaux vivants*. The Windmill was famous for never missing a performance during the Blitz under the ownership of Laura Henderson and the management of Vivian van Damm. 'We Never Closed' was plastered on posters and often mocked with the phrase 'We're never clothed'.² Under the guidance of van Damm, the theatre launched the careers of many British comedians and future mainstays of light entertainment, as diverse as Peter Sellers, Tommy Cooper, Tony Hancock, Morecambe and Wise, and Bruce Forsyth.

There had been many attempts at bringing nudity (in a static format) to a wider audience, and Paul Willetts states that this had been staged since 1847 at the Walhalla Gallery in Leicester Square: 'Such mildly arousing tableaux had, by the late nineteenth century, become a common ingredient of music-hall bills. Suffice to say the shows at the Windmill merely reanimated a dormant tradition, rapidly spawning imitators.'³

The Windmill's desire for attention has been rewarded by historians and popular culture: four feature films have been dedicated to the Windmill; in 1957 the BBC featured a 25th anniversary series of programmes; and it has attracted more literature both in

² Rod McPhee, 'Never closed, never CLOTHED: How the Windmill sailed close to the wind', *Mirror*, 2 November 2014, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/never-closed-never-clothed-how-4555998> [accessed 20 January 2021].

³ Paul Willetts, *The look of love: the life and times of Paul Raymond, Soho's king of clubs* (London, 2013), p. 46.

academia and outside than many parts of the comedy industry.⁴ The so-called 'Windmill girls' were very much a part of an emerging pin-up girl culture during World War Two, as a form of commodified sexuality.

The Windmill initially offered non-stop variety productions, but this did not attract sufficient interest or revenue. Vivian van Damm changed the plan for the theatre to attract a new audience. In 1940 Lord Clarendon, the Lord Chamberlain, clarified the rules that the acceptable criteria for stage nudity were that the subject had to be motionless and that displays should be distinctly separate from other acts by means of a break in the performance.⁵ Van Damm manipulated these loopholes to create the successful Windmill formula. 'My idea', he said, 'was that perfectly proportioned young women should be presented in artistic poses, representing a frieze entablature or a famous classical painting.'⁶ Comedy turns, and other variety acts were incorporated between the dances and nude displays. The performances were still non-stop, a gruelling six-a-day.⁷

The theatre was designed as an intimate space. It had fewer than 400 seats, and the audience sometimes had a 'close-up' and 'intimate' view of performers.⁸ Customers, predominantly male, sometimes chose to masturbate under the cover of a newspaper. The audience were monitored by a member of staff with a pair of binoculars.⁹ This role

⁴ *Tonight and Every Night* [film], directed by Victor Saville (Columbia Pictures, 1945); *Murder at the Windmill* [film], directed by Val Guest (Angel Productions, 1949); *Secrets of a Windmill Girl* [film], directed by Arnold L. Miller (Searchlight Films, 1966); *Mrs Henderson Presents* [film], directed by Stephen Frears (The Weinstein Company, BBC Films, Pathé, Future Films, 2005); Vivian van Damm, *Tonight and Every Night* (London, 1952); Sheila van Damm, *No Excuses* (London, 1957); Sheila van Damm, *We Never Closed: The Windmill Story* (London, 1967).

⁵ Mort, 'Striptease', p.36.

⁶ van Damm, *Tonight and Every Night*, p. 86.

⁷ Secombe, *Arias and Raspberries*, p. 132.

⁸ Mort, 'Striptease', p. 35.

⁹ Barfe, *Turned Out Nice Again*, p. 78.

was taken in the pre-war years by Kenneth More, who worked as an assistant manager, before he became an actor of note.¹⁰

These sordid tales are contradicted by the squeaky-clean press releases provided by Windmill's house manager and press officer, Kenneth Bandy, which are full of marriages, sometimes between the Windmill girls and comedians, courting, hobbies, and pastimes and are only embellished by the vital statistics of the models in the mid-1950s.¹¹ The Windmill was not a 'seedy establishment' in the eyes of the wider public and it is that respectability that meant that the popular press of the time found it so fascinating. It was acceptable for them to print pictures of the girls.¹² These press releases extol the womanly virtues of the girls, including their education and extra-curricular interests, along with the exploits of van Damm's daughter Sheila as a rally driver.¹³ All this can be interpreted as a smokescreen for their objectification.

The women in the theatre were recruited at a young age and there was a high rotation of recruits. In the press releases, 'new girls' were given a lot of fanfare but for every British film star like Jean Kent, who worked at the theatre, there could be a dozen more girls who drifted off into chorus lines and / or obscurity.¹⁴ Performances at the Windmill often acted as a stepping-stone for comics, the majority of whom secured work on the variety circuit, radio, and television.¹⁵ It was less likely for the dancers, in their relatively anonymous role, to be able to progress into a more legitimate sphere. Perhaps unlike their male counterparts, despite the seeming innocence and bonhomie of the

¹⁰ Kenneth More, *More or Less* (London, 1978), p. 78.

¹¹ Windmill Theatre, Windmill Theatre Press and Marketing Material, c. 1940s–1960s. V&A Theatre and Performance Collections. GB 71 THM/422.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*; Kynaston, *Family Britain*, p. 572

V&A-TPC, Windmill Theatre Press and Marketing Material, c. 1940s–1960s, GB 71 THM/422;

¹⁴ V&A-TPC, Windmill Theatre Press and Marketing Material, c. 1940s–1960s, GB 71 THM/422.

¹⁵ van Damm, *We Never Closed*, p. 112.

Windmill, the girls were more likely to be viewed as 'tainted' by their time working in such an establishment.

The degrading role of the women in the Windmill is glossed over by many of the works in popular cultural portrayals of the Windmill.¹⁶ Women appear to be the main attraction yet insignificant at the same time. It is not a revelatory argument to view the Windmill as a fundamentally sexist and misogynistic enterprise. However, the portrait of the Windmill as an innocuous and inoffensive institution in popular culture is frequent, including the 2005 film *Mrs. Henderson Presents*. Historical coverage and scholarship have drawn a veil of respectability over the Windmill in popular history. It established a place in the historical literature, not afforded to the rest of the variety industry, which unlike the Victorian music hall remains marginalised in historiography. The Windmill's sexuality and acceptability mean it is an alluring topic.

The Windmill occupied a position in British society that is suitably contradictory. In common with other British cultural institutions – the saucy seaside postcard, *Carry On* films, the comedy of Max Miller and Frankie Howerd – it was both chaste and naughty. The Windmill provided an odd combination of moral viewpoints. It was a lascivious, male-dominated establishment but simultaneously maintained a sheen of innocence. The streets of Soho could be seen as a liminal space, akin to seaside resorts, where the usually prohibited was acceptable and this mentality certainly seeps into attitudes towards the Windmill. The Windmill embodied many of the inherent contradictions in British sexuality and, according to Frank Mort, it occupied an important place in mid-twentieth century British cultural life. 'Even the Lord Chamberlain, acting as the state's theatre

¹⁶ 'Windmill Girls (Let's Join The Ladies)' (1944), *British Pathé Archive*, Canister NSP 421, Media Urn 50516, tape PM1574, <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/188110/>; 'Anne Edwards (Let's Join The Ladies)' (1944), *British Pathé Archive*, Canister NSP 421, Media Urn 50515, tape PM1574, <https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/188109/>.

ensor, famously described the Windmill as a “national safety valve”, evoking a hydraulic model of male sexuality to endorse the theatre as an institution guaranteeing collective sexual release.’¹⁷

The Windmill’s position as a post-war comedy force emerged from a curious congress between sex and war. Young comics who first experienced show business in the entertainment corps emerged into the already crowded variety circuit. They struggled to make a career in the industry and the Windmill’s recruitment policies offered a route in. Van Damm and Henderson were almost exclusively interested in young, British talent. The Windmill was synonymous with youth. Fresh faces were present in both the male and female performers. Sheila van Damm explains that the most fertile recruiting period was after the war. Hundreds of entertainers came to the Windmill to audition. She explained that it was not easy identifying stars and that acts could change hugely during their careers. Those that emerged as stars were unrecognisable from the performers that auditioned. She explains that her father had an instinct for spotting talent.¹⁸ Comics that made early and formative appearances at the theatre included (along with the already mentioned Sellers, Forsyth, Morecambe and Wise, and Cooper) Jimmy Edwards, future Goon Show stars, Harry Secombe and Michael Bentine, Arthur English, and Bill Kerr.¹⁹ Vivian van Damm’s hit-rate was not 100 percent though, and he turned down Spike Milligan, Norman Wisdom, Roy Castle, Benny Hill, and even the future critic Kenneth Tynan, performing a comedy turn.²⁰

The Windmill emerged with a raised profile due to the Second World War. A large part of its success can be attributed to war and conditions created by war. War had

¹⁷ Mort, ‘Striptease’, p. 30.

¹⁸ van Damm, *We Never Closed*, p. 110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 110–111.

shaped these young military-comics. The Windmill possibly propelled many to seek an alternative career route. The theatre offered the opportunity to leapfrog established performers onto the variety stage.²¹ These young comics reflected a wider trend in British post-war society, young men, demobbed from the forces, with renewed expectations and a fresh outlook. This can be witnessed in much of the comedy that they produced and could explain their popularity.

Scripts, descriptions of costumes, and the organisation of the static nude displays for all the *Revudeville* shows had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office to ensure that they complied with standards of decency. This meant that the entire monologues for stand-up acts had to be submitted too. This is a rarity, as stand-up is most commonly oral and ephemeral, often evolving even if recorded on tape. The Lord Chamberlain's staff did remove certain dubious jokes from these monologues although sometimes they crept through.²² Other acts like Tommy Cooper and Harry Secombe merely had a description of their act included, in Cooper's case 'A conjuring act'. However, the elements that did not translate into the written form, such as Secombe's frequent blowing of raspberries or any gesticulations, were harder to censor. It is almost as if the Lord Chamberlain was complicit in the game of decency brinkmanship that occurred at the Windmill.

The experience of comedians was often poor, as the audience had little interest in their presence, and several high-profile comics have commented on this. Tony Hancock most eloquently expressed this when he said he learned at the Windmill 'to die gracefully,

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²² Windmill Theatre Archive (Jane Kerner Gift), *V&A Collections, Theatre and Performance*, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/archive/ARC64474>; Windmill Theatre Press and Marketing Material, *V&A Collections, Theatre and Performance*, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/archive/ARC75240>; Revudeville no. 194, 198 and 199, 200, Revudeville Scripts, Windmill Theatre Archive, *V&A Collections, Theatre and Performance*, THM/257.

like a swan.’²³ This was not an ideal space for any of the performers. It is worth questioning how the Windmill has achieved such a place in popular culture. The staff at the Windmill had an extraordinary ability to self-publicise and were able to transport the reputation of a relatively ordinary variety show into a place that was of great interest to the media.²⁴ The *Picture Post*, amongst others, was willing to devote specials to the establishment in an attempt to tantalise their readership.²⁵ The van Damm family were very successful self-publicists and were clearly very keen to maintain a legacy for their ‘achievements’, including an extensive and well-maintained archive, possibly an attempt to sanitise the work of the Windmill, to establish it as a ‘proper theatre’ with legitimate and artistic weight.²⁶

Van Damm profited from readily available young entertainers emerging from the forces and he needed to fulfil the non-stop requirements of his shows. He was clearly an able talent-spotter, who had an eye for a successful comic. The Windmill can easily be portrayed as a seedy curiosity in Soho but the legacy of the comedians that gained their first opportunity is difficult to deny. The most important performers for the television age began their careers in Great Windmill Street. Comedians that performed in the venue testify that the venue prepared them quite successfully for the silent, mirthless atmospheres of the television studios when this is what they received from the Windmill audience.²⁷

²³ Simon Callow, ‘The lad himself’, *The Guardian*, 27 December 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/dec/27/biography-tony-hancock> [accessed 15 February 2022].

²⁴ V&A-TPC, Windmill Theatre Press and Marketing Material, c. 1940s–1960s, GB 71 THM/422.

²⁵ John Chillingworth, ‘Non Stop Peep Show’, *Picture Post*, vol. 52, no. 3, 21 July 1951; ‘The Windmill Theatre Throws a Party’, *Picture Post*, vol. 30, no.9, 2 March 1946, pp. 18-19.

²⁶ Mort, ‘Striptease’, p. 5.

²⁷ John Fisher, *Tommy Cooper: Always Leave Them Laughing* (London, 2006), p. 84; Barry Cryer, *The Chronicles of Hernia* (London, 2011), Kindle Loc 333; Secombe, *Arias and Raspberries* p.132; Lewis, *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers*, pp.146-161

The success of the Windmill was due to packaging. The variety theatre, despite still attracting profitable audiences in the late 1940s and early 1950s, was beginning to look staid and old-fashioned. The productions were unable to promote themselves to modern audiences. In contrast, the Windmill marketed itself successfully; it was youthful and sexy. Later, the variety theatres would adopt the nude tableaux tactics of the Windmill. In turn, Paul Raymond's tactics would help spell the end of variety at the Windmill in Soho (he bought it) and the variety theatre audiences plummeted partly due to the introduction of these strip shows. By the 1960s, the Windmill too looked old-fashioned, and Soho became a truly seedy space. The Windmill exploited a perception of permissiveness that only existed between the 1930s and 1950s. It sold sex to the mainstream.

This theatre needs to be viewed within the wider context of variety theatres and not in isolation. The availability and extent of its archive, the academic and non-academic interest it has received, have skewed its relative standing in theatrical entertainment. However, financially and in terms of attendance, the Windmill was insignificant compared to the Stoll Moss network of variety theatres. The idea that 'sex sells' has influenced coverage of the Windmill and, it could be argued, afforded the Windmill too prominent a position. This thesis has sought to redress the balance; further analysis of the nationally important variety theatres and comedy industry after 1930 is required.

The Windmill was not alone in offering strip-shows and nudity. There had been sporadic attempts in variety to exhibit nudes and there were private clubs of Soho that were able to circumvent the Lord Chamberlain's rules. Well-funded nude shows were not

regularly featured at major theatres in the years before 1955; however, second- and third-tier theatres did show revues with names like *Ooh La La*, *Oui Oui*.²⁸

Paul Raymond and Variety Nude Shows

As traditional variety began to struggle, strip and nude acts seemed an attractive proposition to variety theatre booking agents. Variety began to struggle in the face of increasing challenges from broadcast media. The rise of popular singers and teen idols in the 1950s had created fragmented audiences. The traditional family audience that had been so carefully fostered by the variety theatres in the late Victorian era onwards was beginning to fracture. Trying to construct a bill that included acts that catered to this much wider range of tastes was difficult, although Max Miller and Lonnie Donegan bridged this gap to record together. Many of the traditional variety entertainers felt threatened by these younger acts.²⁹

Paul Raymond came from a humble background and had a short-lived attempt as a mind-reader.³⁰ He began his ventures with two volunteer nudes in an otherwise normal show and continued to grow his format in the following years.³¹

In the wake of the success of television, there were declining audience numbers and negative balance sheets. Variety theatres were offered a new option by entrepreneurs such as Paul Raymond. Using the template of the Windmill Theatre, Raymond offered theatres the opportunity to attract a male audience by putting on nude shows. These would follow the Lord Chamberlain's rules that the women must remain stationary in tableaux vivants. An exclusively male audience was a small price to pay for

²⁸ Willetts, *The Look of Love*, p. 43.

²⁹ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 215.

³⁰ Willetts, *The Look of Love*, p. 37.

³¹ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 215.

a steady income. At one time, Paul Raymond had ten shows touring the variety theatres at once, not all of them featuring nude performers.³² Raymond's business model began by offering his shows to smaller theatres. Raymond promoted his shows in seaside towns like Morecambe and Clacton.

Raymond had very specific requirements for the women who worked in his shows, ones that betrayed a strangely prudish streak. He did not want breasts that were too large or women who did not behave 'respectably', 'hanging around milk bars' being one of the activities forbidden.³³ He even employed the drag performer Danny LaRue (whom he knew from his days as a mind reader!) to help the performers walk, pose, and conduct themselves in a 'ladylike' way.³⁴

One of Raymond's early shows was a show based on the model for the *Daily Mirror*'s 'Jane' cartoon, Chrystabel Leighton-Porter, that toured in 1952 for several years.³⁵ She was a client of Lew and Leslie Grade's and Raymond employed her to star in very successful nude touring revues based on the cartoon.

... in 1953 I had four touring revues; then six; the heyday was 1956, when I had ten going at one time. In 1957 I could see that the halls were closing – I had eight shows; and in 1958 when I started the Raymond Revuebar [in London's Soho] I still had four touring revues. They were mostly nude shows – not all, I did one called *Las Vegas After Dark* which had no nudes, *Hot from Harlem* with Shirley Bassey, and shows with people like Bernie Winters or the Dallas Boys. Previous nude shows had just been touring revues with nudes in them – models who stood still; I was the first person to do one where the

³² Willetts, *The Look of Love*, p. 67.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ 'Paul Raymond presents The New Front-Page Strip Show "We Strip To-Night"', *Evesham Standard & West Midland Observer*, Friday 11 July 1952,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002560/19520711/054/0004> [accessed 20 January 2022];

Adrian Bingham, 'An Introduction to the Daily Mirror', *Mirror Historical Archive 1903–2000* (2019), accessed via <https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/adrian-bingham-introduction-daily-mirror> [accessed 20 January 2022];

Steve Holland, 'Obituary: Chrystabel Leighton-Porter', *The Guardian Online*, 16 December 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/dec/16/guardianobituaries> [accessed 23 January 2022].

whole show was built as a nude revue, and all my revues did very well and packed all the theatres out.³⁶

To consolidate the appeal of his shows, Raymond also sought ways to by-pass censorship rules:

By not having any Sketches in the show, but just a series of speciality acts, single comics, and with no talking in the scenes – we had some dance scenes, but no talking – I didn't come under the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain. We did have several occasions when we had to tell the local Watch Committee to contact the Lord Chamberlain's office to confirm the Lord Chamberlain had no jurisdiction over the show. Then the local Watch Committee would do their own censorship – for example, we had a girl on a revolve, and in Manchester they wouldn't let it revolve showing her backside bare, and in Leeds they wouldn't let it revolve showing her front bare.³⁷

By 1956, Raymond planned to expand his output to eight shows. In *The Stage*, in January 1956, he claimed to have 'plenty of ideas' and the article goes on to describe the different spectacles that he produced, divided into distinct categories, at the major Moss and Stoll theatres: 'gimmick' shows to capture press attention (see lion-taming), 'come-ons' to attract patrons into the theatres and, finally, an 'annual' show. All of these featured nudes. Along with lion taming, a man and girl would perform over the cage, within reach of the lion and Manz and Chico would perform knife throwing around two nude women.³⁸

... I am against girls with poor figures posing amid tatty surroundings and many do. No one can accuse me of this unforgivable fault. There is always something else going on the stage whilst my girls are posing. You do not need to look at the girls, if you do not want to.³⁹

³⁶ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 215.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ 'Paul Raymond Will Tour Eight Shows In 1956', *The Stage*, 12 January 1956, p. 3, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19560112/024/0003> [accessed 23 January 2022].

³⁹ *Ibid.*

He also claimed to 'pay his girls well' in order to 'keep them'. He had his own fleet of coaches to transport the show. He railed against cheap managers that were looking to pay less for his increasingly elaborate shows. In total, the article claims that 200 people would be employed by his productions.

There was opposition to Raymond's shows and his shows were widely reported on in both the local and national press.⁴⁰ Stories about nudes offered the newspapers easy headline material and could easily manipulate the moral duality of the 1950s. The articles were popular to write and could spice up a boring edition with some salacious descriptions, one of Raymond's famous gimmicks and often a quote from him defending his work. The backlash and moral outrage of local citizens and watch committees allowed the newspapers to take the moral high ground. It is fascinating to see how many of these observers had watched the shows themselves, yet still were scandalised or doubtful of their artistic integrity. There were complaints to the Sunderland Corporation Watch Committee from the Sunderland Standing Conference of Women's Organisations; at their conference in June 1956 they passed a resolution criticising the nude shows at the Sunderland Empire.⁴¹ 'We regard nude shows as an unnecessary form of entertainment, and in view of the fact that that it is the only theatre in Sunderland, we think that the bills should be fit for all members of the family to enjoy.'⁴² The Chief Constable said all shows complied with the strict rules laid out by the Lord Chamberlain and he had seen all but one of the shows.⁴³

⁴⁰ 'Anti-Nudity', *The Stage*, 19 January 1956, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19560119/031/0004> [accessed 23 January 2022].

⁴¹ 'Nude Shows Complied with Rules', *The Stage*, 27 September 1956, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19560927/014/0001> [accessed 23 January 2022].

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

A letter from a reader of *The Stage* newspaper from 1957 had a contradictory view on Raymond's shows, firstly praising the staging and then morally condemning them. This reflected the curious fascination that they stirred in the public but also the paradoxical guilt and handwringing at the decline of decency they engendered.

I do not agree with Mr. Paul Raymond in his letter to "The Stage", your issue of August 22. I have seen many of Mr. Raymond's shows and they are some of the best I have seen but leaving out the *nudes* they would have been *best*. You do not need *nudes* to make a show. You need talent and it is in England if it is only looked for.

Let's have some good clean variety, where we can take our wives and children. What about it Mr. Raymond – Cyril A.P. Nugus.⁴⁴

The second letter seems to have more insight into the economic implications of the shows and, although there is a discernible outrage in this missive, the financial analysis is sound and tallies with what happened in theatres that hosted Raymond's shows.

It must be obvious to the least informed that the nude show has been the cause of the closure of many theatres already. This type of show has established an audience alien to true variety theatre – an audience composed mostly of men, seeking not music-hall entertainment but something which can hardly be called entertainment or true art. The new type of audience stays away when the more wholesome show is being staged, whilst the family audience, having been disgusted with shows which they consider distasteful, stay away completely, thus avoiding the chance of further embarrassment.

