

The Great British Music Hall: Its Importance to British Culture and ‘The Trivial’

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Abstract

By 1960, Britain’s once-thriving Music Hall industry was virtually dead. Theatres with their faded notions of Empire gave way to Cinema and the threat of Television. Where thousands once linked arms singing popular songs, watch acrobatics, see feats of strength, and listen to risqué jokes, now the echoes of those acts lay as whispers amongst the stalls’ threadbare seats.

The Halls flourished in the 19th Century, but had their origins in the taverns of the 16th and 17th Centuries. Minstrels plied their trade egged on by drunken crowds. As time passed, the notoriety of the Music Hall acts and camaraderie produced grew. Entrepreneurial businessman tapped into this commerciality and had purpose-built status symbol theatres to provide a ‘home’ for acts and punters. With names like The Apollo giving gravitas approaching Olympian ideals, so the owners basked in wealth and glory.

The Music Hall became *the* mass populist entertainment for the population. Every town had one, where *everyone* could be entertained by variety acts showing off the performers’ skills. The acts varied from singers, joke-tellers, comics, acrobats, to dancers. They all aimed to entertain. They enabled audiences to share a symbiotic relationship with one another; became recruitment officers for the Army; inspired War Poets; showed short films; and they and the halls reflected both the ideals and foibles of their era.

By using Raymond Williams’ *structures of feeling* as its cornerstone, the article will give a brief history of the halls, whilst providing analysis into how they grew into mass populist entertainment that represented *British* culture. Case studies of famous artistes are given, plus an insight into how Music Hall segued into radio, film and television.

Keywords: Music Hall, British, populist, entertainment, Victorian, cinema, low art.

True music hall is a place of light and laughter, a place of good cheer, of freedom, of do-as-you-please, go-as-you-please, where everyone is 'jolly good company' and where the cigars, cigarettes and pipes add their tint of blueness to the air and the gurgle of drinks mingles with gusts of laughter. It is a place where pals meet, where jokes are cracked, where, for a while, the outside world is forgotten. That is – was – Music Hall. (Walter 1950: 437-438)

(Music Hall) injure(s) the theatre both financially and artistically. They withdraw from the theatres many who are tempted by the freedom, the smoking, the promenades and the drinks in the auditorium of the music hall, advantages the theatre cannot have... And they tend to produce a degraded taste for hurried, frivolous and brainless drama.¹

One story describes her (Marie Lloyd – star of Music Hall) arriving with an umbrella, waving it in front of her to the point of embarrassment until it opened – 'Thank God! I haven't had it up for months'. (Banks et al. 1987: 8)

Introduction

This article will give a brief history of the British Music Hall, how it rose to prominence in Britain during the nineteenth century, some important artistes and types of acts incorporated in them and how it then segued into radio, cinema and television. Two case studies of British Music Hall/Film Stars, Gracie Fields and George Formby are examined to illustrate this development. Raymond Williams' 'structure of feeling' are utilized to give Music Hall a cultural aspect which will help understand both the culture of the Music Hall, its descendants and the cultural placement of it as an emotional experience when analysing why the *British* Music Hall is important to *British* culture.

Music Hall has, of course, been catalogued elsewhere: Dagmar Kift (1996) proposes in-depth deconstructions of it; Laurence Selenick's (1981) catalogue-approach to the topic offers lists of London's and the provinces halls, various artistes, types of architecture, regulation, etc. There are books by Music Hall artistes themselves: Peter Honri, nostalgically reminisces about his own family's time as performers treading the boards (Honri 1973). Each adds weight to the idea that the *British* Music Hall has something quintessentially *British* about it.

This quintessentiality is often seen through investigations about gender, class, and cultural outlook. But this is sometimes too precise a measure. Raymond Williams' notions about the almost-ethereal and intangible approaches of 'feeling' come into play here and will be examined later on. What is it that makes the British Music Hall so characteristically British? On a purely physical plane, the British Music Halls are set in Britain, much the same as the American Burlesque is set in the USA. That indefinable 'something', however, that makes the British Music Hall *British* is harder to define. When one mentions the Moulin Rouge, one immediately thinks of girls dancing the *Can-Can* and Toulouse-Lautrec painting Parisian life in the theatres. Does that make both *quintessentially* French? Yes. The same is therefore applicable to the British Music Hall. The halls incorporated many foreign acts

and often used ideas from the continent and beyond in its programs. But it is the ‘overall’ package, an indescribable ‘feeling’ that makes the subject of this article so difficult to pin down with any academic precision. That is not to say that it cannot be done. This article offers an account of the halls, its acts, and its importance to British culture through a variety of means: the history and its place in the populace affections are noted; acts are examined; case studies given. All will hopefully demonstrate how, by using existing literature, through close analysis, and by using ideas of ‘feelings’, just how quintessential and important the British Music Hall is to British culture, through its position first and foremost as an entertainment, and secondly as a reflection of the nation at times of turbulence and peace.

This article is divided into sections. Each section is clearly sub-headed, and an introduction to the subject is given followed by analysis. The first section will briefly highlight Raymond Williams’ ideas about *Structures of Feeling*, including three dominant, residual and emergent visualizing categories linking to ideas of culture and how it can be related to ‘the Trivia’. The second section provides a very brief overview of what the British Music Hall is. This includes its early history and how it rose from the taverns of the 14th Century onwards to become vast entertainment palaces. Facts about early entrepreneurs and costing will also be given to indicate how the populace could afford to visit the halls. The more-famous acts are examined, especially in relation to ideas about toying with sexuality and class. The third section will examine how the fortunes of the Music Hall changed, and the fourth demonstrates the importance of the halls helped to shape, develop and become an established part of early-British sound cinema, radio and television. Examples will be given at relevant junctures, and an in-depth look at the two major Music Hall stars, Gracie Fields and George Formby, will help to illustrate the significance of these two British megastars as being representative of both the populace and the country at the time of great economic and cultural uncertainty.

Structures of Feeling and Ideas About Culture

Raymond Williams (1977: 38; Highmore 2001: 91-100) suggests that we deconstruct and reconstruct through detailed analysis almost anything from the world around us: a period in history, an artifact, and a culture. This deconstruction may be through Marxist approaches, historical methods of investigation, or a psychoanalytical one, depending on one’s own favoured method. He argues that whilst we may be able to do this with some accuracy, and that these approaches are complex and influential, they possibly shape our comprehension of that item under investigation into a ‘whole’ commonality.

However, breaking away from ‘traditional’ academic thoughts about how the deconstruction of said items may be approached, he then posits the idea that even though something may be broken down into its constituent parts and analysed, there

still remains something intangible for which there is no outside/academic equivalent. Williams calls this theory ‘structure of feeling’ which can only be readily measured through the experience of the period and/or work of art itself, as a whole product. By exploring the idea that this concept is not static, and to help conceptualize this theory, he uses three categories: dominant, residual and emergent. Whilst dominant comes to represent ‘official consciousness’ about a subject, both residual and emergent categories imply that there is an alternative or, indeed, oppositional position to the ‘official conscious’. These oppositions are more experiential, relying on one’s own concepts of, or experience around, the subject. They are at once fluidic – inasmuch as they are constantly evolving – but also have a contextualized framework as a hook on which to hang ideas about historicity, social change, and national identity.

Williams argues that there are three definitions for culture. The first is that there is the ‘ideal’ state, whereby a set of universal values reflects the human condition. Secondly, that ‘documentary’ provides us with the ability to investigate, to question, to value culture. Finally, a ‘social’ definition of culture occurs, whereby institutions, production structures, family, and communication are coalesced to form a structure of feeling that cannot be defined with pinpoint precision.

