

Introduction

THE POPULAR NOT THE PUBLIC

There is no simon-pure thing

—*Countee Cullen*

This book studies the many literary and journalistic representations of Britain's first indigenous and fully capitalized mass culture form, the music hall.¹ The London music hall reached its commercial zenith roughly between 1880 and 1919. A miscellaneous revue of art and amusements, a night of music hall could feature song, dance, comic routine, acrobats, and animal acts. As the music hall grew from roots in local, raucous pub sing-alongs into a large-scale capitalized venture, it welcomed more styles of entertainment, as well as a large paying segment of the nation itself.² The London music hall provides the central focus of my book, since the many descriptions of these halls by the London intelligentsia serve as the core texts for

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this study.³ My work addresses the discourse produced by the metropolitan intelligentsia at the moment when the music hall reached its commercial peak.

I argue that this discourse provides a pioneering example of a now familiar story about the inevitable loss of cultural possibilities. Late-Victorian literary intellectuals like Max Beerbohm and Elizabeth Robins Pennell framed a narrative of cultural rise and decline using their experience of the music hall. As they understood it, culture forms emerge with an appealing vigor, vitality, and charisma. Popular entertainment stands in some honest, responsive, and authentic relation to its patrons. Inevitably, the bloom leaves the rose; entertainment becomes commercialized, co-opted, appropriated, and vitiated. Popular, working-class, or otherwise marginal expressive forms gain momentum, marshal force, and become transformed utterly in the process. Sharp edges are sanded down; tart humor and song are run through the propriety mill. Energy gets channeled and the improper made acceptable by salaried tastemakers. The commercial success of the form spells its predetermined failure as genuine vernacular expression.

So the argument goes, in the accounts of the music hall provided by the London intelligentsia. These critics had a point. The most successful arts remain those which circulate with the greatest ease, and which require the least elaboration or translation for the public. The details that give savor and piquancy to an art form can become lost in the effort to draw larger crowds. Expressive modes that bond small, intimate audiences lose their puissance; they get harnessed to the profit drive, the infamous bottom line. Crowds march in, and local knowledge is lost in the accompanying shuffle. Like all cultural forms in the marketplace, the music hall was enlisted by larger social forces, and its initial significance was refined and redefined.

Nevertheless, I demonstrate that the inevitable mediation and abstraction that accompany the commercial success of formerly marginal cultural forms still permit opportunity for constructive social change. I provide close analysis of several kinds of music-hall accounts, including readings of public media controversies involving London music hall. I look to contemporary cultural studies, particularly the creative commentary of the Birmingham School, for a new way to tell the story of the music hall. The work of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and many others counsels us to face the fact that art and culture are produced under impure conditions, and to profligate effect.⁴ Cultural messages get scrambled in the transmission;

they face resistance, appropriation, and acclaim. Performance forms meet and miss their intended targets, lose and find new constituencies, over and over. Stuart Hall reminds us that popular culture in particular exists as process, not essence, in a series of negotiations between different, class-specific perspectives. The popular is a manifest contingency or construct, existing in discursive and therefore shifting relation to any social group.⁵ Similarly, Paul Gilroy details the rhetorical pitfalls that intellectuals with honorable motives can fall prey to in the search for reassuring traces of identity and authenticity in music and its accompanying rituals. Treating the complex forms of musical production as natural, spontaneous eruptions, as an opposite to craft, amounts to intellectual bad faith.⁶ The search for the authentic within a performing art inevitably produces essentialist claims that overlook modes of production. Ironically, the very move that seems to validate “the popular” can place it beyond the reach of all but the most expert critics.⁷

Just such a move animates the powerful, elegiac narrative that emerged in the late-Victorian age through the writing of such key figures as Max Beerbohm, Elizabeth Robins Pennell, and Arthur Symons on the music hall. These writers expressed and often maintained their fondness for the variety theater in its “purest,” most genuine—that is, most authentically proletarian—form. Through their accounts, these cultural professionals endeavored to conventionalize a distinction that was largely semantic between “mass culture,” tainted by its association with commerce, and untainted vernacular culture. Their testimonials on music hall endeavored to parse out authentic expression from more contaminated forms. The result was a selective reading of class identity that repetition consolidated and reified. Observers located and often celebrated the “vulgarity” of the halls, further suggesting that vulgar expression was the natural outcome of the bracingly bad taste of “the people.”

The testimony of Beerbohm, Pennell, and others proved highly influential among readers of their class. Indeed, precisely because their representations of music hall were so persuasive, it still requires some doing to demystify their colorful accounts. These writers expended considerable labor to solidify a link between the London music hall and the English working class; they often generalized about the character of that class based on the form and content of music-hall performance and the enthusiastic response these entertainers drew from large crowds. Literary intellectuals endeavored to

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define what could count as English by virtue of their inside knowledge of the people's entertainment. In the process of telling the story of the music hall's rise and fall, they authorized professional critics like themselves to distinguish the authentically English from its commercial degradation.