This, then, is more than likely the reason why nude shows play to satisfactory figures whilst other shows at the same theatres do not. Nude shows have most certainly created an audience for themselves, but they have done a great deal towards destroying the family audience – Donald Keyte, Esplanade Hotel, Seaford, Sussex.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ 'What You Say – Points from Letters', *The Stage*, Thursday 12 September 1957, p. 3, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19570912/025/0003> [accessed 7 January 2022].

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The Stage reported that various posters had bill matter censored and pasted over, including the poster for *Paris After Dark* at the Camberwell Palace in London, or a poster with a reference to the risqué World War One song *Mademoiselles From Armentieres, Parlez-Vous?* (which was pasted over in the Midlands). British Railways and the British Poster Advertising Association also banned images of artists such as Coral Gaye. In Wigan, the watch committee decided that artists must not be nude; 'Folies Parisiennes' a posing group was asked to wear chiffon instead (albeit semi-translucid).⁴⁶

In the *Bradford Observer* in 1954, one of the six theatre padres, Rev. Guy Stanbridge, had decided to stop backstage visits whenever the programme included nude showgirls.⁴⁷ He stated 'These nudes shows are billed as artistic poses. They are certainly artistically presented but they are not themselves true art. They appeal to nothing but the lowest instinct of human nature.'⁴⁸

Established performers who saw themselves as popular entertainers were not always happy to appear in shows featuring striptease – especially since, as Wilmut highlights, Raymond's format was quickly copied by other, less tasteful entrepreneurs. 'There were many imitators of Raymond's success – some of them very sleazy, getting their girls practically off the street, much to the disgust of the established variety performers who found themselves forced to work in these shows to make a living. Raymond himself – although many variety performers viewed his shows with distaste – did at least provide a high standard and a range of gimmicks.'⁴⁹

⁴⁶ 'Posters in the News', *The Stage*, 12 August 1954, p.4, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19540812/026/0004> [accessed 7 January 2022].

⁴⁷ 'Nude Shows not True Art - Vicar', *Bradford Observer*, Saturday 25 September 1954, p. 5, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003150/19540925/095/0005> [accessed 23 January 2022].

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 215.

Arthur Fox was Paul Raymond's clearest rival. He was known as Manchester's King of Glamour. He had produced *Six-Five Special* rock and roll shows starring Marty Wilde and had produced striptease and nude shows since 1947.⁵⁰ He eventually established a similar revue bar to Raymond's, based in Manchester.⁵¹

With time, Raymond's revues began to use more and more outlandish ways to attract audiences, including world record attempts, lions, and knife-throwing.⁵² Raymond explained his multiple-layered approach to attracting audiences to his shows:

We had nudes in a lion's cage, nudes *in* ice, the only Chinese nudes in Europe ... but while the gimmicks were there to bring the audiences in, the entertainment was still there to keep them in and encourage them to tell their friends. It was very difficult for us to get onto the Moss and Stoll tours, but in the end we did, and we were playing to more money than many of the stars.⁵³

Raymond's views are rife with contradictions. He claims packed houses, but many variety theatres were struggling, and he was strangely coy about both the models and the nature of the audience – not unlike the promotion of acts at the Windmill. There had been much debate about whether variety's family environment was under threat. Raymond himself railed against the notion that theatres began to be seen as grubby and not venues for children. This undermined the performances that were not based on Raymond's acts or other touring strip-shows. It reinforced the idea that the best family entertainment was available through a television set.

Though Raymond had no hesitation in pocketing the generous rewards from such unequivocal theatrical sexploitation, he still valued the tenets of middle-class propriety enough to deny the true nature of his business. In his eagerness

⁵⁰ 'Arthur Fox – Manchester's King of Glamour', comments section, *Pamela Green*, <https://pamela-green.com/arthur-fox-manchesters-king-of-glamour/#comments> [accessed 9 December 2021].

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Willetts, *The Look of Love*, p. 67.

⁵³ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 215.

to dispel the notion that his shows were the natural habitat of goggle-eyed masturbators, he assured a sceptical journalist from the left-wing Daily Herald that his revues were attracting 'family audiences', that 'children rising from infancy to the teens' were 'taken to his shows by their doting elders'.⁵⁴

The People reported in 1956 that Raymond was giving out 'art photographs' or 'French postcards' for his shows in Aldershot and Doncaster.⁵⁵ There was a collectable series for all six nights of performance. This caused outrage amongst 'social workers, magistrates and clergy'.⁵⁶ The newspaper quoted 'Dr. Helen Herklots, marriage counsellor and wife of the Vicar of Doncaster' saying 'It's a shocking commentary on public taste.'⁵⁷ Raymond countered that the postcards were 'art studies' and 'classy' and were worth two shillings each.⁵⁸ The manager of the Aldershot Hippodrome said that business increased 100 percent the week that the show was in town.⁵⁹ Raymond was clear that 'all publicity is good publicity'.

Willetts describes one memorable performance held in Nottingham in 1956 that received much press at the time. It was 'Les Nuits de Paris', advertised as 'the most daring and fearsome revue ever staged'⁶⁰. A six-day run was planned at the Nottingham Empire, operated by the Moss Empires chain. Every performance of Les Nuits de Paris ended with an act called the "Nudes de Paris". It involved the 20-year-old Phyl Edmond and 23-year-old Zelda Lamone inside a large metal cage, standing completely still on pedestals about one meter high. The women were nude apart from bejewelled G-strings, high-heeled shoes and feathery head-dresses. Inside the cage were also two male lions and a lioness,

⁵⁴ Willetts, *The Look of Love*, p. 60.

⁵⁵ 'Classy Nudes are Given Away', *The People*, Sunday 1 April 1956, p. 7, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000729/19560401/071/0007> [accessed 23 January 2022].

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Willetts, *The Look of Love*, p. 72.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

who leapt on and off three stools under the command of Nikolai, an experienced Greek lion-tamer. It was a routine which had previously been performed 'nearly two hundred times.'⁶¹

However, in front of a full house of 1,800 people at the second house on Saturday 30 June 1956, Nikolai the lion-tamer was mauled on the hand by a lion and the shocked audience saw he had been injured.⁶² The lion-tamer instructed the nearly naked performers not to move and he completed the act and had to have 17 stitches in his hand.⁶³ The lions are described as 'aging' by Willetts and the lion-tamer as 'part-time'. This generated much publicity for Raymond's show but Lamone did not rejoin the show for the next engagement. Raymond's wife agreed to replace Lamone, but on the condition she wore a bikini.⁶⁴ *The Daily Mirror* led with the headline 'Lion Leaps ... Girls Keep Pose' and explained how the lion-tamer told them to stay still, so as not to attract the lion's attention. Nikolai was 'terribly brave' according to the model Zelda; Nikolai explained: "It was no use backing away – I had the girls to think about, apart from saving my own skin".⁶⁵ It is possible to see how Raymond used these events to maximise positive publicity.⁶⁵

Raymond's notoriety did not please all audiences and the front page of *The Stage* on 15 August 1957 reported that 'rowdies' at a show of 'Follies Striptease' 'threw glasses, cream, and egg from the gallery, showered the stage with coppers and gave slow hand claps' until the musicians had to retreat.⁶⁶ The protest, if it can truly be called one, was

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Willetts, *The Look of Love*, pp. 72–3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75 and p. 76.

⁶⁵ 'Lion Leaps ... Nudes Keep Pose', *The Daily Mirror*, 2 July 1956, p. 5, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000560/19560702/015/0005?browse=true> [accessed 23 January 2022].

⁶⁶ 'Nude Shows on the Way Out?', *The Stage*, Thursday 15 August 1957, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19570815/017/0001> [accessed 23 January 2022].

claimed to be organised by about six 'troublemakers', who were escorted to the street.⁶⁷

'Our Scottish correspondent reports that Glasgow does not want nude shows and appreciates the more traditional forms of variety – the best acts, top names and the pick of the American stars when they are in this country'.⁶⁸

Raymond, always willing to harness media interest, seems genuinely irritated in his letter contradicting *The Stage's* interpretation, which was published in the next week's issue:

'Nude Shows On the way Out?' The answer is definitely NO

This answer will be confirmed by all theatres that play our shows. My production business is growing each year and the weekly takings this year are far greater than ever before: my shows are bigger and have now created a huge following in most towns and cities of Great Britain. I fail to see therefore that "Nude shows are on the way out".

If and when the public decide that they no longer wish to patronise these shows I can assure you that I will be the first to refrain from giving the public what they do not want.

You state the rowdiness at the Glasgow Empire has been interpreted as a sign that Glasgow does not want Nude shows ... How wrong you are, and how misinformed you have been, is proved by the box office returns and I am sure had you been aware of the figures that my show "Folies Striptease" played to, you would certainly not have printed what you did. The show was playing to capacity houses and on the Friday and Saturday hundreds, repeat hundreds of patrons were turned away. This is indeed a strange way of showing that the people of Glasgow do not want nude shows.

Was your leading article a genuine mistake or are you trying to use the rowdyism, which did occur, as an excuse to condemn nude shows? It seems to me that your Glasgow correspondent is, without doubt, trying to use the incident for his own personal likes and dislikes. He says that Glasgow appreciates the more traditional forms of Variety; he himself perhaps does, but the box office does not altogether agree with him.⁶⁹

Raymond's letters demonstrate the tension within the variety industry. We must assume some vested interest in the readers of *The Stage*, as a theatre industry publication,

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ 'Nude Shows: Two Letters in Response to Last Week's Report', *The Stage*, 22 August 1957, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19570822/027/0003> [accessed 23 January 2022].

but although Raymond was given the opportunity to both defend and promote his shows, a clear backlash and insightful awareness of the implications of the shows is present in this correspondence.

Nude Revues: lifeline or nail in the coffin of Variety?

The arguments about the impact of the nude shows cannot escape the economic realities that faced variety in the 1950s. Wilmut notes that many variety performers expressed dissatisfaction that 'nude shows – whether well-presented or not – were a death blow to their business because they drove away the family audience. Certainly, in the climate of the times few young men would feel they could take their girlfriends to a nude show, and few families would feel that these shows were suitable for their children; but in any case, by the mid-1950s the family audiences were deserting the rapidly decreasing theatres.'⁷⁰

Raymond's revue shows may have made him money but the 'quick buck' that variety made in bolstering audiences began to backfire. In the case of the Sheffield Empire, it came to rely on an increasing number of nude shows. This provided initial small profits: Gipsy Rose Lee at the Sheffield Empire in September (13th) 1952 made a profit of £356. Similarly named shows in 1952 such as *Folies Bergere* and *Moulin Rouge* made £467 and £84 respectively.⁷¹ By 1957, these shows were making consistent losses for those that ran the theatres rather than those like Raymond that were promoting the shows. This was due to the general decline of the variety theatres and falling audience numbers that impacted on the theatres' bottom line more than the pre-booked touring productions.⁷²

However, whether this shift towards nudity and striptease was a necessary evil to keep venues afloat, or a strategic miscalculation, remains a vivid debate. Paul Raymond

⁷⁰ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 215.

⁷¹ V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, 'Stoll Moss Theatre Returns', GB 71 THM/303/1/7. 1942–64.

⁷² *Ibid.*

maintained that the nude element of the shows was, in fact, the very draw that kept several variety theatres in business.⁷³ As Wilmut points out, this view was also supported by Ted Gollop, who booked several of Paul Raymond's shows in the Moss Empires theatres. Describing the declining appeal for variety and revues, Gollop notes that 'the strip shows were the only thing that did help to keep the theatres going. They did turn away family audiences – but what could we do? When the Finsbury Park Empire closed in 1960 there was an outcry – I have to go to an enquiry, and a member of the public stood up and said we were wrong to book strip shows because that was what had killed the Theatre. I had to ask what else he thought we could keep the theatre open with – people didn't want to see variety or the ordinary reviews, and there weren't enough of the big musicals, so you *had* to book strip shows.'⁷⁴ Paul Raymond also defended his shows in *The Stage* in October 1957. He told *The Stage* that the closure of 'No 2' (less prominent) variety theatres was due to a lack of good attractions and more would follow.⁷⁵ Raymond by this point had progressed to 'No 1' theatres due to his success and the decline of variety. He was making a 'gesture of goodwill' to the managements that had helped him by having some of his shows in smaller theatres.⁷⁶

Taking the opposite view, Oliver Double is damning in his assessment of the use of Raymond's shows on the mainstream variety circuit. 'Instead of investing to stop the rot, managers and agents looked for desperate short-term solutions. Nude revues became increasingly common particularly in the lesser theatres.'⁷⁷ Moreover, nudity and an element of the risqué were seen as unique selling points that audiences could not obtain

⁷³ Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage*, p. 215.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 215–6.

⁷⁵ 'Paul Raymond Shows the Way', *The Stage*, 3 October 1957, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19571003/024/0003> [accessed 23 January 2022].

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 80.

anywhere else, certainly not on the television. Roy Hudd believed this would constitute a draw and, according to Oliver Double, he appeared in a show called *Striptease Vin Rouge* at the Aston Hippodrome: 'that was the last knockings of variety. They thought this might bring them in – couldn't get that on the telly...' ⁷⁸ The *Manchester Guardian* in 1957 took a bleak view of matters:

Music-hall has always been tottering along from one half revolution to another. Now the question seems to be whether live variety can survive at all in any substantial way, nudes or no nudes. The professionals one meets seem bravely optimistic about the prospects ... The chief worry has been that there may not, if the trend of costs, closures, and competition goes on, be enough theatres left to play in.

The revue artists carry the tattered music-hall banner around an ever-diminishing circuit. They recall that 'in the old days', meaning pre-1939, there was room for a hundred revues on tour; currently there are twenty, virtually all of them, as their heavily saucy titles indicate, depending on the nude to draw the customers. In those days they could be assured of a two-month continuous run in the larger cities with several variety halls to choose from. Now it is invariably a one-week stand, and the company pursues its nomadic route up and down the country, often with long journeys between bookings. ⁷⁹

Willetts also makes an argument in favour of Raymond, perhaps not so surprising as Raymond is the subject of his book. 'Raymond found himself being blamed by disgruntled artistes for the sudden decline of variety theatre. They complained that nude shows, however well presented, had driven away family audiences. But that was to ignore the truth: family audiences were already drifting away from variety theatre. "Look, there's no such thing these days as a family audience", Raymond conceded the previous year. If anything, the nude shows were keeping the variety circuit alive.' ⁸⁰

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ 'Nude shows go round in ever-decreasing circles', *The Guardian*, 21 November 1957, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/nov/21/music-hall-variety-burlesque-nudes-1957> [accessed 23 January 2022].

⁸⁰ Willetts, *The Look of Love*, p. 77.

Variety theatres had attempted to become respectable places. They were no longer associated with the heavy drinking and eating of the Victorian music hall. They were not evocations of Bakhtin's carnivalesque; they were not the world-turned-upside-down. They were safe, regulated spaces. Therefore, introducing the nudes, in a desperate attempt to attract audiences, broke a fundamental contract between entertainment provider and audience.

Oliver Double maintains that opponents of the striptease shows could be accused of prurience: 'Some journalists defended striptease, labelling detractors ... "gymnophobes" and arguing that "the nude in the theatre can be clean and elevating"'.⁸¹ At the same time, Double argues clearly that the nudes had spoiled the 'family trade'.⁸² Visits to the theatres had been family affairs for some for generations and, unlike Wilmut, who saw the use of nudes as a lifeline for variety theatre, Roy Hudd describes the introduction of nudes as the 'final nail in the coffin'. For Hudd, the idea of visiting a variety theatre with his grandmother to see a nude revue was anathema and could be seen as detrimental to the whole business model.

This is a vital point. The respectable family audience had been the mainstay of variety throughout its existence. The impresarios who had built the big chains advertised their theatres as places you 'you can with safety take your Wives and Families'⁸³. The traditional family audiences were already dwindling in the face of falling standards; nude revues positively chased them away, replacing them with what Hudd has described as 'raincoat on laps businessmen'.⁸⁴ There is a clear difference in opinion between those who believed that there was no choice but to put on risqué shows by Raymond, and others

⁸¹ Double, *Britain Had Talent*, p. 81.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 81–2.

who believed the move towards nude revues was a poor tactic that ultimately contributed to the downfall of variety. The idea that already struggling theatres were offered a chance to survive by including nude shows may have been true further down the scale, where the second- and third-tier theatres would have really struggled against the innovations of television. However, the premium Moss Empire theatres provided a much more exclusive experience and, although the 1950s had introduced many changes, they were still the space in a city where top line performers played, whatever their ilk – pop, rock, variety, or American star. The *Manchester Guardian* explained the challenges that faced variety in the late 1950s and how the nudes fitted in:

There are several other reasons, of course, why the music-hall has not stayed the pace. Television has always been pointed out as the principal wicked uncle, both in keeping people at home and in making them more exacting as audiences. 'They get used to seeing the top-liners', one comic said dolefully, 'and you've got to be on your toes to keep up with the gags.' Good top-of-the-bill artists (apart from nudes) are harder to get now and more expensive ... and the smaller theatres cannot regularly afford the fees or compete with the theatre-chains in offering long contracts.⁸⁵

These shows supposedly tapped into the transgressive past of the music hall, but this move was fundamentally misjudged. It undermined the familial atmosphere of venues and excluded the female half of the demographic. It gave the sense that the theatres were grubby places akin to erotic cinemas or peep shows. This did not broaden the audience but narrowed it. It signalled that the traditional audience of variety was being abandoned in favour of a quick buck.

Raymond was a man who knew how to exploit both the press, sensationalism, and the desire for sex and nudity. He also understood or had been indoctrinated into a very

⁸⁵ 'Nude shows go round in ever-decreasing circles', *The Guardian*, 21 November 1957, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/nov/21/music-hall-variety-burlesque-nudes-1957> [accessed 23 January 2022].

British understanding of propriety and, in the same way as the music halls had always toyed with permissiveness and acceptability, Raymond seemed to possess notions that his shows were neither tawdry nor even sexual. He was selling a fully formed variety show but with added titillation. The idea that he was undermining variety would have been an affront to a showman who did not believe that his revues were 'dirty' but were in fact offering a lifeline to struggling theatres. Raymond's shows had 'crossed the Rubicon', the knowingness and suggestiveness of jokes could not survive a full-frontal assault of nudity. Every city centre in Britain could not have a theatre that hosted children's pantomimes but at other times doubled for Soho.

The fact that this might have a knock-on effect for the rest of the programme seemingly did not occur to theatre managers and bookers. The fact that the theatres had become male spaces with dubious content and limited artistic value meant that when theatres were not offering nude shows, the rest of their offering became devalued by association.

In many ways, it was the fatal misjudgement for variety. It was craven, short-termism, opportunistic, and reactionary. It appealed specifically to a male audience and was not treating sexuality in a progressive manner. It offered cheap thrills, but not for a young, modern audience that wanted to experience rock and roll, see American stars, or even watch radio comedians. It offered sordid gratification to a limited audience. In modern terms, it also desecrated the space, it contravened the public space by introducing private desires. However, it attempted to counterbalance with enough humour to make this fit the ethos of the variety theatres. The tightrope act of morality that had been walked by comedians like Max Miller had been cut. Miller had always said that 'it was all in the mind', but now nothing could be farther from the truth.

Nude Revues and Variety Theatres: The Naked Facts and Figures

As a case study of a major city-centre Moss Empire theatre, I will analyse how the Sheffield Empire fared in 1957. This year is significant at this venue because of the reliance on nude and more salacious acts.

The figures point to a situation where these nights consistently made a loss throughout 1957. It seems that in a large, city-centre venue like the Sheffield Empire, it is possible to discern that the takings were significantly down on the previous year, the shows were not profitable, but that Paul Raymond and Arthur Fox still made good money for their part. These shows replaced a wide range of alternatives; some were fads or could not command long-term audiences, or, as with American acts, demanded hefty compensation, but it had become increasingly difficult to market any variety or offer new and interesting acts. There was certainly an audience for these shows but, as Raymond discovered later, it was suited to individual, specialised venues and later the home video market. Although Raymond claimed to have paid his employees well, their youth, vulnerability, and inexperience meant that the young women and other performers were comparatively cheap compared to bigger box office performers. The fact that his first-ever show in Manchester involved paying two dancers 10 shillings more to perform topless illustrates his business model.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Willetts, *The Look of Love*, p.43.

Table 7.1: *Moss Empire (Sheffield) 1957 Takings and Profits*

Date	Attraction	Takings	Previous Year	Profit or Loss
Apr 13	Folies Striptease	£1,212	£2,008	£20 loss
May 18	Moulin Rouge	£1,026	£1,590	£126 loss
May 25	Gay Mam'selle	£889	£1,530	£217 loss
Jun 1	Excitement	£850	£809	£243 loss
Jun 15	Girls in Cellophane	£654	£875	£355 loss
Jun 29	Toujours L'Amour	£616	£1,110	£372 loss
Jul 6	Las Vegas After Dark	£992	£948	£154 loss
Aug 17	Lovelies on Top of the World	£1,000	£1,241	£167 loss
Aug 24	Glamour Girl	£836	£1,933	£123 loss
Aug 31	Casino Oriental	£889	£2,357	£233 loss
Dec 7	Hello Burlesque	£983	£1,073	£205 loss

Source: V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Moss Empire Returns, 1945–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/10.

It is possible to analyse some of the shows in more detail, including the manner they were promoted and the techniques and language that were used to try to draw in an audience. This can be analysed in the British Music Hall Society's extensive collection of Moss Empire posters.



'Illustration 7.1: Bill Poster, 20 May 1957, Poster Collection - Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive

The manner of marketing is apparent in these posters. 'A new exhilarating Parisian style revue', 'Gay Mam'selle', but still including variety stalwart Tessie O'Shea. It included 'The Dance of Desire', the 'Jungle Fantasy' and 'Pat Patterson's Mam'selle Lovelies', along with 'Beauties in Nighties' (Illustration 7:1).