If Williams’ notions are deemed as accurate, or at the very least enticing, ‘structure of feeling’ and ideas about defining the social aspects of culture can be used as the cornerstone of what would arguably be called ‘trivial’ subjects. Such ‘trivia’ might include the importance of public houses as a place of discourse, the feeling of melancholia at the end of a television series, the clothes found in science fiction serials – the list is endless. The fact that the subject may not be deemed as ‘academically worthwhile’ is therefore redundant, and whilst the investigator may *not* have experienced the subject directly, the subject can be given a structure of feeling, whereby *it* occupies a place or period either of importance to that investigator *and/or* as an almost intangible part of a collective-psyche.

With this in mind, Williams’ ideas can be directly linked to the British Music Hall and its’ traditions. As stated earlier, there is something indefinable about something so intrinsically a part of a nation’s culture as Britain’s Music Halls. By systematically going through the case studies I have offered in this text, I have attempted to apply Williams’ theories with verisimilitude. For example, in the section regarding the history of the halls, I see Williams’ ideas regarding nationhood as seen through a ‘shared’ perspective; the Music Hall does this – it was for all of society, where classes could intermingle: a *shared* culture. With regards to the acts themselves, they (in)directly reflect this *sharing* philosophy: this was done through comic patter or verbosity (and their reflection of the daily life around them), their outlook (from downtrodden to dapper, which again indicates a collective mentality), or their engagement with their audience about things that *mattered to them*. The humour was British: mostly saucy and innuendo-laden, often satirical and witty. The wordage reflected the world of its audience, and whilst Ferdinand de

Saussure's work on *langue* and *parole* delineates the vocabulary used, I would argue that Williams' work offers an extra countenance to this. Innuendo was the mainstay of the halls. Laden with meanings, directly applicable to the populace that watched them, audiences saw this humour as 'theirs', as being a part of their 'outlook'. This outlook formed the cornerstone to British humour, and the Music Hall took it and used it for its own ends: to entertain and to comment upon ideas of British life. This comes to the fore in my investigation into Gracie Fields and George Formby being a part of Williams' '*experience, contact and discovery*'. All the artistes in this article – and countless others in the halls, on the nation's airwaves or on television – became a part of the cultural heritage landscape of Britain. Whilst they may be seen as Low Art, they retain through the passing of time an even greater degree of cultural specificity. Although they may be frowned upon from the higher echelons of traditional academia, like Williams' theories they have gained more credence as time has moved on. Williams' work about *structures of feeling* becomes therefore an ideal tool to use when examining a topic like the British Music Hall. Whilst the Music Hall's fortunes faded only to be reborn through radio and television, one thing is certain: by employing Williams' work as a hook on which to hang my arguments, it will become apparent that the British Music Hall has written itself into not only the nation's affections, but into the very cultural fabric of the country itself.

A Very Brief History of the British Music Hall

The Music Hall was a populist construction that occurred in Great Britain after the mass migrations of the populace to new and expanding townships during and after the industrial revolution.² The public flocked to theatres to be entertained by the latest sketches, songs, dances, tumblers, ventriloquists, prestidigitators and illusionists, but its predecessors have been recorded before: Chaucer writes of an artiste in *The Canterbury Tales* (c.1387):

He used to dance in twenty different styles...
He played a two-stringed fiddle, did it proud...
And sang an high falsetto loud
And he was just as good on the guitar.
There was no public house in town or bar
He didn't visit with his merry face...

The traditions passed down to the Music Hall are evident – dancing, singing and instrument playing are important conventions of the Music Hall. The drinking tavern was *the* institution that accommodated wandering players and nurtured home-grown talent. From the 1500s 'beer taverns' and 'penny gaffs' appear and in Massinger and Field's *The Fatal Dowry* (1632) a 'a Singer and Keeper of a Musick House' points to the idea that the Music Hall found its roots in establishments of

the hostelry. As an example, Saddlers Wells Theatre in London had a stage for various acts, whilst drinkers sat watching from booths.

Cromwell indicates that the music room or music house in Elizabethan England (1558-1603) was to be found in a large house, cider-room, tavern or theatre. By the Jacobean era (1603-1625) these rooms were known as 'music houses' and their upturn in fortunes came through Oliver Cromwell's political and religious fervour, when all organs were removed from churches. These organs were bought by publicans and installed in specially built rooms to accommodate a crowd to watch various acts. After the Restoration music houses proliferated in number, as did the variety of acts, the quantities of these performers and the audience that readily went to these locations for drinking, revelry and entertainment.³

At the end of the Restoration until 1859, London's 'fashionables' could walk amongst arbours in New Spring Gardens⁴ where wandering players entertained the crowd and prostitutes plied their trade. Pepys mentions the gardens in his diary of 30th May 1668:

Over to Fox Hall, and there fell into the company of Harry Killigrew, a rogue newly come back out of France, but still in disgrace at our Court, and young Newport and others, as very rogues as any in town, who were ready to take hold of every woman that came by them. And so to supper in the arbour; but Lord! their mad talk did make my heart ake. (Pepys 1668)⁵

Entertainment included song singing, dance and dramatic plays. Famous singers included Mrs. Arne and Mrs. Beddeley, who leant a degree of civility to the evening's proceedings. Other acts included Ameson Santa 'The Mexican Wonder and his son' (the son slipping through the steps of a ladder 'like an eel' with the ladder balancing on his father's chin), Master Bridges and Madame Lamotte (tightrope walkers), Mr. F.A. Canfield 'The American Samson', Herr B. von Feitlinger (a celebrated Tyrolean vocalist), and Mr. Arthur Nelson, the 'Demon' Rock-Harmonic player, the American harmonist on the 'Pine Sticks' and 'Niagara Stones'.⁶

At 9pm 'The Cascade' was performed. This fifteen-minute long showcase was presented against a backdrop of a miller's cottage or mountain scene. The audience gathered around with all classes mingled alongside one another. Songs and music were played and Kalm (1753) writes:

Youth of London, almost every evening in the summer divert themselves... At 6 o'clock in the evening they begin to assemble, when the music commences at 7 or 8... (it becomes a place where) One can see and be seen. (Kalm 1753)

In the taverns, beer money paid for the entertainment. In 1751 parliament's Licensing Act meant that each hostelry had to possess a magistrate's license to house these attractions. Rather than limiting song and drink, it had the opposite effect. With the license came 'legitimacy': beer prices rose, landlords presented better artistes, and grander drinking taverns sprang up with landlords expanding their empires to produce greater 'leisure palaces'.

By the 1830s, Music Hall emerged from the ‘trappings’ of the drinking room to become a more-reputable pastime. Individuals such as Charles Morton, ‘the Father of the Music Halls’, who Bailey (1986) describes as a ‘pioneer leisure entrepreneur or “caterer”’ (Bailey 1986: x) separated their taverns from their music rooms (Bailey 1986: ix). Entertainment became commoditised with purpose-built halls constructed to showcase talent and make a profit.⁷ Morton’s Canterbury Hall in Lambeth, which opened in 1852, was massive, housing six hundred in the auditorium. It had a revolving *and* removable glass roof, illustrating his ambitions. One day per week was given over to ‘celebrating’ the fact that women could also attend the halls: Canterbury Hall’s ‘Ladies Thursday’ inferred that *ladies* of the middle classes could safely visit the theatre either with or without their respective husbands or beaux. It was also for men to ‘escape’ their wives for an evening to seek out prostitutes who frequented the venue.

The publicans sought elevation to the higher echelons of polite society, and as dramatic episodes were performed in the Music Halls so their reputation as procurers of highbrow entertainment was assured. Any criticism of the Music Hall craft was diverted due to the very nature of this ‘High Art’ approach.⁸ The halls had classical names: The Parthenon, The Coliseum, The Star, and The Constellation indicated the haughtier aspirations of the theatre’s proprietors (Bailey 1986: 145).