In so doing, Symons and company participated in a broad-based and often contentious dialogue about the nature and significance of cultural expertise. The peak years of music hall coincided with a time when distinctions between amateurs and experts began to make a considerable difference.⁸ The ambition to be recognized as an authority gained a new impetus in the late nineteenth century, with the growth and consolidation of the formal professions: not only law and medicine, but social work and civil service. Contemporaneous music-hall criticism allowed literary intellectuals to write themselves into the new class of managers analyzed in essential accounts by social historians Harold Perkin and Burton Bledstein.⁹

There was some evidence for the critic's complaint that the commercial music hall had become cleansed and capitalized. The 1880s saw the spread of the music hall from shady neighborhood spots into affluent London suburbs, an increase in entertainments that targeted family audiences, and the rise of managers who sought to make the form respectable.¹⁰ Yet the educated middle-class observers who first leveled this complaint against the music hall had an interest in promoting just this kind of story. I contend that the narrative of vernacular decline facilitated—even licensed—a new kind of professional critic. These critics credentialed themselves by dint of their capacity to read the deep meanings of the entertainment in terms of significant issues such as national history, urban administration, and national hygiene. The culture critic who produced this weighty commentary assumed a place in a division of labor that increasingly privileged the trained and credentialed specialist.

Professionalism constituted a hallmark of British modernity. "Modernity," of course, is now a blanket term, if not a cottage industry, in scholarship; it gathers together many discrete elements of social change. In *Farewell to an Idea*, T. J. Clark's recent endeavor to define modernity for an imagined posterity, the term encompasses the secularization process, a collective embrace of contingency and risk in social life, the new information society, and, important for this study, what Clark describes as "the de-skilling of everyday life (deference to experts and technicians in more and more of the microstructure of the self); available, invasive, haunting expertise."¹¹

My study focuses on Clark's last descriptive cluster. For my purposes, "modernity" designates a crucial transformation in the development and middle-class reception of London music hall in the late-Victorian era, and nothing less than a structural change in discourse on the halls. I employ the concept of modernity, a decisive break from an earlier social order organized according to tradition or collective wisdom, to explain the differences between social explorer Henry Mayhew's account of the penny gaff and the pronouncements of late-Victorian intellectuals on the music hall. The gap that separates these accounts is remarkable; it constitutes a major shift in consciousness and discursive protocol. Increasingly, middle-class observation of the halls no longer simply condemned the form as too vulgar, but worked more subtly to appropriate it to another construction, the popular.

I demonstrate that the late-Victorian discourse on the popular served several purposes. First, such rhetoric fostered a notion of culture that bolstered another powerful fabrication, the nation, which in turn created a climate of opinion congenial to the growth of the centralized state. Second, the popular was invoked to legitimate both music hall and the savvy views of the critical professional. The discourse of the late-Victorian music hall can be labeled "modern," since it reflects the transition to a world of administered opinion, in which relations between the popular and individual subjects are increasingly mediated.

The popular remains a ruling concept of modernity, crucial enough for the purposes of social hegemony that it must be managed, organized, and often neutralized. It was important, for example, for late-Victorian observers of music hall to construct a version of the popular that hailed the people as citizens of the nation, and not as, say, disruptive idlers, social delinquents, or working class. Detailing the construction of the late-Victorian "popular" music hall does not require that we rehearse the old debate over whose culture is legitimate and whose illegitimate, which culture form is more or less subversive. In the case of the late-Victorian halls, it is more pertinent, relevant, and above all more interesting to study the various effects of this "popular" discourse.

The zenith of commercial music hall coincides with the rise of the modern professional, as well as the production of a crisis narrative that cultural specialists applied to this entertainment, and by extension to English popular culture. I claim that these seemingly discrete phenomena existed within a complex set of relations. The power and responsibility of intellectuals and

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the social effects of their discourse have always been on the agenda of cultural studies research. However, with the exception of Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz's essay "State and Society," relatively little cultural studies work has linked cultural production and discourse with the protocols of the key ruling group of capitalist culture since the 1880s: with the professional middle class, the bureaucrat, and the managerial intellectual. Even Hall and Schwarz's essay grants less time to the practices of professional intellectuals than to the deployment of cultural value in redefining the proper aims of state power, or the role of state apparatus in constituting hegemony and maintaining social control. The result has been a persistent gap in cultural studies scholars' addressing the status quo they desire to change: capitalist culture and its attendant structures, its modes of consumption, its forms of identity making, its construction of social reality. The gap has diminished the range and descriptive power of the "culture" that cultural studies desires to analyze and transform. My focus on the discursive production of the popular in late-Victorian professional rhetoric, on exchanges between would-be opinion makers and their public, and on the rise of the managerial subject and consciousness intends to redress this imbalance in cultural studies work so far.

My emphasis on the necessary relationship between the commercialization of "popular" forms and the success of professional critics distinguishes *Music Hall and Modernity* from the ample scholarship that inquires into the origins and practice of music hall, its demographics, and discernible shifts in its performance styles.¹² I provide an anatomy of Victorian professional culture by analyzing a new rhetoric of the popular that emerges with the commercial prominence of English music-hall entertainment at the end of the century.¹³ Contemporary middle-class accounts of music hall often made class lines separating mass audiences more visible. Perspectives on the aesthetic quality of music-hall performance often reinforced the trained prejudices about art and the people held by social elites. Accordingly, the rhetoric of the popular often reinforced the cultural protocols of an upper-middle class. Thus the endeavor to signify the popular helped consolidate the group identity of a professional cadre, authorized by their unique and often exclusive knowledge of art and culture.

Various experts, then, spoke for music hall in the late-Victorian media, thereby raising and settling broader issues of social and cultural hegemony. If this process could be described simply as the middle-class appropriation of subaltern forms, it would not warrant in-depth analysis. However, as I

argue, the assimilation of the music hall into professional discourse set some key terms of expert discourse, such as authority and expertise, into play. Representations of the popular often bore internal contradictions; the attempt to forge consensus could foreground the fabricated character of claims to “real” authority. While I am aware of the class biases of professional culture, I recognize the appeal of professional discourse, then and now, to anyone wishing to escape from the excesses of possessive individualism or the determination of all social outcomes by market forces. It is my wish to defend some aspects of expert culture without providing a mere apology for professional hegemony.