The striptease shows at the Sheffield and Finsbury Park Empires are marketed in a very amusing manner. The supposedly more sophisticated London audience are given a poster in French with revealing pictures, but Raymond clearly feared that

the Sheffield public needed a blunter approach – mock-French in 'La Grand Parade des Streep-Teeze' (illustrations 7.2 and 7.3). Stanley Boston and Len Mitelle presented 'We've been to Paris and brought you Excitement', a new continental glamour show (Illustration 7.4). Mitelle had worked at the Windmill Theatre. The show included a variety section and then the 'Living Statues of Rome', 'Salon de Paris', and 'What happens on the roof tops of Gay Paree'.⁸⁷ Variety mainstay Freddie Bamberger (et Pam) was still making appearances in these shows and the previously mentioned glass-gobbling Sirdani was performing in Raymond's shows, as was future *On the Buses* star, comedian Reg Varney, in the *American Strip Tease Show* (Illustration 7.5).

⁸⁷ Music Hall Society Archive, Sheffield Empire posters 1957, May 27 1957 Poster.



Illustration 7.2: Bill Poster, Monday 14 July, 1957, Poster Collection – Moss Empire Finsbury Park, British Music Hall Society Archive



Illustration 7.3: Bill Poster, Monday 11 August, 1957, Poster Collection – Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive

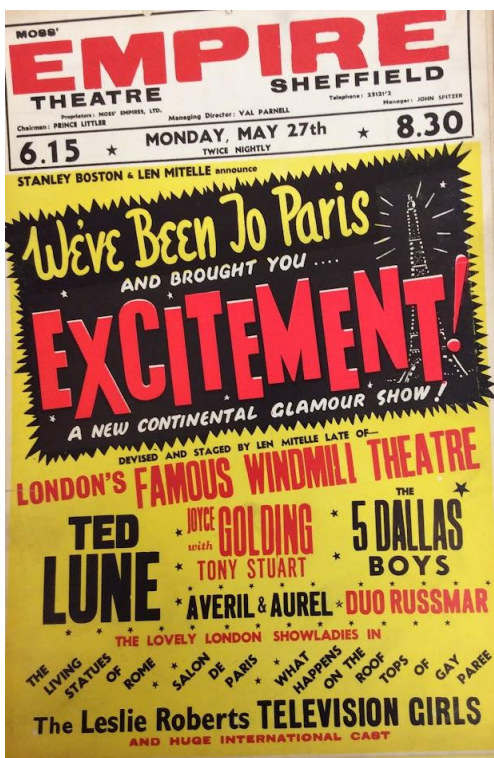


Illustration 7.4: Bill Poster Monday 27 May 1957, Poster Collection – Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive

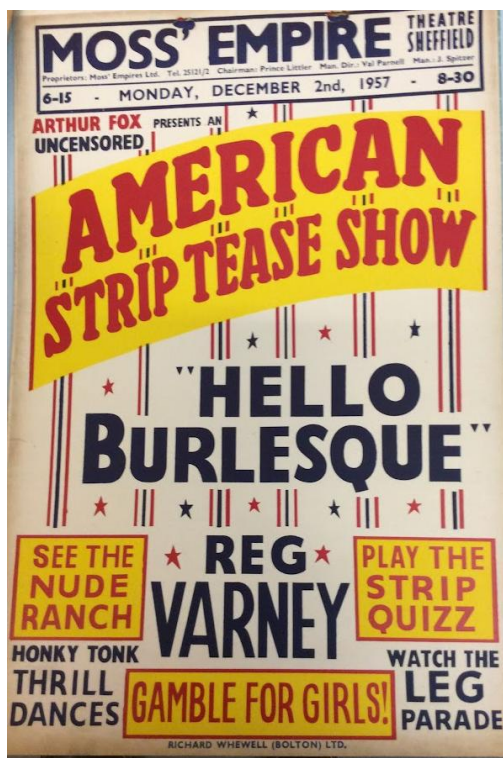


Illustration 7.5: Bill Poster Monday 2 December 1957, Poster Collection – Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive

'Girls in Cellophane' (Illustration 7.6) was presented by Arthur Fox and billed itself as 'a scintillating French style revue'. It included variety acts along with Larry Gordon's Cellophane Lovelies, Eugene's Flying Ballet, A Night in China, Honey Duprez, the Cellophane Nudes and Dance of the Fans.

'Toujours L'Amour, Tonight for Sure' (Illustration 7.7) was also presented by Arthur Fox and included Larry Gordon's Folie Girls and variety acts. The line-up also included L'Amour Nudes, La Tropicana, On the Boulevard and 'Abul La Fleur, Sensation of Two Continents' presenting 'Europe's Greatest "Shake" Dance'.

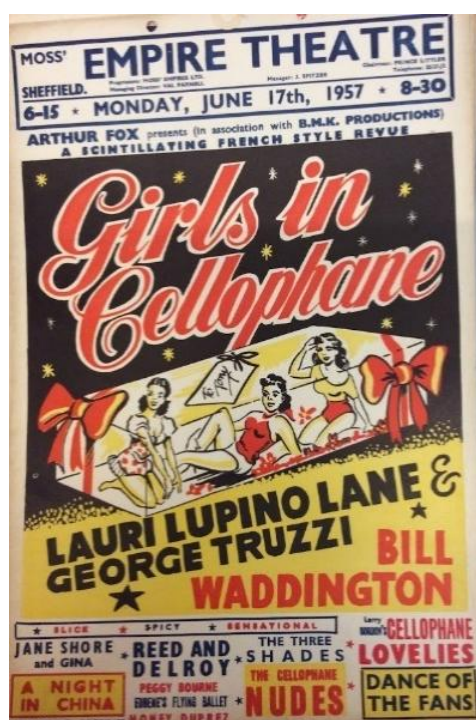


Illustration 7.6: Bill Poster Monday 17 June, 1957, Poster Collection – Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive



Illustration 7.7: Bill Poster Monday 1 July, 1957, Poster Collection – Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive

Paul Raymond presented 'Las Vegas After Dark' the next week (Illustration 7.8). It was billed as 'The Sensational Strip Show' and 'American strip-tease queen' Beryl Catlin, 'The Ultimate in Sex Appeal – See the famous Marlene Dietrich Strip Dance that

shocked Las Vegas'. The poster was peppered with the words 'Nudes', 'Las Vegas, fabulous city of all-night floorshows and pyjama parties'; 'More thrilling More daring than Paris!'; and 'GIRLS in the city of striptease cabarets honky tonks and Burlesque houses'.

Illustration 7.9 shows the poster for 'Lovelies On Top of the World presented to you by Gaston and Andree with the gorgeous girls from London and Paris Night Spots with the Strip Lovelies'. It included Arthur (The Voice) Gordon, Kish (The Body) Caliere, Pauline (The Legs) Terrie, Jo and Frank Coda, (The Lot) Marina Ellen, Dave and his Skiffle Group, Eric Watts 'The Heart Throb', The Lovely Lana Mai Wong, Jack Whiteley's Starlets and 'the new sensationally gorgeous glamour girl Toni Kaye direct from Winston's Club Mayfair. She shows you London Nite Life in the Raw.'

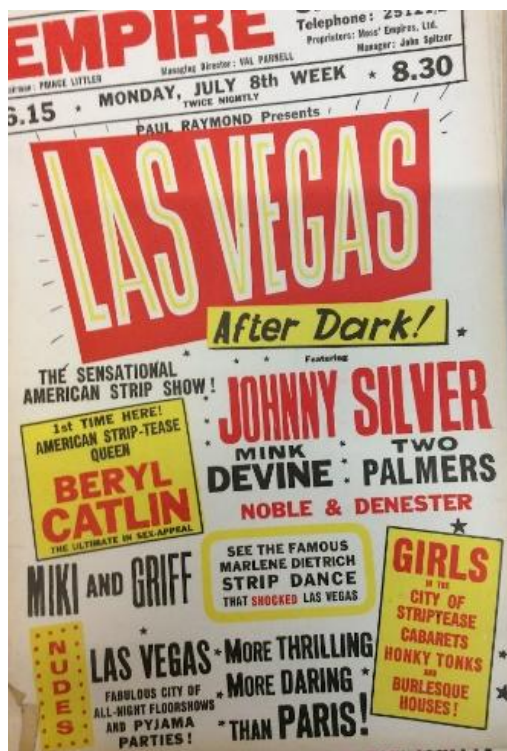


Illustration 7.8: Bill Poster Monday 8 July, 1957, Poster Collection – Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive



Illustration 7.9: Bill Poster Monday 9th August, 1957, Poster Collection – Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive

The poster for 'Jack Gillam Entertainment presents The personal appearance of the "The Front Page" sensation Rochelle Lofting Britain's most photographed girl in Glamour Girl: A comedy with Glamour' (Illustration 7.10) included a picture with Rochelle Lofting's measurements (42-20-36). This comedy was 'written, devised and produced by R. Howard Arundel. You'll yell at the screamingly funny comedy but you'll stare at Rochelle.' It also included these quotes from newspapers: '22-year-old Rochelle Lofting is Britain's answer to Jayne Mansfield, She's the Biggest "Buster Up" of Glamour Girl Measurements, She Tips the Tapes at 40-20-36 – Daily Mirror'. It quotes Bo Stoker in the *Daily Mirror* as saying that Rochelle Lofting 'Broke the Bust Barrier' and included her measurements again. It also included a quote from the *Daily Sketch* that claimed that Lofting was 'too Beautiful to book for Britain's Showmen'. Finally, it said that Lofting's 'figure defies comparison'.⁸⁸



Illustration 7.10: Bill Poster Monday 26 August 1957, Poster Collection – Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive



Illustration 7.11: Bill Poster Monday 2 September 1957, Poster Collection – Sheffield Empire, British Music Hall Society Archive

⁸⁸ Music Hall Society Archive, Sheffield Empire posters 1957, 26 Aug 1957.

‘Paul Raymond presents Casino Oriental – The Web of Desire!’ ‘The Glamour Revue from the land of the Nautch [South Asian] Girls’ (illustration 7.11) included a mix of nudes and a whole host of stereotypes holding the show together. The Great Masoni, Shan, The Vanishing Nudes of the Mysterious East, ‘Deyong and Delysia, the actual burning of a beautiful young girl with naked flames’, Beautiful European and Oriental and Eurasian Nudes, ‘Dance of the Seven Veils’, The Shanghai Dancing Girls, ‘The Reefer Dance’ and ‘unfolding the secrets of the Darkest Orient’.⁸⁹

The marketing had more than a hint of *Carry On*. In fact one show was simply called *How Saucy*.⁹⁰ Lazy stereotypes of foreign countries were present too, as France, China, the USA, and the Middle East are portrayed in a way that is insensitive at best and downright racist at worst. There was an assumption that these countries had lax morals and ‘easy women’ but really reveals something of some of the views in Britain at the time. This strange obsession with the continent and all the fun that was being had ‘over there’ demonstrates a level of repression and a fear of a mature and honest analysis of sex and sexuality. The need to exoticise, Orientalise and give this a ‘foreign’ otherness is present throughout all these posters. This need to give a frisson of the big city – London, Paris, or Las Vegas – is designed to give the performance of what is essentially quite seedy, a glamour and an allure. The marketing seems to be aimed at ‘comic book’ level, the secret desires of the teenage boys hidden in the adult British males of the 1950s. The fact that this was a major enterprise in the variety theatres reflects the desire for this material, but its failure highlights its puerility.

⁸⁹ British Music Hall Society Archive, Sheffield Empire posters 1957, 2 September 1957.

⁹⁰ ‘How Saucy!’, *Reading Standard*, 22 July 1955, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003511/19550722/312/0004> [accessed 23 January 2022].

It is important to compare the experience of the Sheffield Empire with others on the Moss Empires and Stoll circuits. The Palladium did not include Paul Raymond shows in its line-up. This is a list for 1957:

Table 7.2: *Strip or Nude Shows in Variety Theatres 1957*

Theatre	Number of strip or nude shows	Number that made a profit
London Palladium	0	0
London Hippodrome	0	0
Finsbury Park Empire	5	0
Birmingham Hippodrome	0	0
Brighton Hippodrome	3	0
Edinburgh Empire	11 (plus ballet!)	3
Glasgow Empire	1	1 (good profit)
Leeds Empire	8	0
Liverpool Empire	0	0
Newcastle Empire	4	3
Nottingham Empire	11	6
Sheffield Empire	11	0
Manchester Palace	0	0
Moss Empires Totals	54	13

Sources: 'Nottingham Theatres and Halls', Arthur Lloyd,

<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/NottinghamTheatres.html> [accessed 23 January 2022];

Scottish Theatre Programmes, National Library of Scotland Catalogue,

<https://digital.nls.uk/catalogues/theatre-programmes/theatre/?startRow=31&T=191> [accessed 23 January 2022].

It is possible to see some trends in these figures that give a clear answer to some of the debates about these shows. Firstly, overall, they were not a profitable addition to the roster of the Moss Empires theatres. Secondly, major venues tended not to show them on the whole. The venues that did show a good deal of these sorts of shows ended closing or being demolished soon afterwards. As one article notes, during its final years the Nottingham Empire Theatre ‘was staging what seemed like an endless stream of weekly striptease shows’.⁹¹ It was shut down by the Moss Empires chain in June 1958. The New Theatre in Cardiff, and the Edinburgh, Leeds, Newcastle, Nottingham, and Sheffield Empires were all demolished, except the Edinburgh venue, which was converted into a bingo hall. It can clearly be inferred that these shows were a sign of desperation that did not help to improve the circumstances that these theatres found themselves in.

Table 7.3: *Theatres featuring Strip and Nude numbers shortly before closing down*

Theatre	Nude Shows
Chiswick Empire	10
Manchester Hippodrome	5
Bristol Hippodrome	0
New Theatre Cardiff	5
Derby Hippodrome	11
Leicester Palace	14

Source: V&A-TPC, Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection, Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942–1964, GB 71 THM/303/1/7

Consulting the records reveals that the bookkeeper by the end of the 1950s at the Stoll Theatres had terrible handwriting; therefore we may speculate there may have been

⁹¹ Ken Roe, 'Empire Theatre', Cinema Treasures, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/37632>, [accessed 23 January 2022].

one or two shows that slipped through the net. Chiswick Empire and the Palace Theatre in Leicester both closed in 1959. The same year saw the Derby Hippodrome closing and being converted to be used as a bingo hall; it now lies derelict. The Manchester Hippodrome closed in 1961, while only the Bristol Hippodrome and The New Theatre in Cardiff survive.

By 1957, despite several of Raymond's touring revues still being in circulation, a dire picture was beginning to emerge for Variety Theatres. 20 of 33 revues in variety theatres in 1957 contained nudes.⁹²

Over the past few years, 150 venues throughout Britain had closed. Dwindling attendances, combined with the increasingly punitive Entertainment Tax, had rendered a lot of the smaller theatres unviable. In the case of many of the larger venues, typically situated in city centres, their sites had become more valuable to the owners than the theatres themselves, the end of wartime building restrictions having encouraged the rise of speculative development.

Some theatres were converted into cinemas, some turned into bingo halls, some were burnt down in insurance scams, others were demolished, making way for new buildings. Even the once mighty Moss Empires circuit wasn't impervious to the trend, its rapid contraction hastened by the covert relationship between its managing director, Val Parnell, and the boss of a prominent property company.⁹³ A joke went round the offices that Parnell had suggested at a Moss Empires board meeting that they would close the Swansea Empire as an experiment and if that were successful 'we'll close the bloody lot'.⁹⁴

The story of nudity and striptease in Britain in the twentieth century is intertwined with comedy. The Windmill Theatre showcased a wide range of comedy talent in very unpromising surroundings; Paul Raymond included comedy as part of the variety element of all his touring shows. Although when he bought the Windmill he removed the comedy, in 1980 it became home to the Alternative Comedy group, The

⁹² 'British theatre lives while amateurs are enthusiastic', *Newark Advertiser*, 13 November 1957, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003436/19571113/158/0008> [accessed 23 January 2022].

⁹³ Willetts, *The Look of Love*, p. 77; Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre*.

⁹⁴ Willetts, *The Look of Love*. p. 77.

Comic Strip, which was arguably the most important truly post-variety comedy movement.

The overlap between the comedy and nudity shows how both occupy a place on the periphery of popular culture. Comedy was still seen as broad and foolish but was required by impresarios like Vivian van Damm and Paul Raymond to try to give their somewhat seedy enterprises a sheen of respectability and playfulness. The variety theatre and the nude revue venues occupy a similar space: their output is seen as ephemeral and culturally unimportant, and both can be regarded as vulgar. That is why they often find themselves inhabiting the same position.

Raymond eventually moved on to find a more static home for his ventures. Raymond's Revuebar was one of the few legal venues in London to show full frontal nudity; by turning itself into a members-only club it was able to evade the strictures of the [Lord Chamberlain's Office](#) which then barred models from moving.⁹⁵

It seems that the long-term damage of the experiment with strip shows, and nudity was significant for the status of the variety theatres. Even in the more permissive times that were to come in the 1960s, this was a backward step for the industry. It discredited and cheapened the core element of family entertainment of the business that had been so fastidiously built up by men like George Black and maintained by others like Val Parnell. It blew the idea that variety was worthwhile and eroded the relationship between audience and performer. The idea of naughty jokes and cheeky asides seemed unnecessary or even salacious when naked women would soon take to the stage. The use of the female form to draw in customers and the mode of marketing was straight out of the language of Soho. The overall impression was to shatter the illusion of a naughty but

⁹⁵ 'Lord Chamberlain's Office - Theatre censorship', *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Chamberlain%27s_Office#Theatre_censorship [accessed 23 January 2022].

safe space and make it rather awkward and less fun. The normal rules had been suspended and those in attendance might feel uncomfortable or be judged for their decision to buy tickets.

This was another example of the shifts in capitalist interest in culture and impresarios and businessmen taking advantage of the variety industry for their own personal gain rather than the health of the industry. Raymond used the weakness of variety as did Parnell and the Grades and the relative strength of television. *The Guardian* in 1957 summed up how the multiple factors that assailed variety were slowly destroying much of the live entertainment industry.

Some in the business seem to think there will be no more closures; the nudes will hold the fort, they say. The artists who are not able to find a place supporting the nude tableaux can go on hoping to get a fair amount of work in pantomime, summer holiday camps, seaside shows, cine-variety, and so on. But a great many have left the business in recent years and are now 'doubling' work in the post office or factories with occasional, and quite well-paid, club engagements. Scratch a railway porter and you may find a xylophonist or an acrobat.⁹⁶

The image of Archie Rice in John Osborne's *The Entertainer* as a washed-up music hall performer in nude revues symbolises the difficulties faced by variety. Old-fashioned, out-of-step and humiliated, it is possible to see why many felt abandonment was the best path.

The apparent contradictions between the objections to nudity on-stage and the wider spirit of revelry and 'knowingness' that existed in the theatres is relatively easily contextualised. Wider British society and culture had always delighted in moral

⁹⁶ 'Nude shows go round in ever-decreasing circles', *The Guardian*, 21 November 1957, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/nov/21/music-hall-variety-burlesque-nudes-1957> [accessed 23 January 2022].

duality; newspapers were treading a similar line.⁹⁷ The boundaries between outright pornography and titillation were being explored in many arenas (see the *Carry On* films). However, this examination of increasing permissiveness in an arguably sexually repressed nation seemed to overstep the mark in the variety theatres. The playfulness of the music hall, the saucy winks and the suggestive noises were able to lighten the mood. Prostitution had been a co-existing industry alongside the music hall but there was something a bit grubby and desperate about the Raymond shows. They lacked any real nuance and seemed to be aimed squarely at 'dirty, old men' and the public nature of the performances blurred the lines of both privacy and respectability. This move to outright sexualisation damaged the reputation of the variety theatres.

⁹⁷ Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918-1978* (Oxford, 2009).

8. Conclusions

Variety adapted to survive in the twentieth century and was able to overcome the challenges of so many competitors whilst utilising its success to further its position as the primary form of live entertainment. Radio and cinema had to adapt after television, but variety was not able to capitalise upon this ability to adapt.

This piece has sought to shed light on the cultural significance of the variety theatres. The major variety theatres of the time give us a unique insight into the development of popular culture and provide a much more nuanced picture of the post-war period. David Fowler and Bil Osgerby amongst others have identified how stereotypical views of this period can easily be countered, and variety provides a very more developed picture of intergenerational interactions during this period. In contemporary newspapers and in earlier studies of youth culture there was an attempt to conjure up generational conflict, moral panics about teens and Americanisation, fears about the role of technology; but the story of the variety theatre is one where many of these points of conflict were peacefully settled.

The aim of this piece was not to diagnose the cause or plot the decline of variety. Decline was something of a contemporary obsession in the 1940s and from the mid-1950s. In the aspirational and technically innovative post-war years it seemed old-fashioned and class-based, when the new formats were modern and aspirational. This became a problem from the mid-1950s as Britain became more affluent and consumerist and was keen to move away from the class distinctions of the past.

Radio and television could be consumed at home – there was a strong shift in this period to home-based leisure, which also affected cinema. To capture the attention of young people, popular culture needed celebrity, glamour, or sex appeal.

Variety was a low-status, working-class form, and it did not have influential defenders. Key figures in the industry were unsentimental and able to access other opportunities via television and music promotion; they were happy to close venues and invest in other opportunities. Another factor was changing tastes in popular culture. As musicals and rock concerts became more popular, the variety format started to seem outdated and old-fashioned. Audiences were no longer interested in seeing a range of different acts in one show, but instead wanted to see a single headlining act or musical. It is difficult to make a clear case as to why variety was special or important. It is difficult to pin down, it is in some ways difficult to describe, and it was different in every place on any given performance. This meant that applying for government funding was problematic. The relationship between variety and its working-class roots presented an obstacle too: despite all the efforts of Oswald Stoll and others, it retained its bawdy reputation. The fact that a lot of the important elements of variety were tied into an intangible atmosphere created within the venues did not help.