By 1860 the halls were flourishing. There were thirty-one in London alone and three hundred and eighty four around the rest of the kingdom (*The Era Almanack*: x). Almost every town had one. Many were grandiose, stylish, draped with expensive furnishings, and more-elaborate productions were performed (Marshall 1988, as quoted in Bailey 1986: 53-72). As Wilson (1985) attests:

You must understand that these halls are not confined to the Metropolis – there is not a town of any importance in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales but has its music hall or halls, and I am quite sure, from observations which I have made since I have had the honour of catering for your amusement, that they have created a great social and moral improvement amongst the working classes of this country.⁹

As entrepreneurs owned numerous establishments, so a standardization of ‘product’ began. This ‘product’ conducted provincial tours, fine-tuning or adjusting them to cater for different audiences. For example, the Northern England ‘tour’ would have had songs and jokes altered to incorporate localized stories and individuals. Virginia Woolf states the Music Hall had an indefinable ‘something natural to the race’ and that was its appeal to the majority of audiences (Selenick et al. 1981: 13). This appeal came through caricatured stereotypes (the skinny, bespectacled man, the buxom maid, the harridan, the ridiculed figure of authority), or through storylines that mocked and satirized British (mostly English) ways of life.

Music Halls were tailored for all social strata, although they catered (in the main) for the proletariat. Whilst the common notion for Music Hall’s connotations lies within an almost-mythical construction based around the populist ideas of a ‘safe

and secure' past of gentle-Victorian/Edwardianism, where all patrons mingle alongside one another, this was not the case. The public was not one analogous group, but a divided society that used the songs and routines of going to the Music Hall to navigate socially underlying themes such as age, class, gender, and ethnicity.

For the working classes, halls provided escape from the rigours of toiling in heavy industry. A male Liverpool worker stated, 'I work in a foundry and sometimes I and others go to the Coliseum just as we leave work' (*Liverpool Weekly Albion* 1878) which makes the hall a place of solace. It was somewhere where he and his community could be as one. Reach argues that in the Northern provinces female workers frequented the halls with more disposable income being available to spend on leisure activities (Reach 1972: 59). An 1849 edition of Manchester's *Morning Chronicle* recorded that the average audience demographic as:

...two thirds might be men: the others were women – young and old – a few of them with children in their laps, and several with babies at their breasts. The class of the assembly was that of artisans and mill hands. Almost without exception, men and women were decently dressed, and it was quite evident that several of the groups formed family parties. (Reach 1972: 81)

Despite their risqué songs and routines, the Music Hall was a place advertised for *all* the family; a communal area of fun, frivolity and enjoyment. Charrington and Chant claimed that Music Hall was a place of immorality, but Höher argues that the London Pavilion had been refurbished to cater for a more-discerning clientele that used 'legitimate' theatre (Höher 1986; as quoted in Bailey 1986: 85). Audiences entered vast auditoriums. The orchestra played a cavalcade of famous tunes. The lights would dim and a hush descended over spectators. The impresario would take his place at the side of the stage for the duration of the performance.

Impresarios provided whole acts themselves, introducing performers by exaggerated flourishes of arm-waving and extravagant exclamations whilst waving his gavel in an almost sexualized frenzy. Addressing the audience after a rendition of the National Anthem reassured most that any 'fastidious man in this city can safely bring his wife and family to witness' (Höher 1986: 101) giving a sense of 'harmless' fun to the evening's 'wholesome' proceedings. The fact that the national anthem was followed by 'saucy' onstage-antics gave the proceedings a sense of acceptability for those in attendance. As Boucicault (1986) writes: '(Music Halls were) stepping stones from the sensual enjoyment of the public house to the intellectual entertainment of the theatres' (*The Era Almanack* 1867).

Music Hall tycoons ensured that different audiences could attend together (Höher 1986: 87). With Victorian Britain held in sway by its strict social strata, different audiences went for different reasons: the working classes escaped their daily toll in heavy industry, to forget their miserable existences; the upper classes saw risqué acts they could then condemn to their equals; and the middle classes never wanted to feel left out of the proceedings. Williams argues that England's

powerful bourgeois culture held sway over educational, social and literary institutions and, in most cases the proletariat were exempt from accessing them. However, during the industrial and social revolutions of the 18-19th centuries the proletariat was slowly opening the doors to these. Williams perceived institutions, art and learning evolving from a bourgeois culture, to a *shared* one. He appreciated the distinctive working-class lifestyle, saying, ‘I think this way of life, with its emphases of neighbourhood, mutual obligation and common betterment... is in fact the best basis for any future English society’ (Williams as quoted in Highmore 2001: 96). If this is Williams’ case, then the Music Hall, with its primary target being the working classes, reverses High Art’s loftier aspects so that the entertainment, with its Low Art connotations, becomes a part of Williams’ shared culture. Despite there being a delineated boundary between the classes, the Music Hall was one aspect of British society that allowed for *all* to become a part of the Utopian-collective for that briefest of moments. This was no more evident than in the prices to watch the acts.

The cost of a ticket in Liverpool and Manchester are comparable to those in the capital, indicating that management aimed fees within certain price ranges to entice more people through the doors. The following diagram indicates this:

London:

Period	Name of Theatre	Seat Prices	Box Prices
1860	Alhambra Palace	6d. – 4s.	1gn. – 2gn.
1870		6d. – 5s.	1gn. – 2gn.
1870	Oxford Theatre	6d. – 1s.6d.	10s.6d. – 1gn.
1860	Canterbury Theatre	6d. – 1s.	-
1870		6d. – 4s.	10s.5d. – 1 gn.

Manchester (1868):

Name of Theatre	Seat Price
Victoria Theatre	2d. – 3d.
The People’s Theatre	2d. – 6d.
The London	6d. – 1s.
Alexandra Palace	6d. – 1s.

Liverpool (1878):

Name of Theatre	Seat Price
The Coliseum	1d. – 6d.
Alhambra Palace	1d. – 1s.
The Gaiety	2d. – 1s.
The Parthenon	6d. – 1s.
The Star Theatre	6d. – 1s.6d.

Some Important Music Hall Acts

So what of the acts themselves? Performers included singers, acrobats, dancers, comics, black and white minstrels (themselves based upon the Pierrot's of Europe), chorus girls, monologians, and the audience themselves, who were encouraged to partake in proceedings.

Most singers used original material bought from songwriters, paying sole performing rights for up to two pounds. Clauses written onto the sheet music stated that songs were *not* to be performed in the Music Hall. Following legal litigation in December 1892, whereby the singer Katie Lawrence's sole proprietorial use of the song *Daisy Bell* was negated by Lord Justice Smith meant that now *most* songs could be sung in the Music Hall by whoever wanted to. *Daisy Bell* probably remains the most famous Music Hall song of them all. Audiences were invited to sing along, and it was this affinity between audience and performer that proved to be at the cornerstone of the halls' achievements, whereby the strong bond between the two parties became an established, *vital*, aspect to the repertoire of the evenings' proceedings.

Arguably the most renowned female singer was Marie Lloyd (1870-1922). Lloyd was born in London, and as a child, she sang song songs at the Royal Eagle Tavern, Hoxton, London. By 1884 she made her professional debut with her sisters' act, The Fairy Bells. They aimed their turn at a clientele with a temperance leaning, which is ironic as Lloyd's last solo act in the halls ended with her staggering around drunkenly singing 'It's a Bit of a Ruin That Cromwell Knocked About a Bit'.