From Mayhew to Modernity

For middle-class cognoscenti, the success of music hall amounted to a paradox. The popularity of the entertainment seemed to offer the reassuring suggestion that there remained something healthy and robust about the English national character, a notion that apparently required more evidentiary basis at the end of the nineteenth century. The continued prominence of the halls constituted a heritage that these savants did not wish to entrust to the people themselves. Rather, the popular was to be protected through the recognition and care of a new, savvy connoisseur. There were trade-offs in this cultural exchange. The popular found a frame and was thereby saved from being relegated to the margins of the culture; however, the rhetoric assumed in defenses of the popular was often exclusive.

There were substantial differences between the music hall of 1850 and the fin-de-siècle hall. Managers of late-Victorian suburban halls worked to present entertainment palatable to audiences accustomed to West End standards of respectability; this often entailed extricating bawdry from song and jokes rooted in popular traditions. Music-hall managers also endeavored to untangle the halls from their links with the criminal element, which meant keeping a watchful eye on the disreputable crowds attracted to the promenade of the hall. Crucially, the character of middle-class commentary on the music hall also changed over the span of the century. Mid-Victorian urban investigator Henry Mayhew represents the halls as an underworld where London youth find instruction in unlawful, illicit behavior; he is accordingly alarmed by his “discovery.” In contrast, late-Victorian music-hall observers increasingly sought to pass as insiders within the popular culture

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they interpreted for their middle-class readership. Paradoxically, participating in the popular allowed these writers to stand outside the very public they spoke for.

In retrospect, the most significant and seemingly the most influential of the many chronicles of the music hall that proliferated in little magazines, newspapers, and journals of the 1890s was produced by the noted art critic Elizabeth Robins Pennell. In "The Pedigree of the Music-Hall," she formalized a mode of perception and relation to the popular broadly characteristic of the criticism I describe. "For centuries," Pennell writes, "Englishmen have been shaping their variety entertainment into its present form, and now, like a child with the toy it has been crying for, they are doing their best to destroy it. Nowadays proprietors and managers, working men patrons and artistes protest that the variety show is a great moral force, an educational factor and a safeguard against intemperance."¹⁴ None of these apologetic points, Pennell concludes, seem particularly relevant. The music hall stands as a quintessentially English entertainment with a history, and the popular is treated as if it were a distinct character or personality, existing in relative autonomy with regard to other social practices.

Yet who exactly recognizes these salient facts about the popular? Pennell suggests that the authentic music hall is intuited not by the public at large, but rather by an insightful, far-seeing, and select few. "Evidently," she concludes, "[the music hall's] days are numbered. When too late, when it is no longer to be studied at first hand, the scholar will learn its value." This is no mere gesture toward a wiser posterity, enlightened enough to appreciate the aesthetic and social value of an entertainment form that had many contemporary detractors. Her invocation of an uncomprehending public constitutes rhetoric with an interpellative purpose, aimed at an educated readership. Pennell's lament for a benighted public that is incapable of assuming a proper, critical vantage point toward the music hall in effect separates this public from an authentic connection to the popular. The essay interprets the entertainment as reflecting the larger verities of national character while simultaneously insisting that music hall's many patrons failed to perceive this continuity between entertainment and Englishness. To grasp this pedigree requires the vantage point of a sympathetic historian. Pennell's rhetoric has the effect of establishing those in the know as the most trusted caretakers of cultural forms. "The Pedigree of the Music-Hall" draws a clear line between the popular essence and the public, then, to formulate lines of professional power and identity. Interpretive rights over music hall are thus expropriated

from the public, and instead the status and authority of a critical elite are confirmed.

The urge to speak as cultural arbiter structures many of the chronicles of music hall that circulated in middle-class journals in the closing decade of the nineteenth century and beyond. It is necessary to sustain the analogy between cultural professionals and other experts, since it foregrounds the class matrix from which both groups derive. One can usefully bring Magali Sarfatti Larson's criticism of professionalism, as "an attempt to translate one order of scarce resources—scarce knowledge and skills—into another—social and economic reward," to bear on Pennell's music hall commentary.¹⁵ Larson's skepticism toward professionalism highlights the gap between the service ideal of cultural professionals and the self-interested or self-serving consequences of their rhetorical work. Most music-hall accounts were covert skirmishes in a war to win legitimacy for the vision of proper culture maintained by aspiring culture critics.¹⁶ Pennell's effort to speak for the music hall offers a template for the various interventions of Arthur Symons, Max Beerbohm, and T. S. Eliot. Her rhetoric serves to delineate and clarify the popular as well as illuminate her superior place in a critical hierarchy.