Television, taxation, ageing, and expensive venues have all been suggested as factors that contributed to the decline of variety. However, they could also be seen as symptoms of an attitudinal shift at the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, a move to delete the Victorian and move to the new and innovative. Television was more glamorous and a genuine revelation for most of the population. However, it was used as an excuse to abandon the theatres by the major players in the industry. Taxation indicated the lack of political will to save an industry rooted in working-class, industrial culture that lacked artistic value in the eyes of those in power. The key factor here is that there was no will to subsidise variety with public money and those in positions of power had already shifted their focus towards television. Could some forms of variety have survived with government help or more forgiving management? There are not many

examples internationally (vaudeville and cabaret), but it is not unthinkable. The confluence of these elements was unfortunate for variety theatres. They fell at a time before organisations like The Theatres Trust had been established and the shift towards heritage and preservation of Victorian and Edwardian buildings and culture became significant. The Victorian Society was founded in 1958 but it was too late for many buildings and many variety theatres were built in the early twentieth century. The destruction of Euston Station indicates the attitude of many at the time, namely modernisation over preservation. That is not to say that some of the theatres were not unkempt and in need of repair and restoration. They were also not necessarily fit for the purpose of staging rock and roll acts, but the cheap concrete buildings or old cinemas that replaced them were also not satisfactory auditoria.

In the early 1960s, what was left of the theatre network was a set of public spaces. Variety as a format could be translated onto television in some senses and lived on in other cultural forms. In a world of increasingly segregated and demographically targeted cultural forms, variety had a particular use as an inclusive, family- friendly, accessible format. This is why the experiments with nudity proved so disastrous. The challenge of television and the fact that this medium could easily use the variety format made the network of theatres seem obsolete.

Popular histories, even those that pay a good amount of attention to the variety theatre, such as those of Kynaston and Sandbrook, offer a story of inevitable decline. Vaudeville had succumbed in the 1930s but the assumption that variety theatres were to follow the same fate is problematic. The need for live entertainment venues remained and by the 1960s new spaces would be built in many cases as replacements for lost variety theatres. This can be viewed as part of the 'erasure' of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Space Age and 'White Heat' mentality that wished to discard and modernise.

This reconfiguring of attitudes and space was necessary, but the endeavours of John Betjeman and the Victorian Society, founded in 1958, as well as a wider understanding of heritage, was not fully formed. Heritage was not a popular notion for variety and there was a culture of the removal of working-class spaces: housing seen as slums that are now desirable, million-pound properties; greyhound stadiums; and even the numbers of pubs have declined from 75,000 in 1960 to around 45,200 in 2023.¹ The loss of working-class spaces, jobs, and culture is tangible. Even without consideration of the artistic value of the variety industry, it has had an impact on the arts in the United Kingdom. This consequently has had an impact on the shaping of attitudes and culture in the last 60 years.

The Guardian has run articles explaining that ‘The proportion of working-class actors, musicians and writers has shrunk by half since the 1970s’ and ‘Analysis of Office for National Statistics data found that 16.4 percent of creative workers born between 1953 and 1962 had a working-class background, but that had fallen to just 7.9 percent for those born four decades later.’² Comedy is also now dominated by more privileged performers and there have been efforts to try to broaden the access for working-class people.³ Television provided fewer opportunities than variety for those from less affluent backgrounds and even today only eight percent of those working in television are from

¹ Geoff Brandwood, *The Changing Face of the Pub: 1960–2020*, *The Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain*, <https://www.sahgb.org.uk/features/the-changing-face-of-the-pub-19602020> [accessed 13 April 2023];

Rebecca Weller, ‘Number of pubs expected to decline in 2024’, *Morning Advertiser*, 18 January 2024, <https://www.morningadvertiser.co.uk/article/2024/01/18/fleurets-predictions-for-pub-market-in-2024> [accessed 13 April 2023].

² James Tapper, ‘Huge decline of working class people in the arts reflects fall in wider society’, *The Guardian Online*, 10 Dec 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/dec/10/huge-decline-working-class-people-arts-reflects-society> [accessed on 29 August 2024].

³ Sian Davies, ‘Heard the one about the working-class comedian? It’s no joke for us’, *The Guardian Online*, 10 September 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/sep/10/working-class-comic-comedy-industry> [accessed on 29 August 2024].

working-class backgrounds.⁴ There is a good body of evidence to suggest that although the short-term consequences of mass culture opened up new opportunities for young musicians, apparently the long-term picture shows a narrowing, partially caused by the closure of these working class spaces.

This runs counter to prevailing ideas about social mobility in the second half of the twentieth century. This could be seen as neglect or even deliberate erasure of working-class culture. The intention of the dismantling of variety can be interpreted through the lens of Gramscian 'cultural hegemony' by not promoting the interests of the workers and could equally be linked to Bourdieu's ideas of 'cultural capital'.

The variety theatres provided authentic working-class experiences: Max Wall, Max Miller, Gracie Fields (eventually Dame), George Formby, George Robey (eventually Sir), and Frank Randle and many others were drawn from deeply working-class backgrounds. This was very important in the shared knowledge (knowingness) that existed between performer and audience. The encoding and decoding was happening between working-class performers and owners. Some key figures were themselves working-class too. Music hall was always enjoyed by the upper and middle classes but was not a space dominated by these groups. Television often provides either an approximation of working-class culture or an imposition of a middle-class vision of Britain. The influence of the BBC and the Satire Boom of the 1960s entrenched the dominance of Oxbridge-educated comedians.

This could be viewed as replacing one distraction for an even more potent one, television. However, it could be viewed as a genuine supplantation of working-class

⁴ Steven McIntosh, 'Writer calls for more working-class people in TV', *BBC News*, 21 August 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy8xjvzx5zno> [accessed 29 August 2024]; Siobhan McAndrew, Dave O'Brien, Mark Taylor, and Ruoxi Wang, *Audiences and workforces in arts, culture and heritage*, (Newcastle, 2024), <https://pec.ac.uk/state-of-the-nation/arts-cultural-heritage-audiences-and-workforce/> [accessed 1 September 2024].

culture by more sanitised and acceptable, controllable alternatives – the ersatz soap opera rather than the experience of the variety theatre. The replacement for variety theatres is often said to be the working men's clubs but these were both smaller and less prestigious and are now closing in great numbers.

Comedy now is dominated by the middle classes and above: winners and nominees for the Edinburgh Comedy Award are mostly drawn from graduates of Russell Group universities, including many Footlights alumni, grammar schools and some from private schools, including a couple of old Etonians. Therefore, today and perhaps from the 1970s, comedy has become increasingly dominated by this class of people. A working-class act, for instance Micky Flanagan, is now a novelty of sorts, a throwback or a caricature. The route for working-class performers is more challenging than ever and this could be viewed as a deliberate undermining of an undesirable culture that had been heavily sanitised and then allowed to perish. Working-class voices were replaced with the university-educated, sometimes producing wonderful material, but the audiences were now being offered fundamentally different fare. Variety was dismantled from within to a certain extent, but many performers would not have found the work they needed anymore. The conveyor belt was stopped at this point.

This demonstrates how variety theatre and the arts in general can reveal patterns in our society indicative of wider structures. In this case, this seems to run contrary to the wider narrative but may be reflected in the fact that the art, politics, civil service, sport (outside of football and Rugby League), politics, and academia have clearly changed but are still often controlled or dominated by those that are privately educated, have links at university, or come from comfortable backgrounds. This is not always the case, but the decline of variety could be seen as part of a takeover by middle- and upper-class interests that may have fuelled aspiration but actually held back many from various backgrounds.

Variety was dated but the influence of variety and music hall continued through the performers, their style, and its legacy. This is particularly apparent in comedy, where the term variety can be seen as pejorative, but the spirit of music hall performance was still dominant in light entertainment. One of the key ways in which variety theatres influenced popular culture was by providing a platform for emerging talent. Many famous entertainers, such as Tommy Cooper, Morecambe and Wise, Bruce Forsyth, Des O' Connor, and Ken Dodd, started their careers in these theatres. They honed their craft in front of live audiences and gained exposure that helped to propel them to national and international fame. These figures dominated popular television from the 1960s until the twenty-first century. It is interesting to note the resurgence of variety talent shows in this century, which have put the format of variety on primetime television once again, with programmes like *Britain's Got Talent*.

Even in alternative comedy, it is possible to discern important features of variety through *The Young Ones* (a variety show, according to the BBC), *The Fast Show*, which included a parody of the variety comic (Arthur Atkinson), *The Mighty Boosh* and, most prominently, the work of Reeves and Mortimer. The stand-up comedy scene has had many figures who would not be out of place on a variety stage, such as Paul O'Grady or Julian Clary. The more analysis that one does of popular British comedy, it is possible to see the spirit, the atmosphere of suggestion, of knowingness on screen and stage all the time. There is a more nebulous argument that this 'knowingness' transmits itself into everyday discourse in a way that is not present in other cultures. The influence on musical culture has been flagged up before by Oliver Double and it is possible to identify this in the works of acts like David Bowie, The Beatles, The Kinks, and Blur, to name a handful.

The picture that emerges from variety in the period 1945 to 1960 is of a rapidly changing popular culture. Technology had an impact on the nature of variety, but it was

the growth of a youth identity that was exploited by big businesses that could exploit the new market for home entertainment. The popularity of record singles promoted the individual talent. Star culture had already emerged in Hollywood, and this had affected the format of some variety bills, but the increased focus on individual singers meant that the audiences demanded a change to the format of variety. This reflected a shift towards celebrity and fame. The music halls had had stars, but these new figures were multimedia celebrities. They would not just play multiple music halls in one night (as had happened in the pre-variety era) but their faces would appear in the print media, on television and the big screen, and their voices on the radio; celebrity became marketable and public appearances were a smaller part of this fragmented picture.

It is possible to identify the attempts by record labels to market their artists. The success of these attempts was clear, and it was artists like Guy Mitchell, Frankie Laine, Slim Whitman, and Johnny Ray that provided the bridge between the big band era and performers like Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra (who had a two-week stint at the Palladium in 1950) and the emergence of Elvis Presley. This was a time with a hybrid of styles – crooning, jazz, and blues to pop, western-themed songs, gospel, rock, and folk. It was not a set genre, but these performers became international stars, nonetheless. This represented a transition period between the second world war and the modern global pop star. The tours by Mitchell, Whitman, Laine, and Ray involved multiple dates around the country and outperformed the takings for those theatres for the whole year, as well as gripping the charts. This demonstrates how record companies perfected the marketing of acts but were becoming more responsive to the younger audiences; however, large numbers of sales still existed into the 1960s with more family-friendly performers and those performing more traditional popular music. The revolution that is portrayed with

Elvis and The Beatles was much more gradual and this chain of events is apparent with the appearances of these performers in the variety theatres.

It is necessary to separate the spirit of variety from the format. The influence of music hall and variety on the performance dynamics and a common language of both comedy and entertainment is important. Variety seemed to fit with a cultural understanding that permeates much of British society, namely a desire not to take oneself too seriously, and the idea that mockery of pretentiousness or intellectualism is an indelible element of social discourse. Therefore, the movement to separate out the different elements of variety into separate cultural spheres that were more accessible to all classes (such as the rise of skiffle and rock and roll) had allowed working-class young men to become engaged in music making. This did break this atmosphere of frivolity and silliness and allowed the working class to develop a performance style that was more intellectual. However, it did block the routes to a career in entertainment for many in the lower economic echelons, as record and television companies were now in charge of star making and the talent pool therefore shrank. The removal of this space may have allowed a different creative atmosphere to flourish but as music hall and variety had adapted already, a more modern cabaret-style performance with mixed musical and other acts could also have been possible. As these spaces were abandoned, it moved a part of the urban, working-class experience on to television, and although replacement spaces were found, the link to the nineteenth century origins were lost. The West End can trace its history back to the Restoration and it was only the cultural erasure of the interregnum that broke the link to Shakespeare's Globe. The space, content, and ethos may have changed but the deconstruction of variety and many of its theatres was a large shift in the cultural life of Britain.

The adaptability of variety and its ability to integrate different innovations or be used as a vehicle by them was impressive. This adaptability may have undermined its position in popular culture, as it was not viewed as an independent entity but as a platform for others. This can be viewed as desperation, as may have been the case with Raymond and the nude shows, but it had incorporated many different styles and genres without losing its essential character.

The character of variety was the problem. It is hard to define; its strength lay in diversity and constant change. Its anti-intellectual approach and class politics mean that it could be seen as lacking artistic value. It is somewhat hard to tie down as a genre: part-circus, part-theatre, part-pop concert, and part-stand-up gig. The ephemeral experience of the shows was its essence and the character of a space that despite the years of sanitising reforms still harboured the knowingness of Max Miller until his last show in 1960 – the all-round entertainer, viciously funny, nodding and winking, dancing, and singing in a regional vernacular.

In the first part of the 1950s, it is possible to trace the beginning of many modern popular culture trends. This signals the truly multimedia age, and different industries used this period to experiment with how best to monetise and market the emergent or developing media. In the USA, the radio was used a way to promote musical acts; in Britain, the control of the BBC over the airwaves meant that this process was more complex, but many performers, promoters, and agents used radio and then television to push their acts. Initially, this was to push their profile or encourage ticket sales for a forthcoming tour on the variety stage.

However, it was difficult to market variety or to define its cultural place. Although it was a national network, a lot more depended on the relationship between the audiences and the performers, both in the room and because of local or regional characteristics. This

was replaced by the desire for national and international celebrities who were marketed to a mass, multimedia market.

Variety had many acts on the bill; this meant that its essence was in the diverse nature of its performers. It was an experience for those in the audience and was supposed to always be different, every week. They would like some acts more than others, but they got a full and well-rounded entertainment experience. This meant that it was a diffuse art form, ephemeral and constantly changing, rarely recorded, and therefore difficult to label or define in a neat package. It depended on the relationship between that bill and the audience on that night.

The change in popular culture that we can see is both gradual and mixed. It does reflect a grand revolution. Despite some of the headlines, there was limited backlash to the changes that occurred. Americanisation and youth culture were integrated, and these acts were able to co-exist with existing variety performers.

However, arguments about class and aspiration are unresolved. The idea that the population made a collective decision about traditional variety formats is understandable, but this was broadened to involve abandonment of the spaces of variety. This was not without controversy and the desire to cash in and not replace these spaces in urban centres was a cynical business. Just as other decisions were made about the 'slums', the backers and government were willing to re-shape urban space without the consent of the people that used it. The old variety theatres were bulldozed when they could have been re-purposed. The desire for live entertainment did not abate. Similar decisions based on property speculation have plagued live music venues in recent years.

There are certainly changes that can be traced through the records of variety; they can be described as both social and cultural. However, despite the decline in variety over this period, the change that occurs reflects Osgerby, Horn and Fowler's views that there

was not a 'revolution' in attitudes during this period. Blame was placed on Americanisation, the teenager, television and the introduction of nudes, but except for Paul Raymond's opportunism, these new developments were generally accepted by both the theatres and the clientele. Repression and the British relationship to sex can be blamed for some of this, but the decision to allow these venues to profit from sexualised content would create analogous controversy today. The picture of Britain that emerges from the variety story is one that is much more multifaceted and much more difficult to pigeonhole. The stereotypes of this period, so-called revolutions and moral panics do not seem convincing. The variety theatres were places of working-class culture; although in some ways socially conservative, variety was a place where gender and sexuality were explored, women had a strong presence, where different racial groups performed, and new innovations were generally welcomed. The more strictly controlled world of television would be a step backwards for much of the representation and was more closely controlled and censored. The eagle-eye of the BBC, the press and the authorities meant that broadcast entertainment had to catch-up with the variety world. This is particularly true as the remoteness of television removed the quality of Bailey's 'knowingness' and the invisible connection that existed in live spaces.

Peter Bailey's concept of 'knowingness', the communal experience, the participatory nature, although watered-down in variety, was still a part of the shows – the bonhomie and the whole bill infused with a sense of fun. Whether the variety theatres had inherited the Carnavalesque nature of the music hall is a moot point; they were still spaces where working-class culture could be expressed and some truly bizarre culture clashes would take place – rock 'n' rollers, Hollywood stars, conjurors, nude tableaux, hypnotists, glass-eaters, and performing dogs sharing stages. It truly was a weird and wonderful time for variety entertainment.

There are certainly direct descendants of variety on television. In recent years, this has been most apparent in the recreation of the communal, 'live' experience with programmes like *Live at the Apollo* and *Britain's Got Talent*, alongside other talent shows. In the 1950s and 1960s, what would have been referred to as 'variety programming' would have included things like *Strictly Come Dancing*, and the fact that one of the original presenters of Sunday Night at the London Palladium and a veteran of the variety circuit was one of the original hosts of this programme demonstrates this. It also embodies a lot of the characteristics of the all-round entertainer geniality that was so popular in variety.

Variety can show us a much wider picture of popular culture than a simple examination of one strand, such as music or comedy. It is a prism for the whole of the period, and although it is not a complete picture, it is relatively comprehensive in the different trends and performers that used the variety stage. The variety theatres in Britain between 1945 and 1960 were a central aspect of popular culture. They provided a platform for emerging talent, offered a form of escapism, and helped to shape the development of television as a mass medium. Their legacy can still be seen in the entertainment industry today. On these stages, modern popular culture was shaped. As Frank Matcham's Victorian and Edwardian theatres were pulled down and variety shows dwindled, cultural commentators forgot about the missing link that had remained so influential in the first half of the twentieth century.

Variety lay at the confluence of so many forms and its presentation of all these disparate pieces into one performance was both its essence and its downfall. For all its vibrancy and celebration of the live experience, it was rendered unnecessary. Raymond Williams' view of 'flow' in television, which had been derived from variety and was a response to the desires of the early twentieth century audiences, could be more easily and cheaply be staged on television.

Variety's role as a testing ground made it survive until the 1960s but gradually weakened its core appeal. Wave after wave of new popular culture trends performed on variety stages but the unique selling point of variety became undermined by performers and audiences that did not need to respect the atmosphere and conventions of its space.

This study has revealed the sheer complexity of this industry. Variety was instrumental in both the development of popular culture and in the direction of popular culture. It was used as a conduit, as a medium for prototypical entertainments. The story of variety theatre and variety comedy fills the hole between Tommy Handley and Vera Lynn and the Beatles. This story has been told with focus on particular areas of music or popular culture, often with a focus on the late 1950s onwards. Variety reveals a diverse range of interests amongst the working class. This is not a monocultural working class but one that enjoyed both traditional and modern approaches, both foreign and homegrown acts, often within the same performance. Variety provided a bridge between eras, one that is often forgotten or overlooked. Cinema, music and broadcasting's accessibility to researchers has meant that these forms receive much academic attention, but variety and music hall's ephemeral nature and lack of recordings mean that it is harder to understand and quantify. Variety can be parodied as a faintly ridiculous, Victorian, dated and irrelevant artform, whereas this study illustrates its dynamism and persistent popularity.

The loss of these premium spaces had to be replaced. The loss of the premium arts spaces in British cities was partially replaced by the building of new music-centred venues. This formed a re-ordering and evaluation of urban spaces. The decline of city centre attractions such as cinemas and variety theatres began the process that has shifted more and more importance away from these areas. Radio and television began the process of domestication of consumption that has accelerated in recent decades as

technology has become more significant. The abandonment of the variety spaces set a precedent where a laissez-faire approach to urban planning was directed by profit rather than by utility, long-term viability and aesthetics. This can be seen as a natural part of deindustrialisation - the removal of spaces designed to cater to industrial, urban dwellers - but also reveals a short-sightedness about how best to recalibrate when the priorities of a city change.

The decision to abandon variety theatres was a business one, but not based on a failed industry. Variety was a multi-million-pound operation that dominated the start of the twentieth century. Its demise is bound up in working-class identity, but it has a clear legacy in modern British culture. This period showed how variety was at the crossing point of so many modern popular culture forms and the evidence uncovered here shows a multi-generational and globalised form of entertainment. Live performance retained its importance in everyday life. Variety informed and reflected the experiences of generations. It is possible to see the changing culture and media through the prism of variety. In fact, variety is unique in being able to offer such an insight into the consumption patterns of the nation.

Variety's quirky nature and working-class roots mean that it is easy to ignore and dismiss but it can be viewed as both prototype and model for popular entertainment; it was a vehicle for so much change. The fact that those that worked within it - owners, impresarios and performers - used what they had learned and transferred their knowledge into television deserves further attention. The spirit and 'knowingness' of variety were also transferred to television and adopted by performers like Morecambe and Wise, Tommy Cooper, Frankie Howerd and Bruce Forsyth.

The theatres in the post-1945 era give a unique insight into the interests of both young people and older generations. The 1940s and 1950s, often characterised as staid

and austere, yet the programmes for theatres were thriving and diverse. The 1940s and 1950s reflect a connection to the past but are both forward-thinking and outward-looking. The variety stages hosted entertainment 6 nights-a-week, with two performances a night. Variety had seen the great stars from Sinatra to Garland. They had been a pipeline for cultural transformation but by the late 1950s, they were increasingly sidelined and seen as a vestige of a bygone era.

Nostalgia for a lost world serves no useful purpose, academic or otherwise. However, the images from the 1967 documentary *London Nobody Knows*⁵, with James Mason melodramatically pacing around the collapsing and 'putrefying' Bedford Music Hall are arresting. John Osborne had sought to harness the haunting feeling of a collapsing industry. The ageing music hall performer Archie Rice was an allegory for Britain and a changing world. Variety theatres experienced a shift that reflected Britain's culture and how it saw itself by 1960.

