

A Brief History of the Music Halls, Or: Why Do The Middle Classes Have to Ruin Everything? A Guest Post by Fern Riddell:

The British Music Halls occupied a special place in the history of mass entertainment. They influenced generations of comedians, gave birth to the genius of Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel, and the singing stars of Vesta Tilley and Gracie Fields. Born out of the pub song and supper rooms of the 1830s, the music halls were officially recognised by the 1843 Theatres Act, setting them aside from the 'theatre proper', ballet, and opera. This meant they could be licensed, controlled and regulated by the government. But in the early days the music halls were not really seen as a controversial space, they were primarily a male dominated space, holding 'harmonious gatherings' in places such as *Evans Music and Supper Rooms*, *The Coal Hole* and the *Cyder Cellars*. They were pretty much exactly as stated – a hall for music, attached to a pub. Public houses were everywhere, they occupied the poor, why not allow them to have a hall alongside?

But by 1852 they had evolved into something quite different, something special, something *unexpected*.

The halls of the 1850s were a new breed. Led by the self-styled 'Father of the Halls', Charles Morton, - a title also claimed by the 1844 manager of Evans, Paddy Green - the new music halls were purpose built buildings, seating between 700-1,500 people each night. The Canterbury Music Hall was the first of these, opening in 1852, and then again in 1856, after a significant rebuild to increase seating capacity. Morton built this hall at 143 Westminster Bridge Road, and it signalled the new style of entertainment, specifically for the working classes, in the heart of the city of London. It was a marvel to behold: opulent ceilings, chandeliers and a carpet that had reportedly cost 1000 guineas. The middle classes were shocked, why was Morton going to such expense just to provide entertainment to the masses? Elegant designs and exteriors belonged to those who could afford to have them at home, not just to be visited for pleasure.

But this is where the very core of the entire music hall industry ideal exists. It was a world of fantasy; it attempted to create perfection and sold it to the people who would never have enough money to obtain it. It was the modern day celebrity gossip magazine and reality TV star world rolled into one, and appearing twice nightly just down your road. Historians have argued that the music halls were the first commercial mass entertainment to appear in Britain, they appealed to everyone. In a world that was solely orientated along class and gender lines, the music halls were a place that drew in men and women, old and young, from all walks of life. Until the 1880s they were a primarily working class space, with audiences made up of tradesmen, clerks and the occasional 'toff' or 'swell' looking to rough it amongst the common people. Through topical songs they kept their audience informed of parliamentary bills, changes in the geographical landscape of London, political intrigues, as well as domestic relationships and trials. The songs were witty, clever, and occasionally stolen from the poetry of the greats like Byron or Keats. Above all, they educated their audience about their rights and situation. And this was viewed as highly dangerous.

By the later half of the nineteenth century, there were over 300 music halls licensed in London alone. Syndicated groups began to appear, opening music halls in towns and

resorts across the country, and later the world. Their influence over the tastes and ideas of their audience was unlike anything that had ever been seen before. National stars were created, Marie Lloyd, Mark Sheridan and Little Tich all represented the 'true working class' and packed houses to the roof night after night.

Marie Lloyd Singing 'A Coster Girl in Paris'

This combination of mass congregation and the popular masses was too much of a threat to the intellectual elites, who watched in horror as, across the water, the European working classes began to replace and rebel against their former masters. Keen to stop any social unrest from occurring in Britain, the elites and middle classes managed to take hold of the one weapon that could have radicalised and revolutionised the British working class – the music halls.

Through a steady process of regulation, and subversive tactics of a slow alteration to song topics, the music halls altered from an expression of the working classes, to a middle class stereotype of working class character. This happened slowly over a period of about twenty years, from the 1870s to the 1890s. Previous historians often lay the blame on a capitalist-driven social-climbing management, who bowed to the new measures to insure a higher paying audience. The halls themselves altered, getting rid of their promenades – even though this resulted in vandalism by the patrons, including a young Winston Churchill – and seating 5000 people in grand buildings more like cathedrals than the simple churches of entertainment from the 1850s. Electricity came in to replace the dangerous gas lighting and the 'Palaces of Variety' were born.

But while this social manipulation took hold, there was one area of the music halls that saw little alteration, and that was in its performers. They came from the true working class: singers, contortionists, illusionists, acrobats, comic duos, dancers, animal tamers, trick cyclists, and ballet girls. The music hall bills were a combination and mutation of every form of entertainment you could think of.

John Davidson's 1891 poem, *In a Music Hall*, gives some idea of the audience's attraction to the halls:

*"I did as my desk fellows did;
With a pipe and a tankard of beer,
In a music hall, rancid and hot,
I lost my soul night after night.
It is better to lose one's soul,
Than to never stake it at all."*

In the early days, a bill would consist of 9-10 acts, of differing appeals with a Chairman, who sat on stage, sometimes in almost a grand throne, and acted as general overseer and organiser of the night's entertainment. Mid-way through the changes, and certainly by the late 1880s, the role and office of Chairman had almost totally died out, the tables that had filled the auditorium had been removed, and a pit for the musicians had been created, but the bills remained the same.

And so did the pay and situation between artists, agents and managers. By 1907, it was the artists who were really suffering. The long hours, contracts that would ban you from working within a ten-mile radius of any hall for six months after an appearance, and little

pay had taken their toll. The acts went on strike. The 'Music Hall War' affected performers across the industry, from the highest paid stars to those scraping a living. The formation of unions such as the *Variety Artists Federation* (which went on to become *Equity*) show that the industry had begun to regulate itself, inside as well as for outside appearances. The success of the campaign was another demonstration of how far the music halls had come from their working class origins. And this was no more apparent than at the first Royal Variety Show (yeah, it's from the music halls!) in 1912, then called the Royal Command Performance.

The attendance of Royalty at the show might have signified just how close to the people the King and Queen had become, how much they felt a kinship with their subjects and how greatly they enjoyed it when Vesta Tilley appeared on the stage. They didn't. It may have been a good piece of public relations, but when Vesta Tilly appeared on stage, in her male attire and began to sing, Queen Alexandria was so shocked that she turned her face away and ordered the entire court to do the same. If anything, this single moment signifies just how great the social divide still was between the monarchy and the attitudes and beliefs of the common people. But here they all were, brought together under the banner of the music halls.

So what happened to the music halls? Where did this brilliantly inclusive and entertaining form of theatre seem to die out? Traditionalist historians say it was with the advent of the First World War, and the combined threat of cinema and radio. Revisionist historians disagree, the halls evolved to incorporate both these new forms of media, creating 'cine-variety shows' and live performances on the BBC. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s new music halls were still being built and acts achieving international success. It is clear though, that the one threat it could not survive was television. Even '*Saturday Night At The London Palladium*' became the last vestige of a dying art form. One of the most poignant films to capture this sense of loss was by one of the most famous stars of the music halls. Charlie Chaplin's *Limelight*, (1952), has an overwhelming ache for times gone by, and performances past.

So there you are, a brief history of the music halls. And this is just the short version. There isn't enough time to cover everything. But the next time you hear a stand up comedian, or watch a new avant-garde comic duo, remember that without the music halls, they would never have existed. The legacy of the halls echoes through time, and deserves far more attention than we currently seem to give.