The possessive stance Pennell adopts toward the popular is by no means unique to her or to late-Victorian cultural elites. Henry Mayhew's mid-century account of subaltern Victorian culture provides a telling point of comparison. His chronicle of the Penny Gaff, included in the extensive survey *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851–52), arguably marks the beginning of the managerial strategy I am describing. The great social investigator records his unsettling visit to this ancestor of the music hall, the Smithfield Penny Gaff (the name reflects the price of admission to illegitimate theater), in the following terms:

It is impossible to contemplate the ignorance and immorality of so numerous a class as that of the costermongers, without wishing to discover the cause of their degradation. Let any one curious on this point visit one of these penny shows, and he will wonder that *any* trace of virtue and honesty should remain among the people. Here the stage, instead of being the means for illustrating a moral precept, is turned into a platform to teach the cruelest debauchery. The audience is usually composed of children so young, that these dens become the school-rooms where the guiding morals of a life are picked up, and so precocious are the little things, that the girl of nine will, from constant attendance at

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such places, have learnt to understand the filthiest sayings, and laugh at them as loudly as the grown-up lads around her.¹⁷

It is not the ability of music hall to amuse or arouse but its public instruction in sexual misconduct that both startles and transfixes Mayhew. He creates the impression that the gaff instructs its audience before the spectacle begins. Apparently, merely standing in line can get steamy in this Smithfield assembly.

The visitors, with a few exceptions, were all boys and girls, whose ages seemed to vary from eight to twenty years. Some of the girls—though their figures showed them to be mere children—were dressed in showy cotton-velvet polkas, and wore dowdy feathers in their crushed bonnets. They stood laughing and joking with the lads, in an unconcerned, impudent manner that was almost appalling. Some of them, when tired of waiting, chose their partners, and commenced dancing grotesquely, to the admiration of the lookers-on, who expressed their approbation in obscene terms, that, far from disgusting the poor little women, were received as compliments, and acknowledged with smiles and coarse repartees.

Obviously the assembly exceeds bourgeois standards of decorum, even if the entertainment that unfolds before the crowd seems relatively tame. However, Mayhew's alarm suggests that something more than sexual frankness is at stake here; prudishness does not entirely explain his anxious response. Rather, the gaff seems alarming precisely because, in Mayhew's view, it is not mere unreason or anarchy: it represents a discernible structure, a pedagogic enterprise rivaling that of the urban investigator. It is not only that the gaff audience learns about sex, but that, more broadly, they leave the gaff believing they are generally in the know.

Mayhew himself models one form of discursive power, based on authoritative observation. Yet his tale of the gaff presents a competing knowledge base, produced from within the subculture he scrutinizes. On one hand, there is the sociologist/observer's knowledge of culture; on the other, the gaff stands as its own instructional site, circulating local knowledge with awesome efficiency and frightening (to outsiders) self-sufficiency. The exchange between Mayhew and his informants is limned with plural anxieties, just beneath the edgy surface of the text. The outsider produces his knowledge of

lumpen youth in competition with the news-gathering agency of the penny gaff. One passes on the knowledge and tradition of the poor, outside state auspices; the other produces knowledge sanctioned by a central authority, about but not for the subjects he chronicles.

Now, it has been argued that Mayhew, far from being the anxious subculture interloper, secretly delights in the subterranean culture he digs up in the street.¹⁸ I have no problem with this claim, provided we allow that Mayhew might be anxious about what he sees, much as he savors it. This particular encounter with coster culture, after all, is enough to spur Mayhew, a detached, nonstatist observer, to a shrill call for state suppression of the gaffs, a charge anticipated by far less temperate urban observers such as James Grant.¹⁹ When it comes to authority, the social explorer seems in this case to lag behind the gaff's young patrons. After all, Mayhew's writing is still performed under the aegis of commercial journalism, before the rise and consolidation of a disciplinary sociology capable of elevating his account and making it the basis of state action. In stark contrast with a fledgling popular journalism that always gets the message out too late, the penny gaff appears to have deep, tentacular roots within the metropolitan center; it provides its audience with real news.

The young hipster poaches on the resources of the mother tongue in the presence of the well-meaning, and alarmed, social recorder. Mayhew's account insinuates that the young are taught by the gaff to communicate with each other confidently, brashly, and in an argot that catches the ears of curious outsiders but that also keeps them at arm's length. An exchange Mayhew overhears in the ticket line confirms his suspicion that prematurely wizened, flash youth have mastered a stretch of urban space. "To discover the kind of entertainment, a lad near me and my companion was asked, 'if there was any flash dancing.' With a knowing wink the boy answered, 'Lots! Show their legs and all, prime!'" (38). The boy shows neither fear nor alarm when faced by outsiders; in fact, the boy's speech proves more disconcerting than his demeanor. "Quips, backtalk, and sneers are weapons," Wayne Koestenbaum reminds us, "that conquer severely limited terrains."²⁰ This remark captures the cadence of this exchange between outsider and cool young insider; it also prepares us for the casual, stylized insubordination to follow. The young man requests a "yennep" for "tib of occabot" and brandishes a cool remove that one easily imagines Mayhew finding more disheartening in terms of practicing his vocation than the boy's excitement to enter the peep show. It is not merely that the patrons are innocent of

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modesty—they suggest the presence of a set of standards entirely foreign to Mayhew’s Liberal code of conduct. The gaff presents the social investigator with a subordinate but clearly intelligible culture active on the margins of the dominant order.

The shrillness of Mayhew’s call for order may be proportional to his alarm at the prospect of fully restoring calm to the wilds of London. The social explorer lags behind knowing boys and girls, confident in their urbanity, achieved outside state auspices. Mayhew’s exploration of the gaff clearly anticipates Peter Bailey’s suggestion that music hall was a broadcast medium circulating subtle ways of knowing.²¹ Music-hall regulars, as early as the penny gaff and as late as the middle-class camp devotees, consistently prided themselves on knowing more about the city than did novices. Music-hall habitués, then, might well feel that they alone had the real scoop on modernity; that is, they had an authentic experience of vernacular culture unsullied by bourgeois convention. Their accounts, circulated orally and in print, helped fabricate the notion of music-hall authenticity. It appears that the London halls provided the kinds of experience or awareness that fostered such confidence. In contrast, Mayhew’s media outlets, the newspaper and social survey, seem less capable of moving and persuading a core middle-class readership.