⁵ *London Nobody Knows* [DVD film] directed by Norman Cohen [originally released 1967, Norcon]

Appendix I: Moss Empires Top Takings and Profit, 1947-1964

Year	Theatre	Act	Takings	Profit
1947	London Palladium	Gracie Fields	£12140	£6198
	Finsbury Park Empire	Ta Ra Boom De Aye	£2718	
		Donald Peers		£1152
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Picnic Hayride	£3798	
		Merry Mac		£1561
	Brighton Hippodrome	Perchance to Dream	£4700	
		Jack Durant		£1303
	Edinburgh Empire	Sadlers Wells	£6266	£1726
	Glasgow Empire	Nicholas Brothers	£3510	
		Pearl Bailey		£1487
	Leeds Empire	Nicholas Brothers	£2323	£901
	Liverpool Empire	Perchance to Dream	£5953	£1187
	Newcastle Empire	Perchance to Dream	£4585	
		Vera Lynn		£1162
	Nottingham Empire	Picnic Hayride	£2434	
		Forces Showboat		£1018
	Sheffield Empire	Ice Revue	£3087	£634
	Swansea Empire	Ice Revue	£2316	
		Donald Peers		£769
	Wolverhampton Hippodrome	Naughty Girls	£1844	£664
1949	London Palladium	Danny Kaye	£13507	Different week £4932
	Finsbury Park Empire	Frankie Howerd	£2894	£1279
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Danny Kaye	£8382	
		Inkspots		£1636
	Brighton Hippodrome	Song of Norway	£3982	
		Sam Costa		£880
	Edinburgh Empire?			
	Glasgow Empire	Danny Kaye	£8016	£1925
	Leeds Empire	Folies Bergere	£2509	
		Josef Locke		£830
	Liverpool Empire	Danny Kaye	£9378	£4476

	Newcastle Empire	Ice Revue	£3118	
		Josef Locke		£1256
	Nottingham Empire	Jewel and Warriss	£2404	
		Josef Locke		£845
	Sheffield Empire	Annie Get Your Gun	£4023	£894
	Swansea Empire	Allan Jones	£2261	£624
	Sunderland Empire	Inter Ballet	£2867	
	Wolverhampton Hippodrome			
1950	London Palladium (incomplete year)	Gracie Fields	£11661	
		Starlight Rendezvous		£5332
	Finsbury Park Empire (incomplete year)	Nellie Lutcher	£2922	
		Anne Shelton		£854
	Birmingham Hippodrome (incomplete year)	Billy Cotton	£3854	£1959
	Brighton Hippodrome	Starlight Rendezvous	£3968	£1219
	Edinburgh Empire	New York Ballet	£6350	£1716
	Glasgow Empire	Abbott and Costello	£6357	£1632
	Leeds Empire	Frankie Howerd	£2273	£715
	Liverpool Empire	Markova/ Dolim	£4510	
		Frankie Howerd		£1106
	Newcastle Empire	1001 Marvels	£2995	
		Frankie Howerd		£1061
	Nottingham Empire	1001 Marvels	£2955	
		Frankie Howerd		£1061
	Sheffield Empire	Royal Ballet	£2916	
		1001 Marvels		£736
	Swansea Empire	White Horse Inn	£2331	
		Tobacco Road		£752
	Palace Manchester	Gay's the Word	£5910	
1951	London Palladium	Danny Kaye	£13908	£3908
	London PoW (usually not variety)	Bob Hope	£10958	£2760
	Finsbury Park Empire	Billy Cotton	£2497	
		Charlie Kunz		£763
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Judy Garland	£5962	£1342

	Brighton Hippodrome	Starry Way	£2963	
		Jewel and Warriss		£724
	Edinburgh Empire	Judy Garland	£6231	£1643
	Glasgow Empire	Judy Garland	£7923	£2071
	Leeds Empire	Folies Bergeres	£2354	
		Al Read		£699
	Liverpool Empire	Sadlers Wells	£7545	£1084
	Newcastle Empire	King's Rhapsody	£4902	
				£790
	Nottingham Empire	Billy Cotton	£2563	£807
	Sheffield Empire	Showboat	£2436	
		Ronnie Ronalde		£718
	Swansea Empire	Deep River Boys	£1948	£500
	Palace Manchester	Judy Garland	£7605	
1952	London Palladium	Frankie Laine	£13457	£5631 (different week)
	Finsbury Park Empire	Max Miller	£2826	£1113
	Birmingham Hippodrome	King's Rhapsody	£5542	
		Stars of Educating Archie		£1053
	Brighton Hippodrome	King's Rhapsody	£3929	
		Sophie Tucker		£813
	Edinburgh Empire	New York City Ballet	£6336	£1766
	Glasgow Empire	Betty Hutton	£8004	
		Frankie Laine		£1932
	Leeds Empire	Laurel and Hardy	£3070	
				£759
	Liverpool Empire	Betty Hutton	£7966	
		Rose Marie On Ice		£1103
	Newcastle Empire	Laurel and Hardy	£2844	
		Passe Ta Fantasie		£933
	Nottingham Empire	Laurel and Hardy	£3727	£963
	Sheffield Empire	King's Rhapsody	£3591	
		Al Read and co.		£714
	Swansea Empire	Kings Rhapsody	£2565	

		Welsh National Opera	£551	
	Palace Manchester	Betty Hutton	£8322	
1953	London Palladium	Frankie Laine	£13483	
				£4655
	Finsbury Park Empire	Max Bygraves	£2786	£768
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Guy Mitchell	£6321	£1561
	Brighton Hippodrome	Oklahoma	£3030	
		Max Bygraves		£765
	Edinburgh Empire	Sadlers Wells	£6198	£1700
	Glasgow Empire	Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis	£8669	?
	Leeds Empire	Billy Daniels	£3197	
		The Love Match		£584
	Liverpool Empire	Frankie Laine	£8004	
		Guy Mitchell		£2073
	Newcastle Empire	Billy Daniels	£4467	£1264
	Nottingham Empire	Al Read	£2432	£597
	Sheffield Empire	Chu Chin Chow On Ice	£3818	
		Al Read		£639
	Swansea Empire	Rose Marie On Ice	£2820	
		A. Circus		£543
	Palace Manchester	Guy Mitchell	£6510	
1954	London Palladium	Norman Wisdom	£12405	
		Johnnie Ray		£4343
	Finsbury Park Empire	Guy Mitchell	£4319	
		Dickie Valentine		£781
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Frankie Laine	£7635	£1785
	Brighton Hippodrome	A Good Idea	£4518	£1357
	Edinburgh Empire	Sadlers Wells	£9415	£1932
	Glasgow Empire	Frankie Laine	£7643	
		Roy Rogers/ Dale Evans		£1843
	Leeds Empire	Guy Mitchell	£3589	
		Benny Hill		£772
	Liverpool Empire	Roy Rogers/ Dale Evans	£8810	£2296
	Newcastle Empire	Guy Mitchell	£5506	£1119
	Nottingham Empire	Guy Mitchell	£3283	

		Max Bygraves	£577	
	Sheffield Empire	Love from Judy	£4045	£792
	Swansea Empire	Oklahoma	£1785	
		Dickie Valentine		£336
	Palace Manchester	Love from Judy	£5978	
	Sunderland Empire	David Whitfield	£2211	
		Peter Casson		£598
	Morecambe Winter Gardens	Jimmy Young, Ken Platt and David Whitfield	£4143	£2401
1955	London Palladium	Johnnie Ray	£13451	£5147
	Finsbury Park Empire	Billy Cotton	£3495	£698
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Johnnie Ray	£7922	£1783
	Brighton Hippodrome	Norman Wisdom	£4756	£1043
	Edinburgh Empire	Royal Danish Dancers	£8856	£1886
	Glasgow Empire	Johnnie Ray	£7376	£1761
	Leeds Empire	Larry Parks (Hollywood actor)	£2408	
		Ronnie Hilton		£497
	Liverpool Empire	Johnnie Ray	£7967	£1654
	Newcastle Empire	Johnnie Ray	£7888	£1970
	Nottingham Empire	Benny Hill	£2877	
		Al Read		£588
	Sheffield Empire	Dancing Years on Ice	£2705	
		Eddie Calvert		£268
	Swansea Empire	Welsh National Opera	£2108	£337
	Palace Manchester	Johnnie Ray	£8258	
1956	London Palladium	Rockin in the Town	£13141	
		Dave King and co		£5101
	London Prince of Wales	Dickie Valentine	£6988	£1126
	Finsbury Park Empire	Billy Eckstine	£2824	
		Call Girl		£468
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Harry Secombe/Beryl Reid	£5814	£1792
	Brighton Hippodrome	Light up the Town	£4051	£989
	Edinburgh Empire	Sadlers Wells	£10046	£2008
	Glasgow Empire	Slim Whitman	£5944	1583
	Leeds Empire	Slim Whitman	£3256	

		David Whifield	£554	
	Liverpool Empire	Slim Whitman	£6441	£1656
	Newcastle Empire	Slim Whitman	£5101	£1100
	Nottingham Empire	David Whifield	£2397	£552
	Sheffield Empire	The King and I	£3034	
		Kings Rhapsody		£562
	Swansea Empire	Welsh National Opera	£2195	£386
	Palace Manchester	Covent Garden Opera	£6372	
1957	London Palladium	We're Having a Ball	£13488	
		Lonnie Donegan		£5728
	London Prince of Wales	Some variety, mainly theatre		
	Finsbury Park Empire	Billy Eckstine	£2604	
		White Horse Inn		£426
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers	£6537	£1621
	Brighton Hippodrome	The Entertainer	£5980	£1097
	Edinburgh Empire	Royal Swedish Ballet	£9156	£2175
	Glasgow Empire	Tommy Steele	£8060	£2014
	Leeds Empire	Kings Rhapsody	£2635	
		Tommy Steele		£541
	Liverpool Empire	Tommy Steele	£7666	£1610
	Newcastle Empire	The Platters	£5695	£1201
	Nottingham Empire	Rocking the Town	£3614	£536
	Sheffield Empire	Lonnie Donegan	£2854	£586
	Swansea Empire	Theatre Sold, Supermarket built 1960		
	Palace Manchester	Harry Secombe	£6006	
1958	London Palladium (mix of variety and other shows)	Large as Life	£14443	£4940
	Finsbury Park Empire	Lonnie Donegan	£2274	£243
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Max Bygraves	£5862	£1576
	Brighton Hippodrome	Happy Go Lucky	£8000	£2515
	Edinburgh Empire	Edinburgh International Ballet	£6005	£1844
	Glasgow Empire	Max Bygraves	£5789	£1548
	Leeds Empire	Three Musketeers	£2247	

		Ronnie Hilton	£341	
	Liverpool Empire	Max Bygraves	£7101	£2039
	Newcastle Empire	Lilac Time	£2812	£354
	Nottingham Empire	Michael Holliday	£2064	£331
	Sheffield Empire	Annie Get Your Gun	£2670	
		Lilac Time		£365
	Palace Manchester	Covent Garden Opera	£6250	
1959	London Palladium	Swinging Down the Lane	£14426	£4997
	London Prince of Wales	SOLD		
	Finsbury Park Empire	Liberace	£5638	£1613
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Cliff Richard	£5534	£1274
	Brighton Hippodrome	Large as Life	£6566	£1787
	Edinburgh Empire	National Ballet Finland	£8027	£1971
	Glasgow Empire	Connie Francis	£6543	
		Cliff Richard		£1782
	Leeds Empire	Harry Secombe	£3708	£662
	Liverpool Empire	Large as Life	£5492	
		Bruce Forsyth		£1265
	Newcastle Empire	Harry Secombe	£4296	
		Bruce Forsyth		£1074
	Nottingham Empire	Theatre Closed (Demolished in 1969 for road widening)		
	Sheffield Empire	King and I	£2993	
	(Demolished for shops in July)	Jewel and Warriss		£508
	Palace Manchester	Covent Garden Opera	£6331	
	Hanley Theatre Royal	Screamline	£4273	
		David Whitfield		£531
1960	London Palladium	Stars in Your Eyes	£15522	£5552
	Finsbury Park Empire (Theatre closed May 7 for housing)	Adam Faith	£3217	£677
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Liberace Music Box	£6852	
		Meet Me at the Corner		£1883
	Brighton Hippodrome	Let's Be Happy	£8263	£2444
	Edinburgh Empire (partial closure)	Royal Ballet	£11474	£3139

	Glasgow Empire	Bobby Darin	£8801	
		Meet me at the Corner		£1984
	Leeds Empire	Bruce Forsyth	£4391	£887
	Liverpool Empire	Bobby Darin	£9520	
		Startime		£1770
	Newcastle Empire	Black and White Minstrel Show	£2834	£830
		Emile Ford		
	Palace Manchester	Sammy Davis Jr.	£17177	£6444
		Rose Marie		
	Hanley Theatre Royal	D'Oyly Carte	£3660	
		Anthony Newley		£760
	Morecambe Winter Gardens	D'Oyly Carte and Wrestling Contest	£3552	
		Vagabond King and Alma Cogan		£1804
1961	London Palladium	Let Yourself Go	£16546	£6168
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Snow White and the Seven Dwarves	£7009	£1340
	Brighton Hippodrome	Black and White Minstrel Show	£6347	£1465
	Edinburgh Empire	Luther	£8402	£1626
	Glasgow Empire	Andy Stewart Show	£4508	
		Snow White and the Seven Dwarves		£1736
	Leeds Empire (theatre Sold now shops including Harvey Nichols)			
	Liverpool Empire	Snow White and the Seven Dwarves	£7568	£1202
	Newcastle Empire	Nina and Frederick	£5421	
		Tony Hancock		£1114
	Palace Manchester	Sammy Davis Jr.	£17177	
		Do Re Mi		£1905

	Hanley Theatre Royal (Theatre Sold Oct, converted to a bingo hall)	D'Oyly Carte	£3626	£381
	Morecambe Winter Gardens	Stan Stennett	£5119	£1570
1962	London Palladium	Every Night at the Palladium	£15150	£6505
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Summer Show of 1961	£6847	£1468
	Edinburgh Empire (Theatre sold August, now the Festival theatre)	Oklahoma	£3742	£226
	Glasgow Empire	Harry Secombe Helen Shapiro	£5825	£1107
	Liverpool Empire	Tony Hancock Frank Ifield	£6226	£1652
	Newcastle Empire	The Wizard of Oz Frank Ifield	£4810	£800
	Palace Manchester	The Shadows	£7016	£1556
	Morecambe Winter Gardens	Black and White Minstrel Show	£7389	£3133 (Different dates)
1963	London Palladium London Victoria palace great profits for V and W Mistrels	Sammy Davis Jr.	£19216	£5301
	Birmingham Hippodrome	Red Army Show	£12494	£3350
	Brighton Hippodrome	Red Army Show	£11764	£2173
	Glasgow Empire (sold, now an office and retail development)	Red Army Show	£11827	£1601
	Liverpool Empire	Bolshoi Ballet	£21356	£7107
	Newcastle Empire (Theatre sold September, now shops)	Frank Ifield/Arthur Worsley	£5544	£1251
	Palace Manchester	Bolshoi Ballet	£18151	£5148
	Morecambe Winter Gardens	Me and My Girl (loss) Doreen Hume/Matt Munro	£1428	£1776
1964	London Palladium (London Victoria palace great profits for V and W Minstrels)	Star Time	£16178	£5800
	Birmingham Hippodrome	My Fair Lady	£10700	£2303

Brighton Hippodrome	Royal Ballet	£6346	£909
Liverpool Empire	Moiseyev Dance Co.	£13622	
Palace Manchester	Maggie May	£11259	£2203
Morecambe Winter Gardens	Black and White Minstrel Show	£9383	£2203
Nottingham Royal	Some variety shown		
No representative director due to ATV takeover			

Source Moss Empire Returns, 1945 - 1964. Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection. GB 71 THM/303/1/10

Appendix II: Stoll Theatres Top Takings 1945-1964

Year	Theatre	Act	Takings
1945	Hackney Empire	Lucan and McShane	£1774
	Shepherd's Bush Empire	Cyril Fletcher	£2170
	Chiswick Empire	Benet's Circus	£2605
	Wood Green Empire	Benet's Circus	£2236
	Manchester Hippodrome	Lucan and McShane	£2298
	Bristol Hippodrome	Wind of Heaven	£2953
	New Cardiff	Carroll Levis	£2117
	Grand Derby	Rose Marie	£1846
	Palace Leicester	Henry Hall	£1842
1946	Hackney Empire	Carroll Levis	£1860
	Shepherd's Bush Empire	Steffani Co. (Boy's choir)	£1885
	Chiswick Empire	Let's Get On With It	£2348
	Wood Green Empire	Max Miller	£2265
	Manchester Hippodrome	Harry Roy Band	£2403
	Bristol Hippodrome	Lucan and McShane	£2745
	New Cardiff	Don Ross Circus	£2232
	Grand Derby	?	
	Palace Leicester	Lucan and McShane	£2150
1947	Hackney Empire	Stand Easy	£1988
	Shepherd's Bush Empire	Charlie Chester	£2088
	Chiswick Empire	Laurel and Hardy	£2606
	Wood Green Empire	Don Ross Circus	£2118
	Manchester Hippodrome	Charlie Chester	£2634
	Bristol Hippodrome	Mixture of pantomime/plays and ballet then closed due to fire	
	New Cardiff	Stand Easy	£1939
	Grand Derby	Just William	£2169
	Palace Leicester	Hip Hip Hooray	£2532
1948	Hackney Empire	Donald Peers	£1564
	Shepherd's Bush Empire	Arthur Askey	£1565
	Chiswick Empire	Thanks for the Memory	£2789
	Wood Green Empire	Snow White	£2445
	Manchester Hippodrome	Ta Ra Boom De Ay	£3106

	Bristol Hippodrome	Closed	
	New Cardiff	Ice Revue	£3213
	Grand Derby	Ice Revue	£2305
	Palace Leicester	Thanks for the Memory	£2362
1949	Hackney Empire	Less and Dill?	£2168
	Chiswick Empire	International Ballet	£3008
	Manchester Hippodrome	Soldiers in Skirts	£2266
	New Cardiff	Peter Casson	£2178
	Grand Derby	D'Oyly Carte	£2271
	Palace Leicester	Hold Your Breath	£2125
1950	Hackney Empire	Steve Conway	£1397
	Chiswick Empire (incomplete year)	Frankie Howerd Show	£2945
	Wood Green Empire(incomplete year)	Frankie Howerd	£2366
	Manchester Hippodrome(incomplete year)	Max Wall/ Anton Karas	£2855
	Bristol Hippodrome (incomplete year/ showing mixed theatrical programme)	Peter Pan	£4654
	New Cardiff (incomplete year)	Markova Ballet	£3280
1951	Shepherds Bush Empire	Randle's Scandals	£ 2030
	Chiswick Empire	Billy Cotton Band	£
	Wood Green Empire	Wood Green Operatic Society	£1711
	Manchester Hippodrome	Folies Bergeres	£3426
	Bristol Hippodrome (incomplete year)	Festival Ballet	£4704
	New Cardiff (incomplete year)	Bless the Bride	£2788
1952	Hackney Empire (incomplete year)	Rhythm is Our Business	£2175
	Shepherd's Bush Empire	Rhythm is Our Business	£2188
	Chiswick Empire	Rhythm is Our Business	£2337
	Wood Green Empire	Peter Brough	£2004
	Manchester Hippodrome	Max Bygraves, Nitwits and co.	£3138
	Bristol Hippodrome	Laurel and Hardy	£3655
	New Cardiff	Laurel and Hardy	£2902
	Grand Derby	Dick Whittington On Ice	£2383

	Palace Leicester	Archie Andrews Show/Peter Brough	£2202
1953	Hackney Empire(incomplete year)	Issy Bonn and Eddie Clavert	£1175
	Shepherd's Bush Empire (sold October)	Peter Brough	£1821
	Chiswick Empire	Oklahoma	£2628
	Wood Green Empire	Carousel	£1545
	Manchester Hippodrome	Billy Daniels	£4201
	Bristol Hippodrome	Guys and Dolls	£4422
	New Cardiff	? Check records Italian?	£3519
	Derby Hippodrome	Oklahoma	£2386
	Palace Leicester	Oklahoma	£2631
1954	Hackney Empire	Benny Hill and co.	£2014
	Chiswick Empire	Billy Daniels and co	£ 3303
	Wood Green Empire	Benny Hill	£2209
	Manchester Hippodrome	Guy Mitchell	£3756
	Bristol Hippodrome	Sadlers Wells	£5061
	New Cardiff	Guy Mitchell	£4122
	Grand Derby	Sadlers Wells	£2386
	Palace Leicester (mainly non-variety)	Benny Hill	£2192
1955	Hackney Empire	Joan Regan	£1289
	Chiswick Empire	Guy Mitchell	£3024
	Wood Green Empire (became a TV studio Sept 1955)	Guys and Dolls	£1378
	Manchester Hippodrome	Billy Eckstine	£3658
	Bristol Hippodrome	Peter Pan	£4493
	New Cardiff	Welsh National Opera	£2655
	Derby Hippodrome	Sadlers Wells	£1754
	Palace Leicester (mainly non-variety)	White Horse Inn on Ice	£2445
1956	Hackney Empire (then became television studio)	Old Time Music Hall	£843
	Chiswick Empire	Carl Rosa	£2497
	Manchester Hippodrome	Mel Torme	£3250
	Bristol Hippodrome	Festival Ballet	£3646
	New Cardiff	Welsh National Opera	£3095
	Derby Hippodrome (closed for summer)	Maid of the Mountain	£1799

	Palace Leicester (closed for summer)	We're in Town Tonight	£1444
1957	Chiswick Empire	Lonnie Donegan	£2971
	Manchester Hippodrome	Gang Show	£2955
	Bristol Hippodrome	Rocking the Town	£5503
	New Cardiff	Welsh National Opera	£3369
	Derby Hippodrome	White Horse Inn	£2447
	Palace Leicester	Bitter Sweet	£2055
1958	Chiswick Empire	Lilac Time (operetta)	£2499
	Manchester Hippodrome	Gang Show	£4043
	Bristol Hippodrome	Royal Ballet	£4996
	New Cardiff	Royal Ballet	£2654
	Derby Hippodrome	Derby Operatic Society	£2558
	Palace Leicester	Oklahoma	£2357
1959	Chiswick Empire (theatre sold)	Liberace (final night)	£5187
	Manchester Hippodrome	Gang Show	£4242
	Bristol Hippodrome	Norman Wisdom	£3851
	New Cardiff	Harry Secombe Show	£4469
	Derby Hippodrome (closed turned into bingo hall 1961)	Queen of Hearts	£1731
	Palace Leicester (final week, then demolished)	The King and I	£2488
1960	Manchester Hippodrome	The Gang Show	£4370
	Bristol Hippodrome	Royal Ballet	£5154
	New Cardiff	Welsh National Opera	£3598
1961	Manchester Hippodrome (then closed)	The Gang Show	£3922
	Bristol Hippodrome	Tony Hancock	£5783
	New Cardiff	Welsh National Opera	£3420
1962	Bristol Hippodrome	Royal Ballet	£4636
	New Cardiff	Welsh National Opera	£3830
1963	Bristol Hippodrome	Harry Secombe	£5584
	New Cardiff	The Quaker Girl	£2038
1964	Bristol Hippodrome	My Fair Lady	£8104