During her late-teens, Lloyd became a solo artist; her first professional engagement was at Belmont's Sebright Hall, where she was paid 15d per week. Her routine was soon sought after, and she was running from one theatre to another to do her act before an easily excitable audience. At the peak of her powers she starred alongside Dan Leno at London's Theatre Royal in 1891. It was for the traditional Christmas pantomime and she played the Principle Boy. Her appearance was one of pertness, but with a propensity to gain weight; her face was round, and she had proportionately large teeth. Her voice, from the recordings that survive, is disappointing, *but* what makes Lloyd remarkable is that her charm, vivaciousness and ability to fascinate and 'work' an audience were exemplary. Her saucy looks, illusions of beauty in frills, lace and ribbons, twirling a parasol coquettishly whilst giving 'knowing' winks to all in the audience, ensured that she was truly adored by her public. As Shaw says,

Miss Marie Lloyd, like all the brightest stars of the Music Hall, has an exceptionally quick ear for both pitch and rhythm. Her intonation and the lilt of her songs are alike perfect. Her step-dancing is pretty; and her command of coster-girls' patois is complete (Shaw as quoted in Hardin 1990: 25).

Singing sentimental songs like 'The Boy I Love is Up in the Gallery' ensured popularity with female audiences. The risqué 'A Little Bit of What You Fancy Does You Good' appealed to all those with a penchant for innuendo, in which she sang:

I always hold in having it if you fancy it.
If you fancy it, that's understood!
But if that's your bloomin' game,
I shall want to do the same,
'Cos a little bit of what you fancy does you good!

The innuendo comes thick and fast with Lloyd. In 'Oh! Mr Porter!' she sings of 'girls never having their ticket punched before' and Lloyd herself became a target for moral crusaders. At one investigative committee in which Lloyd was asked to explain her songs, she sang her repertoire with utter blandness. With the board satisfied that no impropriety was in evidence, she then launched into a rendition of 'Come into the Garden, Maude' that left assembled members speechless!

The comics' satire, wordplay, physical dexterity and innuendo took audiences into their confidence when telling jokes, and again a reciprocal relationship developed between the two parties. Jokes helped alleviate any societal 'problems'. Many were reliant on audience participation, both with subject matter and familiarity, and most revealed an underlying sense of hostility. This was in an era of no divorce, of burgeoning families, of debt, poverty and strife. Jokes reflected this and targets were usually mothers-in-law, sexual frustration, poverty and drunkenness. These targets were not restricted to British society, but the 'feeling' was that they belonged to ideas about *Britishness*.¹⁰

With the two main theories of laughter being *superiority* and *incongruity*, so joke-tellers relayed comic stories directly at the target audience. The working classes formed the majority of the spectators, but the jokes critiqued *all* classes, helping create a safety valve that could be turned on or off to help ease any tensions of the age. Even if the audiences were of mixed classes, they would feel comfortable from different viewpoints: the working classes saw the middle classes as incongruous; the middle classes saw themselves as superior. The joke becomes evident from both perspectives.

Being a comic with a boisterous crowd in front of them was a daunting task. Thick skin was the order of the day. Arguably the most famous Music Hall jokers were Dan Leno and Little Tich. Basing his act upon the most impoverished members of society, Leno used the squalor of the daily life around him to fund his routines. Dressed as a lodger, a landlady, pantomime dames, tramps, shop assistants, swimming instructors, schoolteachers, and more, he fashioned an act that commented upon the audiences' world. Grime, dirt and filth were magically transformed into happiness, and the poverty of living a hard life in slums and working in factories was converted into laughter. His excellence at mimicry vented streams of absurdity, and the employment of patois strains linked both time and place to the audience. Whilst his routine mixed pantomime and absurdities, he delighted audiences due to his familiarity/ridiculousness. Yet his act (and arguably the world he reflected) was his undoing. His life of rapid-fire jokes, manic dance routines and insane songs that all exposed the hardship of the age, killed him. Lloyd was reported

to have said, 'Ever seen his eyes? The saddest eyes in the whole world. That's why we laughed at Danny. Because if we hadn't laughed, we should have cried ourselves sick' (thedailymail.co.uk).

Tich was famed for his Big Boot Dance. Dressed in an ill-fitting jacket and trousers, broken top hat and crumpled shirt, he walked across the stage on two elongated shoes each approximately one metre long. He would 'shuffle' onto his toes and then whistle famous themes whilst balancing precariously on the tips of the shoes. He would lower himself down onto the stage and use the shoes as 'slappers' that would bang against the wooden floor. His other routines saw him parodying a French gendarme and an English tax inspector. However, he is forever associated with his Big Boot Dance and his influence has been felt in the work of the silent comedians, Jacques Tati and even Monty Python with their Ministry of Silly Walks sketch.

The cultural importance of the comic cannot be underestimated. Not only were they able to assuage the audiences' problems inasmuch as they would create, they projected back into the cultural arena difficult areas of social concern. Tich's tramp and Leno's downtrodden characters commented upon the real world around them, despite their caricatured form. Most of the comedians produced humour that was 'British' and indicative of the British way of life: laughter flavoured with melancholy. The characters, situations and punch lines were indicative of the society that produced them, and whilst I do not try to simplify ideas of the comic and comedy, the comics were part of a *British* consciousness, whereby their work was justifiably important in helping the populace to come to terms with the rapid social change occurring around them.

Toying with Sexuality

The arts have always toyed with notions of sexuality. Hercules dressed as a woman when a slave to Omphale; Thor dressed as Freyja; the plays of ancient Greece and Rome; Shakespeare, Johnson and others had men and women dressed as the opposite sex. This follows two traditions: the first is that the performance demands it as part of the social history of theatre; the second is that the character is a cross-dresser. Both methods are mostly used for comic effect, with mistaken identity at their core. The Music Hall was no exception, using sexuality as both a playful construction *and* as a direct critique on the morés of society. The walls of Victorian society were closely guarded, with men and women's roles 'firmly' entrenched within set guidelines. But these walls were eroding. John Stuart Mill failed to secure votes for women in his Second Reform Act (1867), which led to the formation of the Women's Social and Political Union and its members – the suffragettes – taking violent protests to the streets in order to gain the right to vote. Within the confines of the Music Hall, women dressing as men attempted to break down barriers of a male-dominated society, highlighting notions that the only way to break free from patriarchy was to become male. Ideas of patriarchy were eroded 'from within' and,

by seemingly, ‘one of their own’ – namely, a male shows the Music Hall as an arena where sexuality is being questioned. The enjoyment of these acts was the ambiguity; audiences knew that they were watching a woman dressed as a man who still sang with a woman’s voice. There was no deception, and by putting on pair of trousers, the women were behaving in unorthodox ways; gender was being questioned; and elements of both power and control were in evidence.

The most famous female male-impersonator, Vesta Tilley (1864-1952), examined ideas about patriarchy whilst delighting audiences with her act. Meticulously attired, Tilley’s numerous characters convinced audiences that they were watching a male: Algy was ‘the most perfectly dressed man in the house’; a Judge criticized the judicial system; a soldier. It was as this soldier that she acted as a recruiter during The Great War. Her songs ‘Jolly Good Luck to a Girl Who Loves a Soldier’ and ‘Six Days Leave’ inspired men to sign up for the conflict. Tilley was popular with female audiences who saw in her a symbol of independence, directly poking fun at the male establishment. Her most famous creation, Burlington Bertie from Bow, wore top hat and tails, brightly polished black leather shoes, waistcoat, and shirt and tie. Tilley wore men’s underwear, as her female undergarments would make the male-attire look odd. Her hair was never cut but put into braids and coiled under a wig and hat. She was always introduced as Miss Vesta Tilley, stressing – not hiding – her femininity. This breaking down of gender stereotypes ensured that she, and other performers, became objects of erotic beguilement opening up the sexual arena to more direct questioning than before.