It seems that variety insiders also gained a lesson in sex and the city. As Mayhew’s account insinuates, sexuality was a major preoccupation of the form, as with most forms of modern culture. It is difficult to generalize about music hall, since it tended to be as various an entertainment as the heterogeneous ethnic, gendered, and classed groups hailed by the form. A single night of performance might include highly sentimental, sometimes abrasive song; punning humor; broad-humored sketches; and novelty acts. Music-hall dance in suburban halls of the late-Victorian era itself included wildly disparate practices: the skirt dance, the notorious high-stepping of Lottie Collins (the celebrated “ta-ra-ra-boom-de-yay”), and the spectacular, opulent, high art productions staged by choristers at the upscale Alhambra and Empire music halls. Until Diaghilev’s ballet company toured England—another music-hall event—upscale suburban houses remained in fact the primary providers for continental dance. Music-hall entertainment also included the staging of tableaux vivants, another conceptual hybrid. These tableaux recreated high art moments (often imitating celebrated statuary) but added a perceptible salaciousness that reminded viewers of the standard, vernacular peep show.

Yet music-hall entertainment was more than a direct address to the libido. Educated, cultured observers such as the poet Arthur Symonds were able to bring the language of formal aesthetics to bear on the music hall, in part because of the increasingly rich lyrical content of music-hall song. Keith Wilson provides a fascinating analysis of the lyrical content of popular music-hall tunes from the 1880s and 1890s, arguing that a surprising number of songs revolve around the sheer bewildering and exhilarating fact of London itself.²² In Wilson's account, these lyrics constitute an elaborate song cycle, a self-aware commentary on the apparently endless significance of the five or six miles bordering on Charing Cross Road. In the Haymarket area, off Shaftesbury Avenue and Tottenham Court Road, rich and poor lived, if not worked, in proximity. Some music-hall songs broadcast and codified the ways that working-class or coster audiences negotiated diverse city spaces; other songs downplayed hard-earned local knowledge of the town and instead extolled London for impressive but abstract qualities of the city, its size and scale. Wilson concludes that music-hall song represented the city as the ultimate space of liberty for all, though details as to what constituted liberty were a bit sketchy: apparently, it was enough merely to live in what seemed to be the capital city of the world, no matter who you were or what your station.²³

Wilson's essay also underscores the contradictory nature of urban know-ingness. Precisely because it underscores the people's acumen, Mayhew's account of the penny gaff is more complicated and resonant than the moral panic that often accompanied the emergence of vernacular culture throughout the nineteenth century. As styled by these youngsters, the popular bears a family resemblance to the sophisticated, savvy commentary Elizabeth Pennell produced to capture the essence of the popular. Both discourses suggest a mode of participation with an elite or exclusive aspect. In both instances, the popular takes shape as insiders draw lines that separate them from outsiders.

The Victorians delighted in drawing and redrawing the lines that set off cultural insiders from outsiders; half the fun, and all the stakes, rested on figuring out which side of that all-important line you found yourself on, or might persuade others that you resided on.²⁴ The Victorian popular appears both to have been experienced and articulated as possession. Still, likely the most significant difference between the two modes of participation resides in the greater access of trained, credentialed intellectuals like Pennell to media that permit one to broadcast, rationalize, and thereby universalize

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their impressions. Both Pennell and Mayhew's insouciant gaff patrons speak and act on the notion that they have some scoop that others have missed. The acquisitive ethos that marks winning behavior in the marketplace serves as a natural analogue to this possessive stance toward the popular. Despite the shared nature of music-hall experience, market culture shaped the forms assumed by the Victorian popular: this means that the Victorians knew the popular as something they possessed over and against potential competitors.

Still, Pennell is not Mayhew, in part because her more family-oriented, middlebrow music hall is not Mayhew's. Another crucial difference separates the two spectators. The music-hall experience that Pennell inherits has a substantial discursive component, manifest in an increasingly sophisticated journalistic criticism of the halls. She crystallizes the rhetorical stratagems of the cultural specialist, but largely because she is surrounded by middle-class observers who base their authority as reporters on their familiarity with popular culture. Ironically, these middle-class chroniclers seem to model themselves less on Mayhew, who admits to his profound alienation from the penny gaff, than on the cunning, working-class gaff fans he describes.

The largely interactive account of music-hall performance and culture composed by actor and theater critic Percy Fitzgerald also bears the premium late Victorians placed on being, or posing, as if in the know. While Fitzgerald's encomium cum ethnography of the London halls, *Music-Hall Land* (1890), offers some pointed criticisms of the lower-middle-class audience for music hall, and at one point expresses distaste for what he describes as the "monotony" of music-hall culture, his criticism of the entertainment remains gentle. Throughout his account, Fitzgerald seems willing to deny his distance from the form and its public, and thus sacrifice his critical authority, in order to promote the image of his own prodigious familiarity with the popular.²⁵

Music-Hall Land bears the ambitious subtitle "An Account of the Natives, Male and Female, Pastimes, Songs, Antics and General Oddities of That Strange Country" (see figure 1), and the complex range of the title serves to document a conflicted moment in expert protocols regarding the popular. His handbook on the halls describes the entertainment, promoting it to an imagined community of middle-class male readers also capable of both participating in the popular and seeing around it. One can imagine that for some readers *Music-Hall Land* served to substitute discourse for the music-hall experience.