Source: Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942-1964. Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection. GB 71

THM/303/1/7

Appendix III: Yearly analysis of takings at Finsbury Park Empire and Birmingham Hippodrome, with radio acts highlighted in bold type, 1947

Finsbury Park Empire 1947			Birmingham Hippodrome 1947		
Date	Attraction	Takings	Date	Attraction	Takings
Jan 4	Dick Whittington (Pantomime)	2754	Jan 4	Gang Show	2802
Jan 11	"	2398	Jan 11	"	2720
Jan 18	"	2094	Jan 18	"	3180
Jan 25	"	1657	Jan 25	Ice Follies (American ice performers)	2462
Feb 1	Henry Hall (bandleader)	1283	Feb 1	"	3248
Feb 8	Two Leslies (Comic singers)	1457	Feb 8	"	3380
Feb 15	Elsie and Doris Waters (comedians)	1491	Feb 15	"	3595
Feb 22	Rawicz and Landauer (Austrian pianists)	1428	Feb 22	Joe Loss Band	2597
Mar 1	Squadronaires (RAF band)	1572	Mar 1	Two Leslies (comic singers)	2267
Mar 8	Stand Easy (radio show)	2493	Mar 8	Laurel and Hardy (comedians)	3300
Mar 15	Gang Show	1665	Mar 15	Stand Easy (radio show)	3329
Mar 22	Old Mother Riley (Female impersonator)	1997	Mar 22	Arthur Askey (comedian)	2476
Mar 29	Arsenic and Old Lace (play)	1715	Mar 29	Rawicz and Landauer (Austrian pianists)	2391
Apr 5	Charlie Kunz (American bandleader)	1453	Apr 5	Cavalcade of Mystery (Cecil Lyle/ magician)	1883
Apr 12	Radio Forfeits (BBC radio show)	2448	Apr 12	Robb Wilton (comedian)	3286

Apr 19	Ted Heath (bandleader)	1777	Apr 19	Randle's Scandals (comedy revue)	2416
Apr 26	Happidrome (BBC radio show)	1557	Apr 26	Squadronnaires (RAF band)	2341
May 3	Carroll Levis (Canadian with talent show)	2033	May 3	Big Broadcast	2715
May 10	Monte Ray (singer)	1694	May 10	Ted Heath Band	2525
May 17	Big Broadcast (Issy Bonn)	1558	May 17	Happidrome (radio show)	2126
May 24	Anne Shelton (singer)	1703	May 24	Old Mother Riley (female impersonator)	2635
May 31	Ethel Revnell (comedian)	1406	May 31	Nitwits (comic musicians)	2307
Jun7	Geraldo band	1141	Jun7	Charlie Kunz (American bandleader)	1482
Jun 14	Billy Cotton Band Show	1413	Jun 14	Good Evans (comedy revue)	2453
Jun 21	Revue Continental	1476	Jun 21	Afrique (South African impressionist)	1624
Jun 28	Nitwits (comedy band)	1885	Jun 28	Vic Oliver (Austrian comedian)	1917
Jul 5	Sim Sala Bim (Danish magician)	1413	Jul 5	Geraldo (bandleader)	2144
Jul 12	Billy Reid (bandleader)	1662	Jul 12	Radio Forfeits (radio show)	2543
Jul 19	The Town Roars	1795	Jul 19	Revue Continental	2060
Jul 26	Turner Layton (American singer and pianist)	1603	Jul 26	Henry Hall (bandleader)	1991

Aug 2	Hal Monty (comedian)	1845	Aug 2	Carroll Levis (talent show)	2938
Aug 9	Have a Go (Radio quiz show)	2431	Aug 9	Jimmy James (comedian)	3210
Aug 16	Chico Marx (American comedian)	1875	Aug 16	Reid and Squires (Band and singer)	1901
Aug 23	Vic Oliver (Austrian comedian)	1355	Aug 23	Troise Band	1899
Aug 30	Forsyth, Seamon and Farrell (American musical comics)	1614	Aug 30	The Town Roars (comedy revue)	2298
Sep 6	Ignorance is Bliss (radio show)	1981	Sep 6	Have a Go (radio show)	3083
Sep 13	Harry Roy Band	1623	Sep 13	Ignorance is Bliss (radio show)	2807
Sep 20	Good Evans (comedian)	1935	Sep 20	Ethel Revnell (comedian)	2369
Sep 27	Laurel and Hardy (comedians)	2426	Sep 27	Waters Sisters (comedians)	2816
Oct 4	Twenty Questions (radio show)	2193	Oct 4	Stand Easy (radio show)	3227
Oct 11	Joe Loss Band	1706	Oct 11	Rocky Mountain Rhythm (country music)	2594
Oct 18	Jack Durant (American actor and comedian)	1981	Oct 18	Harry Roy Band	2433
Oct 25	Nicholas Bros (American dancers)	2305	Oct 25	Big Top Circus	3088
Nov 1	Gangs All Here (musical)	1814	Nov 1	Mendelssohn Band	2436
Nov 8	Arthur Askey (comedian)	1975	Nov 8	Me and My Girl (musical)	2553
Nov 15	Spotlight on Sally (based on cartoon strip)	1627	Nov 15	Showboat of Air (Jewell and Warriss revue)	2812

Nov 22	Open the Door Richard (American hit song)	1358	Nov 22	Gang's all Here (musical)	2216
Nov 29	Stand Easy (radio show)	2350	Nov 29	Turner Layton (singer)	2182
Dec 6	Rocky Mountain Rhythm (country music)	1240	Dec 6	Paradise Parade (revue with comedians)	2035
Dec 13	Jewel and Warriss (comedians)	1774	Dec 13	Diamond Lil (play)	3397
Dec 20	Felix Mendelssohn (band)	1444	Dec 20	"	2796
Dec 27	Jack and the Beanstalk (pantomime)	1509	Dec 27	Dancing Years (musical)	2621

Source: Moss Empire Returns, 1945 - 1964. Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection. GB 71

THM/303/1/10

Appendix IV: Yearly analysis of takings at Finsbury Park Empire and Birmingham Hippodrome, with radio acts highlighted in bold type, 1952

Finsbury Park Empire 1952				Birmingham Hippodrome 1952			
Date	Attraction	Takings	Profit or Loss	Date	Attraction	Takings	Profit or Loss
Jan 6	Babes in the Wood (pantomime)	2751	685	Jan 6	Brigadoon (musical)	2434	240
Jan 13	"	2555	585	Jan 13	"	2898	309
Jan 20	"	2337	418	Jan 20	"	2893	298
Jan 27	Anne Shelton (singer)	1756	227	Jan 27	"	2496	103
Feb 3	Charlie Chester (comedian)	1545	166	Feb 3	Kings Rhapsody (Ivor Novello musical)	4000	406
Feb 10	Ronnie Ronalde (singer/whistler)	1605	359	Feb 10	"	4223	1044
Feb 17	Max Miller (comedian)	2826	1113	Feb 17	"	5542	1039
Feb 24	Record Hit Parade	1851	265	Feb 24	"	5306	976
Mar 2	Max Bygraves and co. (comedian/singer)	2101	401	Mar 2	"	5296	959
Mar 9	Peek-A-Boo	1522	134	Mar 9	"	5333	919
Mar 16	Bill Johnson, Anton Karas etc. (American singer?/Austrian zither player)	1594	131	Mar 16	Radio Times	2507	656
Mar 23	Randle's Scandals (comic revue)	1772	348	Mar 23	Stars of Educating Archie	3240	1053

Mar 30	George and Bert Bernard (American dancers)	1658	174	Mar 30	Ronnie Ronalde	2735	736
Apr 5	Dorothy Squires (singer)	1623	185	Apr 5	Look In	1673	177
Apr 12	John Calvert and Company (Amrican magician)	1515	117	Apr 12	Peek-A-Boo	2069	410
Apr 19	Tessie O' Shea (comic singer)	1721	216	Apr 19	Billy Cotton Band	3711	1275
Apr 26	Look In	1526	261	Apr 26	Anne Shelton	1865	414
May 3	What's My Line? (TV show)	1210	-58	May 3	Kalang Revue	1902	279
May 10	Radio Times	1719	236	May 10	Laurel and Hardy	3641	913
May 17	Josef Locke (Irish tenor)	1461	94	May 17	So this is Showbusiness	2254	517
May 24	Terry-Thomas (comic actor)	1544	172	May 20	Rhythm is Our Business	2774	820
May 31	Monty's Army	1444	152	May 27	Josef Locke	2320	522
Jun 7	Forces in Petticoats	1818	360	Jun 7	Happy Go Lucky	2423	493
Jun 14	Issy Bonn (comedian/singer)	1670	143	Jun 14	Forces in Petticoats	1991	497
Jun 21	Harry Roy (bandleader)	1575	139	Jun 21	Joe Loss	2255	472
Jun 28	Rhythm is Our Business	2129	464	Jun 28	Sophie Tucker	2495	484
Jul 5	Dorothy Squires (singer)	1150	-92	Jul 5	John Calvert	1310	-68

Jul12	My Wife's Lodger (play)	1057	262	Jul12	Dr Crock Crackpots	1967	329
Jul 19	Moulin Rouge	1375	14	Jul 19	Sugar Chile Robinson	2286	369
Jul 26	It Won't Be a Stylish Marriage	763	-95	Jul 26	Folies Bergeres	2831	570
Aug 2	Gypsy Rose Lee (burlesque entertainer)	1960	262	Aug 2	Meet the Gang	2397	516
Aug 9	Elton Hayes (singer/guitarist)	2007	332	Aug 9	Moulin Rouge	2652	597
Aug 16	A Follies Production?	2305	329	Aug 16	Joy Nichols	2524	598
Aug 23	Meet the Gang	1729	212	Aug 23	Elton Hayes	1527	51
Aug 30	Deep River Boys (American gospel group)	2074	370	Aug 30	GH Elliott Tommy Joyer	1877	405
Sep 6	Sugar Chile Robinson (child pianist/singer)	2244	388	Sep 6	Hutch, Peter Sellers	2201	426
Sep 13	Happy Go Lucky	1900	330	Sep 13	Frankie Howerd	3392	1072
Sep 20	Nat Jackley	2233	497	Sep 20	The Deep River Boys	2292	529
Sep 27	Open the Cage	1849	288	Sep 27	Five Smith Bros	2749	779
Oct 4	George and Bert Bernard	2069	424	Oct 4	Harry Roy Band	2032	214
Oct 11	Television Highlights	1891	386	Oct 11	Open the Cage	2277	483
Oct 18	Albert Modley and the Beverley Sisters	2126	527	Oct 18	Television Highlights	2114	399
Oct 25	The Stargazers Ganjou Bros	1645	39	Oct 25	Donald Peers	2046	321

Nov 1	Donald Peers	1721	133	Nov 1	Syd Seymour and Band	2517	727
Nov 8	Folies Bergeres	1920	162	Nov 8	Max Miller	2693	810
Nov 15	Anne Shelton	1999	406	Nov 15	Betty Hutton	7895	1064
Nov 22	Five Smith Bros	1518	96	Nov 22	Good Evans	2681	656
Nov 29	Good Evans	1524	148	Nov 29	Radio Times	2062	309
Dec 6	Radio Times	1496	135	Dec 6	Harry Lester	1913	326
Dec 13	Carroll Levis	1292	-21	Dec 13	Miss Esquire	1682	99
Dec 20	Burton Lester's Midgets	952	-456	Dec 20	Carroll Levis	2021	174
Dec 27	Mother Goose	2108	22	Dec 27	Carousel	3054	195

Source: Moss Empire Returns, 1945 - 1964. Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection. GB 71

THM/303/1/10

Bibliography

Archives

BBC Written Archive in Caversham.

R34/482. Policy Music Hall Relays, 1928-1944, 9/2/37. (BBC Internal Circulating memo, From. Director of Variety to Mr. Sharman.)

R34/917 Variety, File 1, 1943-1956 24/11/43. (Document; Memo: Editor-in-Chief to Director-General 'Clean Variety')

R34/917, Variety, File 1, 1943-1956, 24/1/1950. (Memo: Mr. Pat Dixon to Head of Variety "Radio and Television")

R9/12/6 *Audience Research Listener Barometer Reports* 1.8.1950-31.8.1951.

R34/918/3, Vaudeville and Variety File 2B, 1941-1944. 14/742/ Variety Policy and Output by John Watt, to Controller of Programmes.

R34/917, *Variety File 1, 1943-1956*. 16th February, 1945. Memo from R.J.E. Silvey, Listener Research Director, John Watt to Controller of Programmes.

R34/422/2 Policy Home Services Policy, File 2a, 1955-1956. Notes On Sound Broadcasting, 30th August, J.C. Thornton.

British Music Hall Society Archive

The British Music Hall Society, Music Hall Poster Archive

The British Music Hall Society, Programme Collection.

Lancashire Archives

Papers of Hylda Baker (1905-1986), Lancashire Archives, DDX 1683/3

London Metropolitan Archives

London Music Halls, LMA/4237

National Archives, Kew

Variety Artistes' Federation 1907-1967, FS 27/159

National Fairground and Circus Archive

National Fairground and Circus Archive

University of Sheffield, <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/nfca>

V&A Theatre and Performance Collections

Bernard Delfont Ltd, Bernard Delfont Limited Archive, 1950-1993. V&A Theatre and Performance Collections. GB 71 THM/300

Figure book 1956-1958, 2 Jan 1956-3 Mar 1958. Bernard Delfont Limited Archive. GB 71 THM/300/5/1

Frank Matcham and Company, Frank Matcham and Company, theatre architects: records, 1881-1972. V&A Theatre and Performance Collections. GB 71 THM/Windmill Theatre Archive (Jane Kerner Gift), *V&A Collections, Theatre and Performance*, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/archive/ARC64474>;

Moss Empire Returns, 1945 - 1964. Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection. GB 71 THM/303/1/10

Stoll Moss Theatre Returns, 1942-1964. Howard & Wyndham Ltd Collection. GB 71 THM/303/1/7

Stoll Moss Theatre Managers' Report Cards, 1938-1966, PN2597 Outsize.

Windmill Archive V&A Theatre and Performance Collections THM/422;

Windmill Theatre Press and Marketing Material, *V&A Collections, Theatre and Performance*, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/archive/ARC75240>;

Revudeville Scripts, Windmill Archive, V&A Theatre and Performance Collections THM/257.

Digital Archives

Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage

Chronology of performances, <https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/> [accessed on 19th September 2019]

British Library, Theatre Archive Project,

<https://www.bl.uk/collections/theatre-archive-project> [accessed 21 September 2021]

The British Newspaper Archive

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>

British Online Archives

BBC Handbooks, Annual Reports and Accounts, 1927-2002, *BBC Written Archives*

Centre, <https://microform->

digital.sheffield.idm.oclc.org/boa/collections/6/volumes/10/bbc-handbooks

[accessed 9th December 2021]

Mass Observation Archives

Mass-Observation's Panel on Television, [Report 3106], April 1949, available through:

Mass Observation Online,

<http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/sheffield.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/FileReport-3106> [Accessed April 27, 2023]. p.22.

The Opera in Britain [Report], Planning vol. XV, No 290, November 8 1948, available

through: Mass Observation Online,

<http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/sheffield.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/FileReport-3061> [Accessed December 17, 2021]

Parliamentary Acts, Debates and Legislation

Average Industrial Wage (Purchasing Power) Volume 549: debated on Thursday 23

February 1956', *UK Parliament Hansard*

[https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1956-02-23/debates/8806eeb3-a61f-4178-8115-](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1956-02-23/debates/8806eeb3-a61f-4178-8115-8648bbd89f38/AverageIndustrialWage(PurchasingPower))

[8648bbd89f38/AverageIndustrialWage\(PurchasingPower\)](https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1956-02-23/debates/8806eeb3-a61f-4178-8115-8648bbd89f38/AverageIndustrialWage(PurchasingPower)) [accessed 28th September 2021].

Cinematograph Films Act 1927, ch. 29, *UK Public General Acts*,

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1927/29/contents/enacted>

'Foreign Variety Artists', HC Deb 18 December 1947 vol 445 cc 1869-

70, [https://api.parliament.uk/historic-](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/dec/18/foreign-variety-artists)

[hansard/commons/1947/dec/18/foreign-variety-artists](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/dec/18/foreign-variety-artists)

'London Theatres - Supervision of Plays, Etc, volume 83: debated on Tuesday 15 May',

UK Parliament Hansard (1900) <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1900->

[05-15/debates/6fb9411a-fe18-4fcf-96ec-](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/acts/television-act-1954)

[b840af688982/LondonTheatres%E2%80%94SupervisionOfPlaysEtc](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/acts/television-act-1954)

‘Television Act 1954’, Hansard 1803–2005, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/acts/television-act-1954> [accessed 27/04/2021]

Printed Primary Sources: Books

Bevan, Ian, *Top of the Bill: The Story of the London Palladium* (London, 1952)

Bygraves, Max, *Max Bygraves: In His Own Words* (Derby, 1997)

Cryer, Barry, *The Chronicles of Hernia* (London, 2011)

Cullen, Frank, Hackman, Florence and McNeilly, Donald, *Vaudeville old & new: an Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* (New York, 2007)

Delfont, Bernard and Turner, Barry, *East End, West End* (London, 1990)

Farnes, Norma, *Spike: An Intimate Memoir* (London, 2011)

Federation of Theatre Unions, *Theatre Ownership in Britain: A Report Prepared for the Federation of Theatre Unions* (London, 1953)

Forsyth, Bruce, *Bruce: The Autobiography* (London, 2012)

More, Kenneth, *More or Less* (London, 1978)

Morecambe, Eric and Wise, Ernie, *Eric & Ernie: The Autobiography of Morecambe & Wise* (London, 1973)

Morecambe, Eric, Wise, Ernie and Freedland, Michael, *There’s no Answer to That! An Autobiography by Morecambe & Wise* (London, 1981)

Muir, Frank, *A Kentish Lad* (London, 2012)

Secombe, Harry, *Arias and Raspberries: An Autobiography* (London 1997)

Short, Ernest, *Fifty years of vaudeville*, (Norwich, 1946).

Sykes, Eric, *If I Don’t Write It Nobody Else Will* (London, 2009)

Took, Barry, *Laughter in the Air: an Informal History of British Radio Comedy* (London, 1976)

van Damm, Sheila, *No Excuses* (London, 1957)

van Damm, Sheila, *We Never Closed: The Windmill Story* (London, 1967)

van Damm, Vivian, *Tonight and Every Night* (London, 1952);

Williams, Kenneth and Davies, Russell, *The Kenneth Williams Diaries* (London 1994);

Wisdom, Norman, *My Turn: An Autobiography* (London, 2002)

Printed Primary Newspaper and Magazine Articles

‘£7,140 a Week Offer to Danny Kaye’, *Halifax Evening Courier*, Friday 10 November 1950

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003295/19501110/0>

[17/0001](https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003295/19501110/0) [accessed 13 December 2021]

‘£7,140 a Week London Palladium Offer for Danny Kaye’, *Western Morning News*,

Tuesday 12 December 1950

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000329/19501111/0>

[09/0001](https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000329/19501111/0) [accessed 13 December 2021]

‘All Day Siege of Box Office: Danny Kaye Tickets Black Market Men Reap Harvest’, *The*

Manchester Guardian, May 9 1949, [https://www.proquest.com/historical-](https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/all-day-siege-box-office/docview/478906663/se-2?accountid=13828)

[newspapers/all-day-siege-box-office/docview/478906663/se-](https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/all-day-siege-box-office/docview/478906663/se-2?accountid=13828)

[2?accountid=13828](https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/all-day-siege-box-office/docview/478906663/se-2?accountid=13828) [accessed 13 December 2021]

‘Anti-Nudity’, *The Stage*, 19 January 1956,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19560119/0>

[31/0004](https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19560119/0) [accessed 23 January 2022]

Blewett, Denis, ‘The Final Radio ‘close-down’ soon?’, *Sunday Sun* (Newcastle), 24

November 1957,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001723/19571124/008/0008> [accessed February 2022].