Men dressed as women were seen as comedic when linked to ‘Low Art’ comedic traditions. Despite most female roles being played by males in legitimate (or ‘high art’) theatre, the rise of the populist Christmas pantomime saw an actor appearing as a ‘dame’ – a continuation of the traditional *en travesti* – in outrageous costumes, wigs, and make-up, acting in an exaggerated ‘camp’ manner, as the mother of the hero. The most famous dames are Widow Twankey in Aladdin and Cinderella’s two ugly sisters.

The Music Hall incorporated drag acts into their repertoire, and arguably the most famous was Malcolm Scott who was not as caricatured as the dame. He portrayed historical figures such as Elizabeth I, Boadicea and Nell Gwyn, and created the character Camille Clifford. Clifford was based on the 1890s Gibson Girl cartoons which were the ‘ideal’ of femininity at the time. Clifford was a modern woman, fashionable and independently wealthy. Clifford’s silhouette accentuated ‘her’ hourglass figure, with slender neck, bare shoulders, ample bosom, thin waist and broad hips. Later drag artists, whilst retaining a genuinely affectionate, playful look at women’s sexuality through sexual role reversal, caricatured this image. Drag artists of later years (such as Danny la Rue and Paul O’Grady) compliment/lampoon the past in their stylish costumes, wigs and finery, and form part of the tradition that Music Hall was justifiably famous for. If la Rue and Savage’s performances are examined, their interaction with the audience (through jokes, nudges, winks, and

innuendo mixed with gleeful and knowing wide-eyed innocence) offers a direct continuation of the past played out within modern trappings. Most importantly, sexuality is continuously being toyed with – and whilst in the main these roles are comedic, they do serve a purpose: the male impersonator highlights the inequalities between sexes in the Victorian era, whilst female impersonators are part of the theatrical lineage that celebrates drag.

A Change in Fortunes

There is one defining moment that changed the whole course of this variety panoply (Mellor 1970: 43). In 1912, King George V commanded that variety artists perform at the Palace Theatre, London on 1st July. Sir Edward Moss decided that the entertainment would contain the usual roster of acts, with the finale having one hundred and fifty artistes singing to the attendant audience and royalty. One artiste was notably absent from this list: Marie Lloyd¹¹ who was omitted due to her vulgarity despite the fact that she had said some time earlier:

I might as well say right here and now that my songs are not blue – at least not half as blue as they are painted... The trouble is that the people are looking for blue, and I can't help it...if they want to turn and twist my meanings...I don't make them blue. It's the people... (Marie Lloyd as quoted in *The New York Telegraph* 1897)

With numerous royals in attendance, including Princess Victoria, Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein, Prince Arthur of Connaught, and the Duke and Duchess of Teck, censorship of one act took place: Queen Mary asked that 'the gaze of the Ladies of the Royal Party be not directed at the stage' when Vesta Tilley walked on stage for fear of causing offence to their sensibilities. The event rose over £2500 for charitable causes and is kept in the eye of the public's gaze even today, where the annual Royal Variety Show broadcast on British television.

Whilst the proletariat often mingled with the middle classes, the royal seal of approval meant that any symbiosis between themselves as core audience targets, artistes and material would now no longer be applicable. Hands elaborates on this:

After the 1912 Royal Show music hall's fortunes declined sharply. The respectful reception accorded to the performers at the Palace by a predominantly establishment audience did not please those who admired music hall for its vulgarity and brash common touch. (Hands 1931)

As the Great War took its toll on the country Music Hall was at the forefront of recruitment drives.¹² Men would stand in line to sign up for King and country, their wavering signatures presided over by chorus girls singing of soldiers going to war, missed loved ones, and homecoming heroes. Siegfried Sassoon's chilling war poem *Blighters*, offered a critique of this:

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
'We're sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!'

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home, Sweet Home'
And there'd be no more jokes in music halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume. (Sassoon 1917)

It must be remembered that the halls kept providing respite from the troubles of the age whilst nationalistic tendencies were endorsed. Whereas risqué songs such as 'Tuner's Oppor-tuner-ty' (Fred Coyne, 1870) linked the audience by innuendo, Music Hall became indicative of celebrating the Victorian trait of Imperialism. With such devastating loss of life in the horrendous conditions of trench warfare at The Battle of the Somme (1916) how could the Music Hall hope to keep up morale when soldiers returned as mere shells of their former selves?

Cinema and the Music Hall

Cinema began to shrug Music Hall from its complacency. Short movies became *cinemas of attraction*: the film, *Dan Leno Attempts to Master the Cycle* (GB 1900: dir. n/k.) was shown around the country's halls. As films' popularity grew, so halls incorporated them into their schedules. This finally became untenable, and entrepreneurs had theatres either newly-constructed to house the new art form, or halls were transformed to those capable of projecting images on a permanent basis.

With the political economy of Music Hall and Cinema interlinked, once a film had been bought the owner had to pay for the projector, projectionist and organist. Music Hall artistes, with their expenses and tantrums could now be 'relegated' to lower down the bill. The crossover between the two was apparent: Fred Karno made his Music Hall debut on the boards of The Crown and Cushion Public House, Nottingham in 1882, but he also wrote material for early cinema, including *Au Music Hall* (UK 1907: dir. n/k.) and *Early Birds* (UK 1907: Albert Bruett). Syd Walker (father of sixties and seventies exploitation filmmaker, Pete) lost his Lancashire dialect to become a Cockney-twang'd comedian with the catchphrase 'What would you do, chums?', making the successful transition to cinema via films such as *Royal Cavalcade* (UK 1935: Thomas Bentley and Herbert Brenon) and lending his vocal skills to the radio series, *Band Waggon* (BBC 1938-1940).

With the transition to sound, artistes had a platform to launch their own patter. Musical films are generally regarded as the sole invention of American cinema, with *The Jazz Singer* (USA, 1927: Alan Crosland), and *The Broadway Melody* (USA, 1929: Harry Beaumont) examples of tried-and-tested storylines being used to capture an audience. Britain looked towards cheaper modes of representation, employing talent from provincial Music Halls. These were cheap and cheerful outlets for Music Hall stars. Comedians like 'The Cheeky Chappie' Max Miller starred in *The Good Companions* (UK, 1933: Victor Saville) whilst Will Hay's *Those Were the Days* (UK, 1933: Thomas Bentley) celebrated Music Hall acts themselves.

These were budget-frugal and whilst narratives minimized allowing the ‘acts’ to perform, some films contained strands that permitted extensions or developments of the persona emerging away from the institution; Will Hay as his ‘seedy school-master’ in the comedic masterpiece, *Oh! Mr Porter* (UK 1936: Marcel Varnel) is probably the best example.

The coming of sound presented artistes with exploitable opportunities of the medium. Recorded sound brought diegetic material previously only available to a specific audience out to the masses. The ‘live’ performance of Music Hall was transitory whereas film could be watched repeatedly. The cross-consumption of a star as a viable economic commodity became an important reason as to why Music Hall talent was used in early British sound cinema. That cinema became a cultural force. Even though Dilys Powell (1948) argued, ‘There was no tradition of British films... The national characteristics of the British, whether good or bad, had not been fused into a national cinema’ (Powell 1948: 64), Music Hall cinema *does* establish a strand of British society in their films. Murphy writes:

It can be argued that the vigorous strands of popular culture evident in popular music hall based comedies of Gracie Fields, George Formby and Will Hay... do constitute a distinctive cinema of national identity. (Murphy 1997: 198)

Mundy (1999) demonstrates that films like *Elstree Calling* (UK, 1930: Andre Charlotte, Jack Hulbert, Paul Murray and Alfred Hitchcock) broke free from Americanisms by incorporating homegrown stars in homegrown products (Mundy 1999: 142). It combined comedy and musical sketches with a narration based around a television set. This linking of film/radio/television and Music Hall, despite being an ‘unmitigated fuddle, which would have bored an infant’s school’ (Agate 1946: 59) showed that cross-media pollination occurred. Many *Elstree Calling* stars were part of the great Victorian Music Hall tradition. They were ‘ready made’ stars with a loyal audience. That cinema exploited Music Hall stars is important in showing how representations of a form of ‘national musicality’ could take place, which linked Britain together through these films. Benedict Anderson’s idea of an ‘imagined community’, in which “(Community) is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 1983: 2) does hold sway with how any country can never be wholly analogous. But Music Hall’s ‘cinema of attractions’ linked stars and routines into a national *esprit de corps*, the films reflecting contextual ideologies whilst navigating such social situations as mass unemployment in the Thirties.