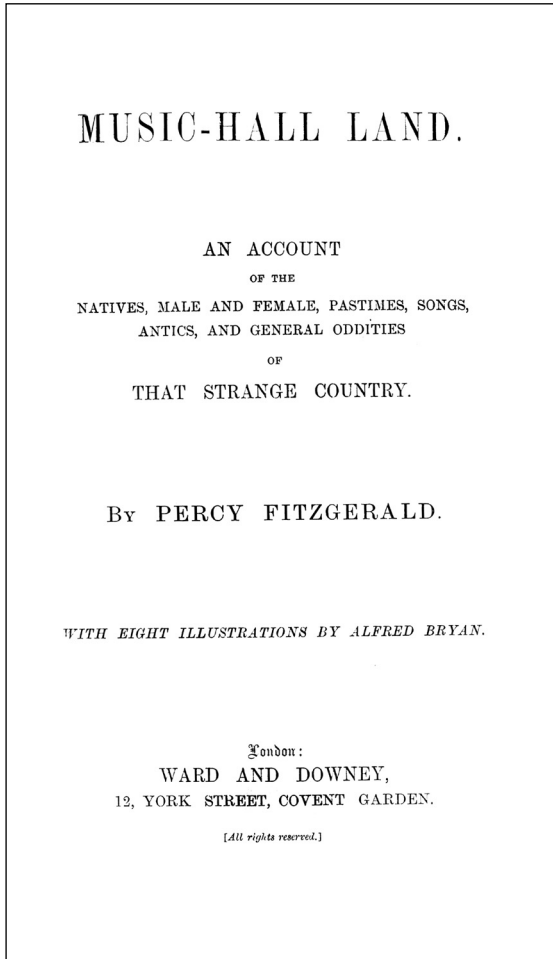


Figure 1. Making music-hall experts. Title page of Percy Fitzgerald, *Music-Hall Land* (London: Ward and Downey, 1890).

The text bears witness to how the democratizing of culture transformed relations between middle-class critics and their public. Perhaps Fitzgerald's general purpose in providing this guidebook to the halls was to qualify the attraction unsophisticated audiences felt for music-hall performers, and thereby elevate the "rude, rough character of the audience."²⁶ There are passages in *Music-Hall Land* that address social-climbing, lower-middle-class patrons, who foolishly believe they might rise above their station merely by blending

into large, mixed-class crowds. Would-be swells are singled out for special reproof in this regard. “To have a box, at, say, the Pavilion or Empire, and to enter in due state, arrayed in dress-suit, a pink handkerchief, protruding from the waist-coat is indeed high ton. Some of these beings are strangers to town; others hang loose upon society; others, again are persons in houses of business and offices, hurrying on the downward course, but the sight is always significant, even tragic. It is the Idle Apprentice over again” (8). Fitzgerald’s ambiguous reaction to music hall’s lower-middle-class audience extends to the illustrations of celebrity music-hall performers that augment his prose account. The suggestion of the larger-than-life appeal of these performers is reinforced by the many images of performers in the text that accent their outsized body shapes. The volume, height, depth, and excess of music-hall performance find a visual analogue in the caricatures with immense faces and prominent features that stare out from the pages of Fitzgerald’s book. These comics and singers with large eyes set in massive heads appear to exist in some heightened space far from quotidian life and its more normal shapes and perspectives. At the same time, these caricatures exact a subtle revenge against the performers, since it is difficult to imagine that these enormous presences move comfortably outside of the footlights. It is even a task to imagine most of these figures in motion, with the exception of the Sisters Wiggles, a dancing team caught in midstep who have pride of place on the book’s title page (see figure 2). The pictured dancers occupy their ground with confidence and poise; they move on stage, but are rendered as if permanently situated—or trapped—on the other side of the footlights. The many performers whose pictures adorn Fitzgerald’s text seem doomed to remain on the periphery of an imaginary London, as local color or an exotic species.

However, the text lingers on performance styles, snatches of lyrics from music-hall songs, and, importantly, various characterizations of music-hall audiences and their highly emotional participation in the stage performance. Typically, Fitzgerald describes Jenny’s Hill’s performance of *Little Gyp*, as “a regular drama, . . . followed with breathless attention from beginning to end” (87). The many images of audience and performer interaction amount to idealized representations of social cohesion. Fitzgerald provides these ideal communities as an attractive frame for his “rough” audience, but these images also provide evidence of his desire to be read as both critic and participant in the crowd. It appears that once the conceit of an autonomous “music hall land,” the nation within the nation, gets formulated, no one,