'Calls for Next Week', *The Stage*, Thursday 07 April 1955

'Cheerful Charlie Chester in Stand Easy!' *Radio Times*, September 10 1948

<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/page/efad6ac5e4df467984cd21ec445c3b32>
[accessed 2 Dec 2021]

Chillingworth, John, 'Non Stop Peep Show', *Picture Post* vol. 52, no. 3, 21st July 1951

'Classy Nudes are Given Away', *The People*, Sunday 01 April 1956, p. 7,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000729/19560401/071/0007> [accessed 23 January 2022]

Could You Run a Provincial Hall? *The Stage*, 10 October 1957,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19571010/023/0003> [accessed 13 December 2021]

'Danny Kaye', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, Thursday 03 March 1949,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000273/19490303/011/0001> [accessed 13th December 2021]

'Danny Kaye not for Nottingham', *Nottingham Journal*, Tuesday 26 April 1949

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001898/19490426/109/0005> [accessed 13th December 2021]

'Flotsam on the Importation of American Artists', *The Stage*, 10 October 1957

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19571010/040/0005> [accessed 13th December 2021]

'Fonteyn Dances Cut', *Liverpool Echo*, Tuesday 24 July 1951 p.3

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000271/19510724/022/0003> [accessed 13th December 2021]

'The Goons', *Birmingham Hippodrome Heritage*, 20 June 1955,

https://birminghamhippodromeheritage.com/bh_chronology/the-goons/

[accessed 21st November 2021]

'Hard Workers', *The Stage*, 28 June 1956,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19560628/039/0005>

Holdsworth, Peter, 'Yells of Ecstasy Sounded Like Tortured Canaries', *Telegraph &*

Argus March 1959, consulted in Bryceson, Dave, 'Concerts & Package Tours,

1959 March to April', *Music & Concerts of the late Fifties & Sixties for the late*

Fifties, Sixties & Seventies, <https://www.bradfordtimeline.co.uk/mindex59f.htm>

[accessed 6th January 2022]

Ellis, Mollie, 'Horror Comics', *The Stage*, 28 November 1957,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19571128/028/0003> [accessed 23rd January 2022]

'How Saucy!', *Reading Standard*, 22 July 1955,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003511/19550722/312/0004> [accessed 23 January 2022]

'Lion Leaps... Nudes Keep Pose', *The Daily Mirror*, 02 July 1956, p.5

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000560/19560702/015/0005?browse=true> [accessed 23 January 2022]

'Liverpool Stars with the Sadler's Wells', *Liverpool Echo*, Friday 13 May 1960 p. 5

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000271/19600513/075/0005> [accessed 9th December 2021]

'Mrs. Laidler Objects to Nudes', *The Stage*, 19 April 1956,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0001179/19560419/002/0001?browse=true>

'New Comics Click on London Cirks', *Billboard*, 24 Jul 1943, p.25

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=fQwEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PP1&pg=PT24#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed on 21 September 2021]

'Nude Shows: Two Letters in Response to Last Week's Report', *The Stage*, 22 August 1957,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19570822/027/0003> [accessed 23 January 2022]

'Nude Shows Complied with Rules', *The Stage* 27 September 1956,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19560927/014/0001> [accessed 23 January 2022]

'Nude shows go round in ever- decreasing circles', *The Guardian*, 21 November 1957,

<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2012/nov/21/music-hall-variety-burlesque-nudes-1957> [accessed 23 January 2022]

'Nude Shows not True Art - Vicar', *Bradford Observer*, Saturday 25 September 1954, p.5,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003150/19540925/095/0005> [accessed 23 January 2022]

'Nude Shows on the Way Out?', *The Stage*, Thursday 15 August 1957,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19570815/017/0001> [accessed 23 January 2022]

'Paul Raymond presents The New Front-Page Strip Show 'We Strip To-Night', *Evesham*

Standard & West Midland Observer, Friday 11 July, 1952

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002560/19520711/054/0004> [accessed 20 January 2022];

'Paul Raymond Shows the Way', *The Stage*, 03 October 1957,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19571003/024/0003> [accessed 23 January 2022]

'Paul Raymond Will Tour Eight Shows In 1956', *The Stage*, 12 January 1956 p.3

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19560112/024/0003> [accessed 23 January 2022]

'The Peers Pass Television Bill' Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer, Friday 23 July 1954

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000687/19540723/136/0005>

'Posters in the News', *The Stage*, 12 August 1954,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19540812/026/0004> [accessed 7 January 2022]

Sachs, Bill, 'Magic', *Billboard*, 6 September 1947, p.41,

<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=VAwEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PP1&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed on 21 September 2021]

'Too many Foreign Acts - Disclosures at VAF Meeting', *The Era*, 10 March 1937

consulted via

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000053/19370310/018/0003> [accessed on 13 December 2021]

Towler, James, 'Variety - Where do we go from here?', *The Stage*, 26 February 1959,

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001180/19590226/021/0002> [accessed 23 January 2022]

‘Variety Back at Coventry Theatre’, *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, Tuesday 31 March

1959, p. 4.

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000769/19590331/049/0004?browse=true> [accessed 6 January 2022].

‘A Variety of Skiffle at the Hippodrome’, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 10 December 1957, p.

19 <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002134/19571210/518/0019> [accessed 6 Jan 2022]

‘Variety: Variety Records Broken’, *The Stage*, July 8 1954 [accessed via ProQuest]

‘What You Say – Points from Letters’, *The Stage*, Thursday 12 September 1957 p. 3

<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001179/19570912/025/0003> [accessed 7 January 2022]

‘The Windmill Theatre Throws a Party’, *Picture Post* vol. 30, no.9, 2 March 1946

Primary Visual and Audio Media

‘Anne Edwards (Let's Join The Ladies)’ (1944), *British Pathé Archive*, Canister NSP 421,

Media Urn 50515, tape PM1574,

<https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/188109/>.

Clifford Stanton 1937 (online film ID:1236.31), British Pathé, first broadcast 29 April

1937, <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/clifford-stanton-1> [accessed 13 December 2021]

Co-operative Printing Society, *Music Hall War. In Distress, 1907*, illustrated flyer with an

engraved image by Roy, Theatre and Performance Collection, *Victoria and Albert*

Museum, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1257802/music-hall-war-in-distress-flyer-roy/> [accessed 28th September 2022]

Donegan, Lonnie and Miller, Max – The Market Song (Pye Recordings, 1962), accessed

on Spotify <https://open.spotify.com/track/4RiUXqotbx1rZhL7k0vR69>

London Nobody Knows [DVD film] directed by Norman Cohen [originally released 1967,

Norcon)

'Max Miller Live at the Metropolitan' (Marble Arch, 1967, originally recorded 1958),

accessed on

Spotify, <https://open.spotify.com/album/3XRnXsE9UIuHHEUFhc4hRO>

[accessed 9th December 2021]

Morton Fraser And His Harmonica Rascals, British Pathé 1947, accessed via YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLPuUnVQ5DY> [accessed 12th December

2021]

Murder at the Windmill [film], directed by Val Guest (Angel Productions, 1949);

Says Sirdani (Vim Advert), [online film], (BFI player, first broadcast 1945)

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-says-sirdani-1945-online> [accessed

21st September 2021]

Secrets of a Windmill Girl [film], directed by Arnold L. Miller (Searchlight Films, 1966);

A Singer On The Flying Trapeze: Aimee Fontenay, black and white photograph taken 07th

July 1961, Alamy - [https://www.alamy.com/jul-07-1961-a-singer-on-the-flying-](https://www.alamy.com/jul-07-1961-a-singer-on-the-flying-trapeze-aimee-fontenay-the-famous-image69394610.html?imageid=DE6FCD73-95AF-4536-A9AB-8A60552C3002&p=90011&pn=1&searchId=ad1280b1b82bf2e4873a84c22eb8ef83&searchtype=0)

[trapeze-aimee-fontenay-the-famous-image69394610.html?imageid=DE6FCD73-](https://www.alamy.com/jul-07-1961-a-singer-on-the-flying-trapeze-aimee-fontenay-the-famous-image69394610.html?imageid=DE6FCD73-95AF-4536-A9AB-8A60552C3002&p=90011&pn=1&searchId=ad1280b1b82bf2e4873a84c22eb8ef83&searchtype=0)

[95AF-4536-A9AB-](https://www.alamy.com/jul-07-1961-a-singer-on-the-flying-trapeze-aimee-fontenay-the-famous-image69394610.html?imageid=DE6FCD73-95AF-4536-A9AB-8A60552C3002&p=90011&pn=1&searchId=ad1280b1b82bf2e4873a84c22eb8ef83&searchtype=0)

[8A60552C3002&p=90011&pn=1&searchId=ad1280b1b82bf2e4873a84c22eb8e](https://www.alamy.com/jul-07-1961-a-singer-on-the-flying-trapeze-aimee-fontenay-the-famous-image69394610.html?imageid=DE6FCD73-95AF-4536-A9AB-8A60552C3002&p=90011&pn=1&searchId=ad1280b1b82bf2e4873a84c22eb8ef83&searchtype=0)

[f83&searchtype=0](https://www.alamy.com/jul-07-1961-a-singer-on-the-flying-trapeze-aimee-fontenay-the-famous-image69394610.html?imageid=DE6FCD73-95AF-4536-A9AB-8A60552C3002&p=90011&pn=1&searchId=ad1280b1b82bf2e4873a84c22eb8ef83&searchtype=0) [accessed 21st September 2021].

Sirdani the Indestructible [online film, film ID:1634.11], (British Pathé, first broadcast

11th October 1934), [https://www.britishpathe.com/video/sirdani-the-](https://www.britishpathe.com/video/sirdani-the-indestructible)

[indestructible](https://www.britishpathe.com/video/sirdani-the-indestructible) [accessed 21st September 2021].

Tonight and Every Night [film], directed by Victor Saville (Columbia Pictures, 1945);

Twenty-One Today - London's Windmill Invites you to its twenty-first birthday party [film], introduced by Leslie Mitchell (BBC, 1953);

The Windmill [radio broadcast], hosted by Kenneth More (BBC Radio, 1957);

The Windmill Theatre - Twenty-Five Years Non-Stop [film], introduced by Richard Murdoch (BBC, 1957);

'Windmill Girls (Let's Join The Ladies)' (1944), *British Pathé Archive*, Canister NSP 421, Media Urn 50516, tape PM1574,
<https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/188110/>;

Secondary Sources

Books

Addison, Paul, *No Turning Back: The Peacetime Revolutions of Post-War Britain* (Oxford, 2010)

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 2006),

Appignanesi, Lisa, *The Cabaret*, (New Haven and London, 2004)

Aristotle, *Poetics*, (e-book, Urbana, IL, 1999)

Bailey, Peter, *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure, Popular Music in Britain* (Milton Keynes, 1986)

Bailey, Peter, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge, 2003)

Baker, Richard Anthony, *Old Time Variety: An Illustrated History* (Barnsley, 2011)

Baker, Richard Anthony, *British Music Hall: An Illustrated History* (Barnsley, 2014)

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, 1984)

Barfe, Louis, *Turned out Nice Again* (London, 2008)

- Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies* (London, 2009).
- Bergson, Henri, *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, (e-book, Urbana, Il., 2002)
- Bingham, Adrian, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918-1978*, (Oxford, 2009).
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans R. Nice (Cambridge, Mass., 1984)
- Bragg, Billy, *Roots, Radicals and Rockers: How Skiffle Changed the World* (London, 2017)
- Bratton, J. S. (ed.) *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes, 1986)
- Bret, David, *Gracie Fields: The Authorized Biography* (London, 1995)
- Briggs, Asa, *The History of Broadcasting in The United Kingdom – vol. IV: Sound and Vision*, (London: 1979)
- Buscombe, Edward (ed.), *British Television: A Reader* (Oxford, 2000)
- Butler, David and Sloman, Anne, *British Political Facts 1900–1979* (London, 1989)
- Cheshire, David, *Music Hall in Britain* (Newton Abbott, 1974)
- Cochrane, Claire, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Worcester, 2014)
- Cohen Stanley, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers* (New York, 2011).
- Collins, Marcus (ed.), *The Permissive Society and Its Enemies: Sixties British Culture* (London, 2007)
- Cook, William, *Morecambe & Wise: untold*, (London, 2007)
- Corner, John (ed.), *Popular Television in Britain: Studies in Cultural History* (London, 1991)
- Cotes, Peter, *George Robey: "The Darling of the Halls"*(London, 1972)

Coward, Mat, *The Pocket Essential: Classic Radio Comedy* (Harpenden, 2003)

Crisell, Andrew, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting* (2nd edn., London, 2002)

Cullen, F., Hackman, F., and McNeilly, D. *Vaudeville, old & new: an encyclopedia of variety performers in America* (London, 2007)

Currie, Tony, *A Concise History of British Television: 1930-2000* (Tiverton, 2000)

Davies, Hunter, *The Grades: The First Family of British Entertainment* (London, 1981)

Devlin, Vivien, *Kings, Queens and People's Palaces. An Oral History of the Scottish Variety Theatre, 1920-1970* (Edinburgh, 1991)

Dibbs, Martin, *Radio Fun and the BBC Variety Department, 1922—67: Comedy and Popular Music on Air* (London, 2018)

Double, Oliver, *Britain Had Talent: A History of Variety Theatre* (Basingstoke, 2012)

Double, Oliver, *Stand Up: On Being a Comedian* (London, 2014)

Earl, John, *British Theatres and Music Halls* (Princes Risborough, 2005)

East, John M., *Max Miller: the Cheeky Chappie* (London, 1977)

Evans, Jeff, *Rock & Pop on British TV* (London, 2017).

Eye on TV: the first 21 years of Independent Television, Independent Television Publications, (London, 1976)

Pete Faint, *Jack Hylton* (Morrisville, 2014)

Faulk, Barry J., *Music Hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (Greece, USA, 2004)

Fisher, John, *Tommy Cooper: Always Leave Them Laughing* (London, 2006)

Fisher, John, *Tony Hancock: The Definitive Biography* (London, 2008)

Fisher, John, *Funny Way to be a Hero* (London, 2013)

Foster, Andy and Furst, Steve, *Radio Comedy, 1938-1968: A Guide to 30 Years of Wonderful Wireless* (London, 1996)

- Fowler, David, *Youth Culture in Modern Britain, C.1920-C.1970: From Ivory Tower to Global Movement - a New History* (London, 2008)
- Freud, Sigmund, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, (Kindle edn, 2013)
- Friedman, Sam, 'Comedy and distinction: the cultural currency of a 'good' sense of humour (London, 2014)
- Frith, Simon, Brennan, Matt, Cloonan, Martin, Webster, Emma, *The History of Live Music in Britain, Volume I: 1950-1967: From Dance Hall to the 100 Club* (London, 2013)
- Games, Alexander (ed.), *The Essential Spike Milligan* (London, 2003)
- Gifford, Denis, *The Golden Age of Radio: An Illustrated Companion* (London, 1985)
- Gomery, Douglas, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London, 2019)
- Gramsci, Antonio, *Prison Notebooks* (New York, 1992)
- Harding, James, *George Robey & the music hall* (London, 1990)
- Stuart Hall, *Writings on Media* (Durham, 2021)
- Hallett, Terry, *Bristol's Forgotten Empire: The History of the Empire Theatre* (Westbury, 2000)
- Hendy, David, *The BBC: A People's History* (London, 2022)
- Hennessy, Peter, *Never Again: Britain 1945-51* (London, 1992)
- Hennessy, Peter, *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London, 2007)
- Hillerby, Bryen D., *The Lost Theatres of Sheffield* (Barnsley, 1999), p. 84;
- Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan* (e-book, Urbana, Il., 2002)
- Hobsbawm, Eric and Ranger, Terrence, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 2012)
- Hobsbawm, Eric *Fractured Times: Culture and Society in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2013)
- Hoggart, Richard, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (London, 2009)
- Hood, Stuart and Tabary-Peterson, Thalia, *On Television* (4th edn., London, 1997)

- Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, 2002).
- Horn, Adrian and Richards, Jeffrey, *Juke Box Britain: Americanisation and Youth Culture, 1945--60* (Manchester, 2009)
- Howard, Diana, *London Theatres and Music Halls 1850-1950* (London, 1970)
- Hudd, Roy and Hindin, Philip, *Roy Hudd's Cavalcade of Variety Acts: A Who Was Who of Light Entertainment, 1945-60* (London, 1997)
- Huggins, Mike, *Vice and the Victorians* (New York, 2016)
- Hull, Geoffrey P., *The Recording Industry* (Boston, 1997)
- Jelavich, Peter, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996)
- Kant, Immanuel, *The Critique of Judgement*, (Kindle ed., 2022)
- Kellner, Douglas, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Post-modern* (New York, 2005)
- Kift, Dagmar *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict* (Cambridge, 1996)
- Kilgarriff, Michael, *Grace, Beauty and Banjos: Peculiar Lives and Strange Times of Music Hall and Variety Artistes* (London, 1999)
- Kroker, Arthur and Cook, David, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture and Hyper-Aesthetics. New World Perspectives* (Montreal, 1987)
- Kynaston, David, *Austerity Britain, 1945-1951* (London, 2008)
- Kynaston, David, *Family Britain 1951-1957* (London, 2009)
- Kynaston, David, *Modernity Britain: opening the box, 1957-1959* (London, 2013)
- Larkin, Colin (ed.), *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music (First ed.)* (London, 1992)
- Lee, Christopher Paul, 'The Lancashire Shaman: Frank Randle and Mancunian Films', in Stephen Wagg (ed.), *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics, and Social Difference*, (London, 1998).

- Lewis, Roger, *The Life and Death of Peter Sellers* (London, 1994)
- Mackintosh, Iain and Sell, Michael (eds.), *Curtains!!! or A new life for old theatres*
(Eastbourne, 1982)
- Major, J., *My Old Man: A Personal History of Music Hall* (London, 2012)
- Maloney, Paul, *Scotland and the Music Hall, 1850-1914* (Manchester, 2003)
- Marriot, Alan Johnson, *Laurel & Hardy: the British Tours* (Blackpool, 1993);
- Marwick, Arthur, *British society since 1945* (London, 2003)
- McCann, Graham *Frankie Howerd: Stand-up Comic* (London, 2004)
- McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media* (London, 2001)
- Medhurst, Andy, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities*
(London, 2007)
- Mellor, Geoffrey, *The Northern Music Hall: A Century of Popular Entertainment*
(Newcastle, 1970)
- Middles, Mick, *Frankie Howerd: The Illustrated Biography* (London, 2000)
- Mitchell, Gillian, *Adult Responses to Popular Music and Intergenerational Relations in Britain, C.1955-1975* (Kindle edn, London, 2019)
- Morecambe, Gary, *Eric Morecambe: Life's Not Hollywood, It's Cricklewood* (London, 2003)
- Mort, Frank, *Capital affairs: London and the making of the permissive society* (London, 2010)
- Neale, Steve and Krutnik, Frank, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London, 1950)
- Nuttall, Jeff, *King Twist: A Portrait of Frank Randle* (London, 2022);
- Oram, Alison, *Her Husband Was a Woman! Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (London, 2007)
- Osborne, John, *The Entertainer* (London, 2013)

- Osgerby, Bill, *Youth in Britain since 1945*, (Oxford, 1998)
- Pedrick, Gale (ed.), *The World Radio and Television Annual: Jubilee Issue*, (London, 1946)
- Poole, Gary, *Radio Comedy Diary: A Researcher's Guide to the Actual Jokes and Quotes of the Top Comedy Programs of 1947–1950* (Jefferson, NC, 2001)
- Potter, Simon, *This is the BBC: Entertaining the Nation, Speaking for Britain, 1922-2022*, (Oxford, 2022)
- Provine, Robert, *Laughter: a Scientific Investigation*, (New York, 2000)
- Sandbrook, Dominic, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London, 2015)
- Savage, Jon, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (London, 2008)
- Scannell, Paddy and David. Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting. Vol. 1, 1922-1939: Serving the Nation* (Oxford: 1991.
- Sendall, Bernard, *Independent Television in Britain, vol. 1: Origin and Foundation 1946-62* (London, 1982);
- Sendall, Bernard, *Independent Television in Britain, vol 2: Expansion and Change 1958-68* (London, 1983)
- Senelick, L, Cheshire, D.F. and Schneider, U., *British Music-Hall, 1840-1923: A Bibliography and Guide to Sources, with a Supplement on European Music-Hall* (Hamden, Conn., 1981).
- Silvey, Robert, *Who's Listening? The Story of BBC Audience Research* (London, 1974)
- Slide, Anthony, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Westport, Conn., 1994), p. 280
- Stanley, Bob, *Yeah Yeah Yeah: The Story of Modern Pop* (London 2013)
- Stedman Jones, Gareth, *Languages of Class Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983)

- Stevens, Christopher, *Kenneth Williams: Born Brilliant: The Life of Kenneth Williams* (London, 2010)
- Street, Séan, *Historical Dictionary of British Radio* (London, 2015)
- Taylor, D., *From Mummers to Madness: A Social History of Popular Music in England, c.1770s to c.1970s* (Huddersfield, 2021)
- Took, Barry, *Star Turns: The Life and Times of Benny Hill and Frankie Howerd* (London, 1992)
- Toye, Richard, *Churchill's Empire: The World that Made Him and the World He Made* (New York, 2010)
- Wearing, J. P., *The London Stage 1950-1959: A Calendar of Productions, Performers, and Personnel* (Lanham, 2014)
- Wheatley, Helen, *Re-viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography* (London, 2007)
- Williams, Jack, *Entertaining the Nation: A Social History of British Television* (Stroud, 2004)
- Willetts, Paul, *The look of love: the life and times of Paul Raymond, Soho's king of clubs* (London, 2013)
- Williams, Raymond, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (Glasgow, 1974)
- Wilmot, Roger, *Kindly Leave the Stage! The Story of Variety 1919-1960* (London, 1985)

Book Chapters and Journal Articles

- Ainsworth, Adam, 'Packed from Pit to Ceiling: The Kingston Empire (1910–1955) and British Variety', in Ainsworth, Adam, Double, Oliver & Peacock, Louise (Authors), *Popular Performance* (London, 2015), pp. 97–118,

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474247368.ch-004> [accessed September 20th 2021]

Bailey, Peter. 'Conspiracies of Meaning: Music-Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture', *Past & Present*, 144 (1994), pp 138–70,
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/651146>

Bailey, Peter, 'Fats Waller Meets Harry Champion', *Cultural and Social History* 4:4 (2007), pp. 495-509, <https://doi.org/10.2752/147800407X243497>

Bailey, Peter, 'The politics and poetics of modern British leisure: A late-twentieth century review', *Re-Thinking History*, 3.2 (1999), pp. 131–175

Bailey, Peter, "Hullo, Ragtime!' West End revue and the Americanisation of popular culture in pre-1914 London' in *Popular Musical Theatre in London and Berlin 1890 to 1939* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 135 – 152,
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107279681.011>

Bingham, Adrian, 'An Introduction to the Daily Mirror', *Mirror Historical Archive 1903-2000* (2019) accessed via <https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/adrian-bingham-introduction-daily-mirror> [accessed 20 January 2022];

'British theatre lives while amateurs are enthusiastic', *Newark Advertiser*, 13 November 1957,
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003436/19571113/158/0008> [accessed 23 January 2022]

Coates, Norma, 'Excitement Is Made, Not Born: Jack Good, Television, and Rock and Roll' in *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 25.3 (2013), pp. 301-325
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12034>

Friedman, Sam, 'The cultural currency of a good sense of humour: British comedy and new forms of distinction', *British Journal of Sociology* 62, 2 (2011), pp. 347-370

- Friedman, Sam, 'Habitus clivé and the emotional imprint of social mobility', in *The Sociological Review*, 64 .1, pp. 129–47.
- Gerrard, Steven, 'The Great British Music Hall: Its Importance to British Culture and 'The Trivial' in *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*. (2013) p. 487-514.
- Glancy, Mark. 'Going to the pictures: British cinema and the Second World War.' *Past and Future* 8 (2010), pp. 7-9
- Gomery, Douglas. 'The Coming of Television and the 'Lost' Motion Picture Audience' *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 37, no. 3 (1985), pp. 5–11,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20687670>
- Hamrick, S., 'Transferring Variety to Television', in: *Shakespeare and Sexuality in the Comedy of Morecambe & Wise. Palgrave Studies in Comedy* (2020), pp 33–64
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33958-6_2
- Harper, Sue, 'Su Holmes, British TV and Film Culture in the 1950s: 'Coming to a TV Near You!'' , *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 4.1 (2007), 184–86
- McGraw, Peter and Warren, Caleb, 'Benign violation theory' in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies* (Thousand Oaks, 2014)
- Mort, Frank, 'Striptease: the erotic female body and live sexual entertainment in mid-twentieth-century London', *Social History*, 32:1 (2007), 27-53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071020601081256>
- Napper, Lawrence, 'Quota Quickies': the Birth of the British 'B' Film, *Screen* 48, 4 (Winter 2007), pp. 551–554, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjm061>
- Nathaus, Klaus, "All dressed up and nowhere to go'? Spaces and conventions of youth in 1950s Britain', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 41, (2015), pp. 30-70

- Nathaus, Klaus, 'Turning Values into Revenue: The Markets and the Field of Popular Music in the US, the UK and West Germany (1940s to 1980s)'. *Historical Social Research* 36.3 (2011), pp. 136-163 <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.36.2011.3.136-163>
- Nicholas, Siân, 'The good servant: the origins and development of BBC Listener Research 1936-1950' in *Introduction to BBC Audience Research Reports Collection, Part I: BBC Listener Research Department 1937-1950*, British Broadcasting Corporation (2007)
- Nicholas, Siân, "The People's Radio: The BBC and its Audience, 1939–1945". In Hayes, Nick; Hill, Jeff (eds.). *'Millions like us?': British Culture in the Second World War* (Liverpool, 1999)
- Provine, Robert, 'Laughter' in *American Scientist* 84, 1 (1996): pp. 38–45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29775596>.
- Russell, Dave, 'Varieties of life: the making of the Edwardian music hall' in Booth, M.R and Kaplan, J. H. (eds), *Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage* (Cambridge, 1996)
- Rutherford, Lois, 'Managers in a Small Way: The Professionalisation of Variety Artistes, 1860-1914' in Bailey, Peter, *Music Hall*, p.116.
- Selina Todd, 'Breadwinners and Dependents: Working-Class Young People in England, 1918–1955.' *International Review of Social History*, 52.1 (2007), pp. 57–87. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44583539>. Accessed 31 July 2024.