This was found primarily in the films of two truly great iconic British Music Hall stars: Gracie Fields and George Formby. Their employment ensured that they were the ‘attraction’. With Formby it was his musical interludes, for Fields it was her embodiment of the working class female that encouraged audience attendance. The narrative mattered little. It was the ‘star’ and their ‘message’, that the populace wanted, however obliquely that message might manifest itself.

Gracie Fields, or 'Our Gracie', embodied the stereotypical Thirties 'Lancashire Lass' and played the same working class heroine that symbolised to her female audience direct cultural specificity. The dialect, the attitudes, the clothes, and her outlook on life was very much part of the 'North' in England.¹³ J.B. Priestley wrote: 'Listen to her for a quarter of an hour and you will learn more about Lancashire women and Lancashire than you would from a dozen books on these subjects' (Priestley 1976: 253). Fields' cultural background propels this representation back to the public as a means of negotiating conservative values to a downtrodden proletariat.

The thirties saw mass unemployment in Britain. Rumours of wars abroad were constantly in the public's minds. Fields and her 'never say die' attitude encouraged audiences to be prepared for sacrifice and communal kinship. This negates Anderson's *imagined community* and film titles such as *Looking on the Bright Side* (UK, 1932: Graham Cutts & Basil Dean), *Look Up and Laugh* (UK, 1935: Basil Dean) and the remarkable social commentary, *Sing As We Go* (UK, 1934: Basil Dean) showed that she had the power to coalesce an audience into a united and cohesive force through her cheerfulness. Her characters' courage and hope for a better life, usually achieved through a Utopian-collective approach of laughter over indifference and despair, provided respite to the masses in a decade that saw Britain slide into the Great Depression, unemployment rise to over three million, breadlines forming, and poverty on a mass scale.

Fields promoted working class ethics within a working class environment. She usually appeared in a gritty Northern town with woollen mills looming above dirty cobbled streets filled with the unemployed. This unglamorised world promoted ideas that working classes bonded together to ensure survival. For provincial audiences (the films were not successful in London) this reflected contextual social conditions, which found its output in Field's best-known film, *Sing As We Go*.

The film begins with the closure of Greybeck Mill. Gracie Platt (Fields) sings the title/anthem song, leading the workforce out of the factory. She rides on her bicycle to Blackpool, the cultural home of the northern working classes, with the promise of a boarding house job. Whilst there she laughs and creates laughter by falling into a pool, wrongly enters a Bathing Beauty competition and causes a riot with her rendition of *In My Little Bottom Drawer*. She returns to the mill with a new patent device that will alleviate unemployment for her fellow workers. She ends the film in communal triumph by leading her co-workers back to the mill.

Sing As We Go ends with a high-shot incorporating the townscape, Fields and her workers marching back to work in pride and jubilation. The crowd becomes representative of the audience, moving towards and then past the camera. *They are us* and as the crowd follow Fields to the factory gates and the image cuts to a close-up of her looking and winking directly into the camera. This momentous feeling of achievement and relationship with the character for the audience suggests that despite harsh economic times there *was* hope around the corner *if* the communal spirit

could successfully combine. The film was undoubtedly effective in capturing the zeitgeist of the era, and it reflects both the humour and optimism that people wanted to feel in such blighted, depressed, forgotten, downtrodden, and deprived areas that Fields' and the film represented. Justifiably impressive, the core of the movie is summed up when Fields sings:

Hee-hee, come on lads and lassies
The factory's opened again
Hee-hee, come on,
Ee, let's sing for it
A song and a smile make it right worthwhile
So sing-sing-sing-sing
As we go... a-long...

Fields' metaphorical representation of female emancipation formed one culturally specific ideal. Mass unemployment reigned, with the male workforce decimated, but females stood proud of their achievements by bonding together, as in motherhood, all aspects of societal kinship. Fields promoted the female as a force within the cultural specificity of the era. Her onscreen persona and her ability off-screen to 'reach out' to a mass audience created intimacy that not only derived from Music Hall traditions, but also remained faithful to her comedic roots in working class environs. Fields became part of a national identity and despite becoming a global star, did not betray her cultural roots, 'suggesting that by embodying national consensus she really did represent something the people wanted' (Richards 1984: 190).

From Williams' perspective, Fields' as a *persona* is part of Britain's *culture*. The films are cultural artifacts, and through them, common meanings that lead to an 'official consciousness' can be gleaned. Fields' *does* lead the workers back to the Mill, but she is still under the command of her superiors; the bourgeois have won out over the working classes. Whilst Williams would argue that the 'official consciousness' has won out (at least from a Marxist perspective), he stresses that society is created by the 'finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery' (Williams in Highmore 2001: 93) I would posit the notion that it is the three points – *experience*, *contact* and *discovery* – that exemplifies Fields (and therefore the Music Hall) as important in defining and re-defining the age in which they were made. The actress, her films, and the halls were fixed points within the public's affections. Each construction questioned, probed, and then commented upon the contextual world. For the masses, the concepts and their experiences around them provided a genuine sense of cultural belonging, of being part of an Utopian-collective: *of being alike* in a time of great social upheaval.

George Formby symbolised a different outlook upon the thirties. Already a well-established recording artist in his own right, with Decca's 1932 recording of *Chinese Blues* selling over 100,000 copies (Mundy 1999: 151), Formby was an economical commodity, with a loyal audience who were prepared to watch his movies, listen to his performances and buy his recordings.

Formby portrayed the Everyman – *us*. Whilst childlike and naïve, he was dependable, honest and hardworking. His characters represented ‘affirmations of working-class pleasures – pursuit of happiness, love and a little bit of money (which) sits alongside working-class ethics of working hard and the ethos of community’ (Mundy 1999: 152). Employed by John Blakely for the £8,000 production of *Off the Dole* (UK, 1935: Arthur Mertz), which grossed over £30,000 in the provinces (after never getting a release in London), Formby’s success ‘was extremely popular with regional audiences, not least because it addressed in its oblique comic manner the experiences of the unemployed during the depression’ (Mundy 1999: 152). Unlike the nationwide phenomenon of Music Hall, it was regional audiences that found favour towards Music Hall stars in films. London audiences demanded more prestigious productions to occupy their time. As producer Basil Dean (1973) said of Formby’s films, ‘...none of his films did worthwhile business in the West End of London, but elsewhere it was a case of ‘all seats sold’ most of the time’ (Mundy 1999: 152).

Through exercises such as the breathtakingly exciting *No Limit* (UK, 1935: Monty Banks), which sees George’s chimneysweep dreaming of winning the Isle of Man TT Motorcycle Race, they retained a semblance towards his regional roots. He lives out his fantasy leaving Wigan in the North West of England behind as his grandfather says: ‘Ee, when I was a lad we were content to stay where we came from’, calling the island ‘foreign’. Formby remembers his hometown through singing, *In a Little Wigan Garden*, performing it whilst blacked-up as a traditional minstrel in front of a crowded beach:

In a little Wigan garden,
Where the dandelions grow
With my sweet frowsy Flo,
Round the mulberry bush we’ll go

Under the Wigan palm trees
There I bring her up to scratch
We have such a game on the cucumber frame
I’d show her the cabbage patch.