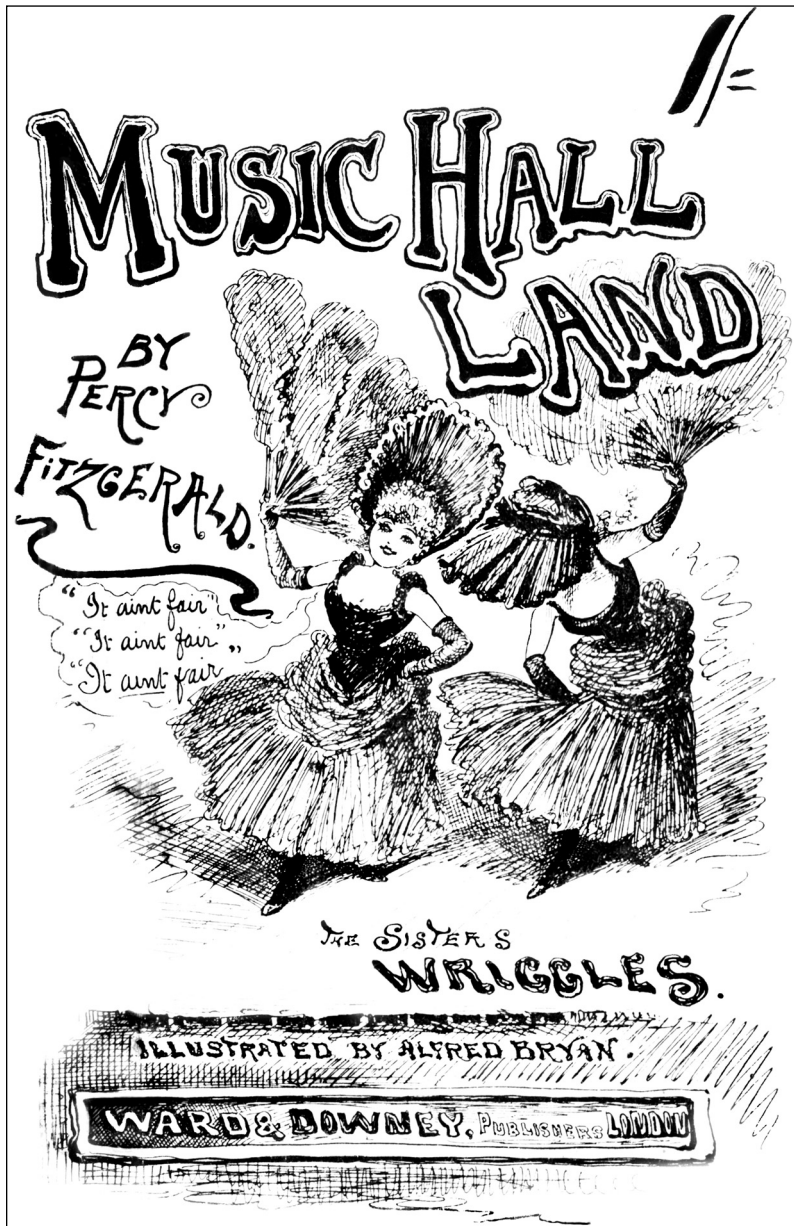


Figure 2. "The Sisters Wiggles." Illustration by Alfred Bryan. Cover of Percy Fitzgerald, *Music-Hall Land* (London: Ward and Downey, 1890).

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not even the author, desires to be outside the charmed circle of knowingness the text conjures. Fitzgerald's account provides a critical perspective while avoiding dogmatic aesthetic judgments.

Fitzgerald never quite arrives at the conclusion that the identity of the people, or the nation, requires the mediating force of a skilled performer for its healthy articulation: this argument would have to wait until T. S. Eliot's 1923 eulogy for singer Marie Lloyd, in which the poet suggests the popular is doomed to decay with Lloyd's death, and the loss of her unique skills in expressing the national popular.²⁷ As an account by a middle-class observer of the music hall, Fitzgerald's book reflects myths about and prejudices toward its lower-class audience, and likely idealizes the coherence that performers stamped on various audiences. However, the guidebook also draws self-conscious attention to itself as a construction: a mediation between the music-hall public and middle-class readership. Fitzgerald takes great pains to situate himself, finally, on the inside of that culture, rather than accept the role of mere onlooker like Mayhew. The music-hall guide blurs the boundary separating participation from observation, alienation from communion with the crowd. Maintaining such boundaries would augment the writer's distance from the audience, and Fitzgerald the music-hall interpreter seems unwilling to turn down the role of knowing participant, since it would weaken his credibility as a professional observer.

Music hall became a social site that allowed for the articulation of various kinds of knowing attitudes and stances, and a means of negotiating what it meant to belong to knowing elites. The topic of music hall, this public discourse on the popular, gave some coherence to group identity. Yet the effort to represent the popular to the public resulted in semantic complications. Walter Frith's attempt to explain the meaning of music hall in *Cornhill* magazine offers a striking instance of such category blurring. In "The Music-Hall" (1887), Frith turns his grim verdict regarding the "hopeless vulgarity" of music-hall entertainment into an argument for the higher wisdom of the public. He is puzzled initially by the success of the halls: why would lower-middle-class and working-class people patronize representations that in Frith's estimate mock the values they live by? The love of the people for their own entertainment serves as proof of the national superiority of English character and occasions some frank xenophobia.

The Turk, the Persian, and the Hindoo, all these races without a history, or a literature really worthy of the name, would in all probability stab,

poison, or bowstring the best of our character artistes, our funny comics. . . . Unhappy, then, the nation that has no appreciation of hopeless vulgarity! Woe to the country that has no love for senseless laughter! The day when England echoes no longer with an utterly foolish and inexplicably popular comic chant will be the day when the knell of her decadence will most surely have struck.²⁸

We may wonder how the popular, here characterized as “hopeless” and “senseless,” can nonetheless signify the elevated status of the English over the rude folk of lesser nations.

Surprisingly, the wisdom of the public rests on what Frith regards to be the public judgment that the popular is best viewed with full detachment.