Secondary Newspaper and Magazine Articles

Amidon, Stephen, 'Obituary: Peter Casson', *Independent* 28 October 1995,

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-peter-casson-1579819.html> [accessed 13 December 2021]

'Anger as church buys hippodrome', *BBC News*

Website, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/6506043.stm> [accessed 11 January 2022]

Bianculli, David, 'The Many Lives of Danny Kaye', *New York Daily News* 10 December 1996

Billington, Michael, 'Just Jim Dale review – Carry On star had me weeping with laughter'

, *The Guardian Online*, 1 Jun 2015,

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/01/just-jim-dale-review-vaudeville-london> [accessed on 6 January 2022]

Brandwood, Geoff, *The Changing Face of the Pub: 1960–2020*, *The Society of*

Architectural Historians of Great Britain,

<https://www.sahgb.org.uk/features/the-changing-face-of-the-pub-19602020>

[accessed 13 April 2023];

Brown, Annie, 'How a generation of stars bombed in Glasgow's notorious comics

graveyard', *Daily Record*, [https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/uk-world-](https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/how-a-generation-of-stars-bombed-in-glasgows-1001410)

[news/how-a-generation-of-stars-bombed-in-glasgows-1001410](https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/how-a-generation-of-stars-bombed-in-glasgows-1001410) [accessed 28

September 2021]

Callow, Simon, 'Titter ye not', *The Guardian*, 27th November 2004,

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/nov/27/biography.tvandradio>

[accessed 28 September 2021]

- Callow, Simon, 'The lad himself', *The Guardian*, 27 December 2008,
<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/dec/27/biography-tony-hancock>
 [accessed 15 February 2022]
- Davies, Sian, 'Heard the one about the working-class comedian? It's no joke for us', *The Guardian Online*, 10 September 2019,
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/sep/10/working-class-comic-comedy-industry>[accessed on 29 August 2024].
- Gifford, Denis, 'Obituary: Charlie Chester', *The Independent*, 27 June 1997,
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-charlie-chester-1258200.html> [accessed on 2nd December 2021]
- Halstead, Richard, 'Making of the Grades: Profile: The Grade Dynasty', *The Independent*, 2nd February 1997 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/making-of-the-grades-profile-the-grade-dynasty-1276495.html> [accessed 9th December 2021]
- Hare, Chris, 'Obituaries: Manny Francois', *The Stage*, 18 Jan 2010,
<https://www.thestage.co.uk/obituaries--archive/obituaries/manny-francois>
 [accessed 21st September 2021]
- Hare, Chris, 'Obituaries: Joy Francois', *The Stage*, 18 October 2017
<https://www.thestage.co.uk/obituaries--archive/obituaries/obituary-joy-francois> [accessed 21 September 2021]
- Holland, Steve, 'Obituary: Chrystabel Leighton-Porter', *The Guardian Online*, 16 December 2000,
<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/dec/16/guardianobituaries>
 [accessed 23rd January 2022]

Leigh, Spencer, 'C'mon everybody: How Eddie Cochran and Gene Vincent changed British music for ever', *Independent*, Thursday 14 January 2010,
<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/c-mon-everybody-how-eddie-cochran-and-gene-vincent-changed-british-music-for-ever-1867305.html>

Massey, Doreen, 'A Global Sense of Place', *Marxism Today* (June 1991), p. 26.

'Max Bygraves - Obituary', *The Guardian Online*, September 1st, 2012.
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/sep/01/max-bygraves-obituary-comedian-singer> [accessed on 20th September 2021]

Malcolm, Derek, 'Tea and buns with Laurel and Hardy: Derek Malcolm on the day he met his comedy heroes', *The Guardian Online*, 11 Oct 2018,
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/oct/11/tea-and-buns-with-laurel-and-hardy-the-day-i-met-my-comedy-heroes> [accessed on 13 December 2021]

McIntosh, Steven, 'Writer calls for more working-class people in TV', *BBC News*, 21 August 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy8xjvzx5zno> [accessed on 29 August 2024]

McKibbin, Ross, 'Not Pleasing the Tidy-Minded', *London Review of Books*, 30.8 (2008),
<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v30/n08/ross-mckibbin/not-pleasing-the-tidy-minded>

McPhee, Rod, 'Never closed, never CLOTHED: How the Windmill sailed close to the wind', *Mirror*, 2 November 2014, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/never-closed-never-clothed-how-4555998> [accessed 20 January 2021]

Sweet, Matthew, 'You Lucky People: Remembering Tommy Trinder', *The Guardian Online*, 18 August 2009,
<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/aug/18/tommy-trinder>

Tapper, James, 'Huge decline of working class people in the arts reflects fall in wider society', *The Guardian Online*, 10 Dec 2022,
<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/dec/10/huge-decline-working-class-people-arts-reflects-society> [accessed on 29 August 2024].

'Timeline: The highs and lows of the Derby Hippodrome', *ITV News*, 7 March 2016,
<https://www.itv.com/news/central/2016-03-07/timeline-the-highs-and-lows-of-the-derby-hippodrome> [accessed 7 November 2021]

Weller, Rebecca, 'Number of pubs expected to decline in 2024', *Morning Advertiser*, 18 January 2024,
<https://www.morningadvertiser.co.uk/article/2024/01/18/fleurets-predictions-for-pub-market-in-2024> [accessed 13 April 2023]

Whitaker, Sheila, 'Jean Kent obituary', *The Guardian Online*, 1 December 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/dec/01/jean-kent> [accessed 6 January 2022]

Online Materials

'1948, London Palladium', The Royal Variety Charity,
<https://www.royalvarietycharity.org/royal-variety-performance/archive/detail/1948-london-palladium> [accessed 13th December 2021]

'About us', Mayflower Theatre, <https://www.mayflower.org.uk/about-us/> [accessed 17 January 2022]

'All the UK tours by American Rock n Rollers: Bill Haley Feb/ March 1957', *American Rock n Roll The UK Tours*,

<http://www.americanrocknrolluktours.co.uk/tour/bill-haley-feb-march-1957/>
[accessed 5th January 2022]

'All the UK tours by American Rock n Rollers: Jerry Lee Lewis - May 1958', *American Rock n Roll The UK Tours*,

<http://www.americanrocknrolluktours.co.uk/tour/jerry-lee-lewis-may-1958/>
[accessed 5th January 2022].

'Annual admissions – 1935 onwards', *UK Cinema Association*,

<https://www.cinemauk.org.uk/the-industry/facts-and-figures/uk-cinema-admissions-and-box-office/annual-admissions/> [accessed 1st November 2021]

'The Ardwick Empire', *Our Manchester*,

<http://manchesterhistory.net/manchester/gone/empire.html> [accessed 15th January 2022]

'Arthur Fox – Manchester's King of Glamour' *Pamela Green*, <https://pamela-green.com/arthur-fox-manchesters-king-of-glamour/> [accessed 9th December 2021]

'ATV (Associated Television) History', *Independent TeleWeb*,

<http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/itw/ATV/index.html> [accessed 9th December 2021]

Auty, Donald, 'Those Variety Days', *Arthur*

Lloyd <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Variety.htm> [accessed 17 January 2022]

Bailey, Peter: 'Leisure, Entertainment and Popular Culture.' *19th Century UK Periodicals*.

Gale (2008) <https://www.gale.com/intl/essays/peter-bailey-leisure-entertainment-popular-culture> [accessed 5th October 2021]

Bank of England Inflation Calculator, <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>

'The Birmingham Royal', *Arthur Lloyd*,

<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Birmingham/TheatreRoyalNewStreetBirmingham.htm> [accessed 11 January 2022];

'Bits and Pieces', *Voices of Variety*, <http://voices-of-variety.com/bits-and-pieces/> [accessed 20th September 2021].

Bryceson, Dave, 'Concerts & Package Tours, 1958 March', *Music & Concerts of the late Fifties & Sixties for the late Fifties, Sixties & Seventies*,
<https://www.bradfordtimeline.co.uk/mindex58f.htm> [accessed 5th January 2022].

Bryceson, Dave, 'Concerts & Package Tours, 1959 March to April', *Music & Concerts of the late Fifties & Sixties for the late Fifties, Sixties & Seventies*,
<https://www.bradfordtimeline.co.uk/mindex59f.htm> [accessed 6 January 2022]

Chudley, Alan, 'The Brixton Academy', <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Brixton.htm> [accessed 1st November 2021]

Chudley, Alan, 'Theatres and Halls in Northampton', *Arthur Lloyd*, <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/NorthamptonTheatres.htm> [accessed 23 November 2021]

'Educated Evans', *BFI Most Wanted: the hunt for Britain's missing films*,
<https://web.archive.org/web/20120803092948/http://old.bfi.org.uk/nationalarchive/news/mostwanted/educated-evans.html> [accessed 28 September 2021]

Ellacott, Nigel, 'The Music Hall Pantomimes', *It's Behind You - The Magic of Pantomime*, <http://www.its-behind-you.com/musichall.html> [accessed 20 September 2021]

'The Empire Palace of Varieties, 55 Broadway, Stratford East', *Arthur*

Lloyd, <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/StratfordEast.htm> [accessed 6 January 2022]

'The Festival Theatre', *Arthur Lloyd*,

<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Edinburgh/Festival.htm> [accessed 6 January 2022]

FJB Collection, *FJB Collection – Who are We?*

<http://web.archive.org/web/20160706151924/http://www.fjbcareers.co.uk/who-are-we/> [accessed 23rd November 2021]

'Fred Collins', *The Collins Variety Agency*, <https://collinsvariety.co.uk/fred/> [accessed 1st November 2021]

Green, Bill, 'Annual Edinburgh Lunch', December 2007, Scottish Music Hall & Variety Theatre Society <https://scottishmusichallsociety.webs.com/events-articles> [accessed 13th December 2021]

'Hetty King', *Voices of Variety*, <http://voices-of-variety.com/hetty-king-from-word/> [accessed 20 September 2021]

Hippodrome / Coventry Theatre / Apollo show archive, *Historic Coventry*,

<https://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/theatre/index.php> [accessed 21st September 2021]

Hoskins, Norman, 'The Terror of Cranbourn Mansions – Norman Hoskins recalls Cissie Williams', *The British Music Hall Society*,

<https://www.britishmusichallsociety.com/terrorofcranbournmansions.pdf> [accessed 28 September 2021]

'Later Theatres & Other Works', *Frank Matcham Society*,

<http://www.frankmatchamsociety.org.uk/about/theatres-other-works/>

[accessed on 1st November 2021]

'League Attendance', *History of English Football*, [https://www.european-football-](https://www.european-football-statistics.co.uk/attn/nav/attnengleague.htm)

[statistics.co.uk/attn/nav/attnengleague.htm](https://www.european-football-statistics.co.uk/attn/nav/attnengleague.htm) [accessed 1st November 2021]

'List of Theatres', *Frank Matcham Society*,

<http://www.frankmatchamsociety.org.uk/about/list-of-theatres/> [accessed 1st

November 2021]

'Liverpool Empire', *ATG Tickets - Venues*,

<https://www.atgtickets.com/venues/liverpool-empire/> [accessed 12 January

2022]

Lloyd, Matthew, 'Theatres in Derby, Derbyshire, East Midlands',

<http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/DerbyTheatres.htm> [accessed 15th January

2022]

London Metropolitan Archives, *Sources for the history of London Theatres and Music*

Halls at London Metropolitan Archives (August 1999)

[https://web.archive.org/web/20130905125320/http://www.cityoflondon.gov.](https://web.archive.org/web/20130905125320/http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/visiting-the-city/archives-and-city-history/london-metropolitan-archives/Documents/visitor-information/47-theatre-and-music-hall-sources-at-lma.pdf)

[uk/things-to-do/visiting-the-city/archives-and-city-history/london-](https://web.archive.org/web/20130905125320/http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/visiting-the-city/archives-and-city-history/london-metropolitan-archives/Documents/visitor-information/47-theatre-and-music-hall-sources-at-lma.pdf)

[metropolitan-archives/Documents/visitor-information/47-theatre-and-music-](https://web.archive.org/web/20130905125320/http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/visiting-the-city/archives-and-city-history/london-metropolitan-archives/Documents/visitor-information/47-theatre-and-music-hall-sources-at-lma.pdf)

[hall-sources-at-lma.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20130905125320/http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/visiting-the-city/archives-and-city-history/london-metropolitan-archives/Documents/visitor-information/47-theatre-and-music-hall-sources-at-lma.pdf) [accessed 1st November 2021]

'Lord Chamberlain's Office - Theatre censorship', *Wikipedia*,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Chamberlain%27s_Office#Theatre_censors

[hip](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Chamberlain%27s_Office#Theatre_censors) [accessed 23 January 2022]

- Martin, Andrew, 'It's That Man Again - Tommy Handley and ITMA', *BBC Genome Blog*, 17 January 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/genome/entries/0d7d5d98-e12f-4a3d-bf40-ecc930435554> [accessed 23rd September 2021]
- 'Max's Life', *Max Wall Society*, https://www.maxwallsociety.org/max_life.php [accessed 21st September 2021]
- McAndrew, Siobhan, O'Brien, Dave, Taylor, Mark and Wang, Ruoxi, *Audiences and workforces in arts, culture and heritage*, (Newcastle, 2024), <https://pec.ac.uk/state-of-the-nation/arts-cultural-heritage-audiences-and-workforce/> [accessed 1 September 2024].
- 'Music Hall and Variety Theatre', *Victoria and Albert Museum website*, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/music-hall-and-variety-theatre#slideshow=15664669&slide=0> [accessed 23 November 2021]
- Nottingham Empire Programme for week commencing August 6th 1951, PDF consulted via https://www.infotextmanuscripts.org/webb/webb_nott_emp_sky.pdf [accessed 1st September 2021]
- 'Nottingham Theatres and Halls', *Arthur Lloyd*, <http://www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/NottinghamTheatres.html> [accessed 23 January 2022]
- Oliver, John, 'Parnell, Val (1892-1972), Producer, Presenter, Executive)', *Screen Online*, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/1146747/> [accessed 9th December 2021]
- 'Open up! Archive Project', a *Theatres Trust* project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/theatres-lost-and-saved-the-theatres-trust/ewlC8XoUFRn7Jg?hl=en>

Powell, Maurice, 'Summer Entertainment on the Isle of Man - The Joe Loss Years Part 1: 1946-50 'Let the good times roll again'', *Manx Music - Collectors & Primary Source Material- Research Papers and Working Guides*,
[https://www.manxmusic.com/media/History%20photos/Douglas%20Entertainment%201946-50%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.manxmusic.com/media/History%20photos/Douglas%20Entertainment%201946-50%20(2).pdf) [accessed 21st September 2021]

'Professor Duncan's Marvelous Collie Dogs', *National Purebred Dog Day* (March 4, 2018),
<https://nationalpurebreddogday.com/professor-duncans-marvelous-collie-dogs/> [accessed 12th December 2021]

Roe, Ken, 'Empire Theatre', *Cinema Treasures*,
<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/37632> [accessed 23 January 2022]

Scott, Derek B., 'Music Hall: Regulations and Behaviour in a British Cultural Institution', paper presented at Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade, *The Future of Music History International Conference* (28-30 September 2017), <https://victorianweb.org/mt/musichall/scott.html> [accessed 1st November 2021]

Scottish Theatre Programmes, National Library of Scotland Catalogue,
<https://digital.nls.uk/catalogues/theatre-programmes/theatre/?startRow=31&T=191> [accessed 23 January 2022].

'Sirdani (1899–1982) - Filmography', *Internet Movie Database*,
<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm5490923> [accessed 21st September 2021]

The Stage, The British Newspaper Archive,
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/the-stage> [accessed 21 September 2021]

Theatre Archive Project, British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/collections/theatre-archive-project> [accessed 21 September 2021]

'This Day in History: 22 May 1958' *History* website, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/jerry-lee-lewis-drops-a-bombshell-in-london> [accessed 3rd December 2021]

Ticket Stub for Blackpool V Newcastle United 1951 FA Cup Final, *eBay*,
<https://www.ebay.co.uk/itm/373192621271> [accessed on 28 September 2021]

Ticket Stub for the 1951/52 Division One match Arsenal v Bolton Wanderers, *Match Worn Football Memorabilia*,
<https://matchwornfootballshirts.com/products/1953-slash-54-original-division-one-ticket-arsenal-v-sunderland> [accessed on 28 September 2021]

Ticket Stub for the 1951 FA Cup Final Blackpool V Newcastle, *Abe Books*,
https://www.abebbooks.co.uk/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=14303999838&cm_mm_c=ggl- -UK Shopp RareStandard- -product id=bi%3A%2014303999838- -keyword=&gclid=CjwKCAjw-sqKBhBjEiwAVaQ9a2fOTU8pCW5wQBqLehGmgVZLk_4rPM6teiCQB9rio_Ttze4smFoxixoCGVwQAvD_BwE [accessed on 28 September 2021]

'UK television households', *Terra Media*,
http://www.terramedia.co.uk/reference/statistics/television/television_households.htm [accessed 9th December 2021]

Unterberger, Richie, 'Larry Parnes Biography', *AllMusic.com*,
<https://www.allmusic.com/artist/larry-parnes-mn0001009359> [accessed 6 January 2022]

'Who We Are - Theatre Royal', *Theatre Royal - Royal Concert Hall website*,
<https://trch.co.uk/who-we-are/> [accessed 15th January 2022]

'Wood Green Empire Theatre', *Cinema Treasures*,
<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/32746> [accessed 15th January 2022]

Unpublished Theses

Daniels, Morgan, 'The effects of 'antiestablishment' BBC comedy on politicians, the public and broadcasting values c.1939-1973', PhD thesis (Queen Mary, University of London)

<https://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/handle/123456789/2415?show=full>

Double, Oliver, 'An Approach to Traditions of British Stand-Up Comedy', PhD thesis (University of Sheffield, 1991)

<https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/1873/1/DX182554.pdf>

Taylor, Ben, 'Bakhtin, Carnival and Comic Theory', PhD thesis (University of Nottingham, 1995) <https://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/11052/1/307809.pdf>

Moore, James Ross, 'An Intimate Understanding: the Rise of British Musical Revue 1890-1920' PhD thesis (University of Warwick, 2000)

http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/4012/1/WRAP_THESIS_Moore_2000.pdf

Visual and Audio Media

Blackpool: Big Night Out, BBC, producer Andy Humphries, Executive Producer Caroline Wright (first broadcast December 26th 2012).

'Bobby Collins', *Then and Now*, consulted on

YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BawZ2UfMIRw> [accessed 21 September 2021]

Heathfield, A & Etchells, T, *Somewhere Near Variety* [videorecording] Live Art Development Agency and Forced Entertainment, 2006)

I Like the Girls Who Do, BBC *Forty Minutes* S9.E7, episode written and presented by Gerald Scarfe (first broadcast February 16th 1989).

Marion Konyot interview by Sue Barbour, [interview transcript], *Theatre Archive*

Project, British Library, 7 November 2008. Shelf mark C1142/252

<https://sounds.bl.uk/related-content/TRANSCRIPTS/024T-C1142X000252-0100A0.pdf> [accessed 21st September, 2021]

Mrs Henderson Presents [film] directed by Stephen Frears (The Weinstein Company, BBC Films, Pathé, Future Films 2005);

Rita Delroy interviewed by Sue Barbour [interview transcript], *Theatre Archive Project*,

British Library, Recording date 23 April 2009, Shelf mark C1142/259,

<https://sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/Theatre-Archive-Project/024M-C1142X000259-0100V0> [accessed 28 September 2021]

The Story of the Music Hall with Michael Grade, aired Tue 25 Oct 2011, BBC FOUR

Production

The Story of Variety with Michael Grade, aired Mon 28 Feb 2011, BBC FOUR Production