When the morning mildew christens our shallots
Scented breezes coming from the chimney pots
In a little Wigan garden
When the soot is falling down
Oh, what a place, what a case
A disgrace to my hometown.

In a little Wigan garden with my little Wiganese
Getting stung with bumble bees
‘Neath the cabbage and the peas
‘Neath the Wigan water lilies
Where the drainpipe overflows
There’s my girl and me
She sits on my knees

And watch how the rhubarb grows.

By juxtaposing clichéd images of town-terraced houses with ‘soot falling down’ and ‘drainpipe overflows’ Formby created an identifiable world for the public. Though sentimentality was never far away in Formby’s repertoire, the emphasis on bodily attributes – though never *quite* mentioning them – became testament to his stature as a mediator between Music Hall, cinema and the audience. John Reith, director of the BBC, wrote condemningly of Formby and his song *When I’m Cleaning Windows* stating, ‘If the public wants to listen to Formby singing his disgusting little ditty, they’ll have to be content to hear it in the cinemas, not over the nation’s airwaves!’ (Bret 1999: 54). Formby used Donald McGill’s innuendo-laden, seaside postcard humour as a basis for his comedy/songs:

I go cleaning windows to earn an honest bob,
For a nosey parker it’s an interesting job
Now it’s a job that suits me,
A Window cleaner you will be
If you could see what I could see
When I’m cleaning windows.
The honeymooning couples too,
You should see them bill and coo
You’d be surprised at the things they do
When I’m cleaning windows.

In my profession I work hard
But I’ll never stop.
I’ll climb this blinking ladder
‘Til I get right to the top!

The blushing bride she looks divine.
The bridegroom he is doing fine,
I’d rather have his job than mine!
When I’m cleaning windows.

What makes the euphemistic lyrics enjoyable for the target audience is that not only were they laden with innuendo, and therefore *not* High Art, Formby used the medium as an unabashed display of his musical talent. The song has little narrative importance with performance winning over storyline cohesion. The ‘star vehicle’ story is constructed around the idea of the persona, not the storyline itself. The lyrics’ suggestiveness meant that audiences were sutured into this narrative and became part of an Utopian-collective activity whereby innuendo was used as a direct path to audience/persona empathy.

With war imminent Formby provided a vital component in British cinema’s war of propaganda. The Ministry of Information clearly understood the importance of comedy and entertainment as a valuable wartime tool saying, ‘If we renounced interest in entertainment as such, we might be deprived of a valuable weapon for getting across our propaganda’.¹⁴ From Williams’ perspective, Formby himself becomes part of the ‘official consciousness’ through the acts of others, the MoI.

With Formby becoming *Everyman*, his music and comic adventures dealt directly with threats of German invasion in his greatest success: *Let George Do It* (UK, 1940: Marcel Varnel). Formby plays George Hepplewhite, a hapless ukulele player who is mistaken for a British spy. He is sent to Norway to intercept German radio codes that are played via a local band at a certain time each evening.

George gets to play his most famous song, *Granddad's Flannelette Nightshirt*, which has nothing to do with the narrative, providing Formby with a showcase for his talent. But it does signify that when he plays the song to the assembled crowd of soldiers, sailors and other passengers in a train station bar, he (Low Art culture) and the crowd (society) become one body (shared culture) against a common enemy.

The other day I got an invitation
To go and join a nudist's colony
And as the life is healthy and in the open air
I trotted off as happy as can be

With my granddad's flannelette nightshirt
I walked up to the door.
Someone said, 'Now don't make a fuss!
Just take off your clothes and you'll be like us'.

I was bashful so I stayed by myself,
For with the girls I didn't want to flirt,
But when I was asleep,
They all came to have a peep
At my granddad's flannelette shirt!

Camera movements and edits are minimised until the image rests with him as the dominant focus propped up against the bar. When he plays his ukulele Formby looks directly at the camera, smiles and winks at *it* and therefore *us*. This Brechtian approach ensured commonality between performer and audience where both share the experience of performance. The filmmakers guaranteed a linking device between the two and again provide a sense of the Utopian-collective 'belonging' against a common enemy.

Whilst British cinema also produced such films as *The Thief of Baghdad* (UK, 1940: Michael Powell, Ludwig Berger and Tim Whelan) to provide the audience with an escape into the realms of fantasy and 'Magic Technicolour', propaganda was the order of the day. Documentaries like *Fires Were Started* (UK 1943: Humphrey Jennings), the class-critiquing *In Which We Serve* (UK 1942: David Lean and Noel Coward), *Millions Like Us* (UK 1943: Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat), which promoted the role of women in the workplace, and the jingoistic *Henry V* (UK, 1944: Laurence Olivier) ensured that the war effort was helped by cinema. With tickets surpassing one billion receipts per year, cinema had an important role in disseminating ideas society and culture during the conflict. Formby's films provided this role.

George's haplessness bridges Williams' ideas about both feelings and culture. Whilst the work of Formby (and therefore, by relation, Music Hall) has often been downplayed in terms of importance to ideas about British culture, the fact remains that contextually he was a box office sensation. His films reflected anxieties, traits, and outlooks of the era. His characters were representing the downtrodden masses; the narratives turned outwards to the audience, either via Formby nodding and smiling at the camera; the plots reflected both the disasters of economic depression in the Thirties *or* of the small man (Britain) standing up to authority (the Axis Powers) in the Forties. Through his films, Formby's and other Music Hall artistes in the canon, contribution to the war effort is often underestimated, as the subjects are deemed 'trivial'. The fact remains that they, and the Music Hall, were loved and adored by the British public. They offered the masses a place to go, to be with like-minded people, to be a part of the Utopian-collective. The films, the halls that had often been converted to house projectors, and the stars themselves provided arguably the last genuine collective-spirit (apart from, say, one-off events such as the World Cup Final or a royal wedding) that knitted together all elements of British society. They could be, as Williams wrote, part of the fabric of society, one that was seen as 'under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land'.

With the rise in popularity of both radio and television in the Fifties, the Music Hall and Music Hall cinema declined in fortunes. Formby's last film, *George in Civvy Street* (1946) was a box office flop; Fields had retired from cinema; The Crazy Gang had retreated back onto the boards; Will Hay had died. The halls were too expensive to maintain, the artistes too costly, and whilst Britain was retrenching further into consensus with its strict class divides still in evidence, Music Hall returned to radio and segued into the new, populist media of television. Music Hall stars could either be listened to, or watched from the comfort of the parlour. They were now *variety*.

Radio comedy was incredibly popular during the 1940s and 50s. People wanted laughter and radio helped alleviate peoples' troubles. Programmes such as *Billy Cotton's Band Show* (1946-68), and *Variety Bandbox* (1941-1953) launched many careers, including British comic actors Frankie Howerd, Tony Hancock and Peter Sellers. *Bandbox* remained firmly entrenched on the nation's radio waves, but *Band Show* moved into television in 1956, becoming a staple part of BBC Television's Saturday night line up providing a resolutely light entertainment production in which song and dance, comedy and famous guest stars (or those on their way to being famous, such as Petula Clark, Tommy Cooper, Matt Munro, Cliff Richard and Adam Faith amongst them) was a genuinely entertaining, unpretentious programme which audiences loved in their millions.

The BBC offered its viewers an unrepentantly nostalgic look at the Victorian and Edwardian Music Hall with the massively successful *The Good Old Days* (1953-83). Filmed in a genuine Music Hall (Leeds City Variety Theatre), which

provided an appropriate venue of plush drapes, and boxes in front of an audience who willingly dressed up in fashions of yesteryear, the show usually opened half-way through a chorus number with the audience singing. The impresario (Leonard Sachs) introduced acts with such hyperbolic exclamations as, 'Now, with verissimilitudeness, violent, ventriloquial, virtuosity, Mr...' and a traditional programme would follow: comedians, drag artists, singers, tumblers, and the audience who formed the 'core' to the programme. Each show ended with a tumultuous rendition of 'The Old Bull and Bush' from both acts and audience. The focus on the audience ensured that there was a genuinely warm and affectionate relationship between cast and audience, both in the theatre and at home.