[at the music hall] there is no reflection there of love, of honour, or reverence, or obedience, nor, to speak the brutal truth, of any very cheerful or honest merriment. But to the really thoughtful these very deficiencies are a happy and a worthy sign. . . . For let it be remembered that these audiences, mainly composed of honest tradesmen, of men and women whose lives are full of order, duty, labour, self-denial, are not laughing with the artistes, but at them.²⁹

The people maintain, in Frith’s startling reversal, a final distance from the performance they witness, and remain spectators rather than participants in the entertainments that they nevertheless patronize. For Frith, the popular is not the place where public identity is clarified and articulated: rather, the public’s defining characteristic is its collective detachment from the music-hall spectacle. The music hall testifies to the public’s innate capacity to safely aestheticize spectacle: it is the people’s critical distance, their special sight lines, their disinterested observation (they “are not laughing with the artistes, but at them”) to which the popularity of music hall bears witness.

Frith’s assertion that the public constitutes its identity in reaction against popular performance rather than through it leads to the inevitable but surprising conclusion that the public and the cultured observer remain practically impossible to distinguish from one another. The verdict of the “really thoughtful” observer regarding the meaning of music hall merely replicates the distance that Frith asserts marks the response of the English public to the popular. In its principled remove from what it nonetheless patronizes, the public largely resembles the isolated culture critic as spectator. Unlike

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Fitzgerald, Frith does not wish to present himself as advocate or aficionado of the form. By asserting that the public shares his virtuous distance and unprejudiced remove from the entertainment, Frith blurs the lines separating public survey from expert observation. Yet the common ground Frith and Fitzgerald share is significant. They seem to agree that some distance is a prerequisite for critique: they merely disagree about whether a member of the crowd can have this distance. If the crowd can perform these cognitive tasks, then it constitutes a version of the public; if not, the crowd enters the degraded category of the mass.

By the close of the Victorian era, the music hall had become a site for the public articulation of professional conduct and culture. The discourse on the halls in middle-class venues often created and reinforced group cohesion among the middle class, even as it promoted the illusion of familiarity of this class with other class fractions. The public discourse on music hall served as a forum in which intragroup identity, as well as the perception of cross-class knowledge, could be figured. It is not surprising that discourses of cultural solidarity prove highly unstable, and efforts to draw firm lines between cognoscenti and various others have unpredictable consequences.

A new kind of critic emerged, eager to do more than dismiss the popular on the grounds of its low cultural cache. On the contrary, this new critic insisted on the importance of the entertainment she or he analyzed, while at the same time making the crucial distinction that other, less capable viewers who missed the connection between the music hall and issues of national health and hygiene—representative expert concerns—saw the entertainment incorrectly. In the process, the particular, local ways of knowing promoted by music-hall entertainment were often misread and misconstrued, and the form compacted and diluted for middle-class consumption.

Still, if a transformed music hall drew others besides its old core constituency, the dominant culture, too, changed and grew enough to accommodate the entertainment. Social elites have the power to appropriate subaltern forms, but seldom without doing some damage to the critical prejudices held by those in power. This book attempts to provide a model of music-hall criticism that neither celebrates the authenticity of the popular sensibility that it somehow discovers, nor romantically overestimates the autonomy of critical observers from lived categories of capitalist experience, such as expertise, administration, and professionalism.³⁰ I demonstrate how articulating the Victorian popular provoked competition over the various meanings conveyed by English culture. Yet this competition was not of the sort that

can be won decisively—it produced an intrinsic conflict between the admiring fan and the would-be expert.

Music Hall and Modernity demonstrates how such pioneering cultural critics as Arthur Symons and Elizabeth Robins Pennell used the music hall to secure and promote their professional identity as guardians of taste and national welfare who were, at the same time, devotees of the spontaneous culture of “the people.” Examining late-Victorian controversies over philanthropy and moral reform, and fiction from Walter Besant, Hall Caine, and Henry Nevinson, as well as performance criticism from William Archer and Max Beerbohm, I argue that discourse on music-hall entertainment helped consolidate the tastes and identity of an emergent professional class. In such writing, we see the first flowering of the now-pervasive paradox in which celebrations of popular culture as authentic confirm the need for professionals to discover, interpret, and defend what makes it so.

By moving from literary representations to media controversies, I do more than merely suggest the diversity of opinions regarding art and expertise current in late-Victorian London. I assert a broader claim, rooted in the historical evidence I uncover: namely, that these various actors were involved in a common struggle to be recognized as cultural specialists. Then as now, debates over aesthetic taste and social decorum had sometimes profound repercussions for how gender conventions were lived; then as now, debates concerning the character and regulation of aesthetic forms mobilized a host of interested parties competing for the right to represent the popular. Mimicking the moral and aesthetic criteria of high art, professional discourse arguably demolished the vernacular practice it set out to celebrate and preserve. At the same time, writing about the halls negotiated issues of class, respect, and empowerment. Once it had been established that one could be a music-hall “expert,” it turned out that a diverse crowd could seize and utilize this rhetorical authority. By emphasizing a communal interest shared by Victorian elites and popular audiences in their desire to be recognized as experts, I wish to reclaim professionalism from its conventional reading as the subservience of a middle-class segment to a capital-owning elite.³¹

Music Hall and Modernity attends to the declarations of self-declared experts and cultural managers, whether reformers, models, civil servants, aficionados, or literary intellectuals. Their accounts suggest that managing the popular did not entail the evasion of hard questions, such as the relations between cultural capital and the resources for social capital. Although my

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study details some of the inequities of late-Victorian professional culture, I also relate what I take as its egalitarian effects. This is as it should be: for in the face of a possible end of art, or its full marginalization, the cultural appropriation of the popular by authorities and experts becomes a risky but necessary alternative to a world without art.