ITV's Music Hall show, *Val Parnell's Sunday Night at the London Palladium* (1955-67 and 1973-4) was broadcast 'live'. Entertainers such as Tommy Trinder and Bruce Forsyth introduced each act. The first show starred Gracie Fields. The roster of acts would include dancers, acrobats or jugglers, ventriloquists, new comedians, and then during the second half 'big' stars such as Judy Garland, Bob Hope, The Rolling Stones and The Beatles would perform. The format was revived during the 1980s and 2000s as *Live From Her Majesty's* and *Tonight at the London Palladium* but neither was as successful as the original production, indicating that like its progenitor, Music Hall television had run its course.

However, as a final riposte, in 2007, ITV foistered the massively popular *Britain's Got Talent* onto the British public. Each week saw members of the public performing their variety acts to an assembled panel of professionals. *Svengali*-like Simon Cowell, with manicured hair, tight black sweater and cynical quips, judges contestants alongside his panellist cohort. Acts 'worthy' of progressing to the final have the chance of performing in front of Royal patronage at that year's Royal Variety Performance.

The competition has been won by Paul Potts (opera singer, 2007); George Sampson (child street-dancer, 2008); Diversity (dance troupe, 2009); Spellbound (gymnastic troupe, 2010); Jai MacDowall (singer, 2011) and the owner/dog act, Ashleigh and Pudsey (2012). With viewing figures for the final approaching 15 million people in the UK alone, it would appear that Britain still has, at its heart, an intrinsic desire to watch people perform Music Hall acts in front of them.

The format is not just for Britain. Germany's version, *Das Supertalent* (2007-) shares both similar formats and winners' accoutrement: Ricardo Marinello (opera singer, 2007); Michael Hirte (harmonica player, 2008); Yvo Antoni (Acting, 2009); Freddy Sahin-Scholl (often-falsetto opera singer also known as Galileo, 2010); Leo Rojas (panpipe player, 2011); Jean-Michel Aweh (pianist and singer, 2012). If one looks at a clip of Hirte on *YouTube*, he plays harmonica against a backdrop of a German castle – a clichéd and stereotypical image; for Rojas, his South American influence (his family were from Ecuador, he lived in Spain and moved to Berlin with his Polish wife) and his interpretation of 'El Condor Pasa' (an original Peru-

vian folksong re-interpreted by Simon and Garfunkel) indicates a multi-cultural aspect to the show. Both of these approaches are in keeping with Music Hall traditions. The fact that these are in the German version does not indicate that they are *German* per se; neither do the British acts mean that they are specifically *British* either. It would be churlish to argue that each country is separated in this phenomena; but on investigation, the acts are reflecting – in the main – the country of production.

Conclusion

By returning to Williams' idea of 'structures of feelings' and culture, it becomes apparent that the British Music Hall has, at its core, something intrinsically *British* about its construction that is simultaneously definable and indefinable. The acts, the songs, the innuendo-laden dialogue, the outlook, and even the reciprocal relationship between the audience, performer and stage can be clearly delineated as part of a long British tradition that has taken elements of carnival and burlesque into its structure.

However, the 'feeling' is that the British Music Hall, with all its foibles and celebrations, is both part of Britain's long theatrical tradition and 'outside' it. Whilst it does not aim for the 'superior' heights of 'High Art' and legitimate theatre, it found its niche within the alehouses, tawdry taverns, and entrepreneurial-owned establishments up and down the country. It was this direct linking of audience to profit-making that is at the cornerstone of Music Hall's rise to prominence. The majority of the public, the working classes that fuelled Britain's rise to global importance during and beyond the Industrial Revolution, wanted to be entertained. They wanted to be with like-minded people, who celebrated *their* culture, however 'low art' or, indeed, 'trivial' it was deemed.

To end with Williams' work, if one takes his 'social' definition as the tool with which to dissect the concept of the importance of British Music Hall to British culture, it becomes readily apparent that the whole panoply of acts, stars, ideas, comics, songs, audience participation, *et al.*, is based upon ideas of experience. One thing *is* clear: whilst Britain has produced such brilliant wordsmiths as Wilde and Shaw, the fact that the Music Hall is still around today, albeit in a transformed state as The Royal Variety Performance, Cowell's enterprises, pantomime or the Summer Season's up and down the coast at places like Blackpool or Brighton is testament to its marked resilience in the nation's affections. For those reasons Music Hall is a *vital* part of the structure of feeling that forms Britain's populist heritage. As such, Music Hall should be celebrated.

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Notes

- ¹ Public Record Office, H045/173738/4 taken from a 1909 Home Office memo of the Lord Chamberlain regarding Music Hall sketches.
- ² For information about this view please see: Willson Disher (1938); Scott (1946); Mander & Mitchenson (1965)
- ³ Cromwell, Thomas (publisher and date not known) *History and Description of the Parish of Clerkenwell (1828)* (London) taken from Cheshire 1974: 13-25.
- ⁴ For a detailed examination of New Spring Gardens/Vauxhall Gardens' history please visit: (Author not known) www.vauxhallgardens.com
- ⁵ Transcribed from the shorthand manuscript by Rev. Mynors Bright, and edited by Henry B. Wheatley. Please see: <http://infomotions.com/etexts/gutenberg/dirs/4/1/8/4189/4189.htm>
- ⁶ For an insight into what acts appeared at Vauxhall Gardens please see: http://www.vauxhall-gardens.com/vauxhall_gardens_performers_page.html (Author not known).
- ⁷ In 1861 Charles Morton had constructed the Canterbury Music Hall in Lambeth, and the Oxford Music Hall in London's West End. (Bailey 1986: x).
- ⁸ Bailey points to two progenitors of criticism against the Music Hall in its infancy: Frederick Charrington, a former brewer turned zealot, and Mrs. Ormiston Chant a moral crusader who campaigned against prostitution. (Bailey 1986: xii).
- ⁹ As Wilton states at the Proprietor's Benefit Show (12th February 1862) quoted in Honri (1985: 1).
- ¹⁰ This is particularly true when, alongside the rise of the Music Hall, the saucy seaside postcard tradition of Donald McGill and others, lampooned in both verbal and visual dexterity the targets listed here. McGill shows mothers-in-law to be large chested, barrel-bottomed, hair curler-wearing, rolling pin waving battleaxes; sexual frustration came about through either the mother-in-law curtailing sex (the couple are afraid of her catching them 'at it'), or the older man chases the younger girl as the wife looks on because *they* don't have sex (often the ten screaming children around the wife are shown to emphasise this point); and, drunkenness happens to males – usually the henpecked husband, vicar, magistrate, middle-class buffoon.
- ¹¹ Marie Lloyd is arguably the progenitor of that other great female Music Hall star, Gracie Fields, or 'Our Gracie' as her adoring public affectionately knew her. Traits of Lloyd are passed through the Music Hall directly into British cinema via Fields herself and then in the caricatures played out in the *Carry On* films by Joan Sims and Barbara Windsor.
- ¹² The artistes sang such songs as *It's a Long Way to Tipperary* and *Pack Up Your Troubles* to the attendant males, egged on by their sweethearts to fight for King and Country.
- ¹³ I would suggest that the reader looks towards such programmes as *Coronation Street* as modern-day examples for comparison.
- ¹⁴ Policy Committee Minutes, 26th July 1940, INF 1/849.

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