

ASPECTS OF THE LONDON MUSIC HALLS

The London Music Halls operated from about 1850 to 1960. They originated in entertainment provided in the new style saloon bars of public houses during the 1830s. These venues replaced earlier semi-rural amusements provided by traditional fairs and suburban pleasure gardens.

The **saloon** was a room where, for an admission fee or increased bar prices, singing, dancing, drama or comedy was performed. The most famous London saloon in the early days was the Grecian Saloon at the Eagle established in 1825. It was later known as the Grecian Theatre. Marie Lloyd made her debut there at the age of 14. The music hall developed from such establishments.

The music halls were distinguished from theatres by the fact that in a music hall you would be seated at a **table** in the auditorium and could drink alcohol and smoke tobacco during the show. In a theatre you sat in the **stalls** and there was a separate bar room.

The first true music hall was the Canterbury in Lambeth built by Charles Morton which opened in 1852. He was known as “the father of the halls”. Another early hall was The Middlesex, Drury Lane – known as the ‘Old Mo’. Several large music halls were built in the East End. These included the Shoreditch Empire which was rebuilt in 1894.

By 1865 there were 32 music halls in London each seating between 500 to 5,000 people plus a large number of smaller venues. By 1878 at its peak there were 78 large music halls and 300 smaller venues. Numbers declined from then on due to competition and stricter licensing restrictions imposed by the Metropolitan Board of Works.

Music hall songs were often composed with their working class audiences in mind. Songs like ‘My Old Man Said Follow the Van’, ‘Knocked ‘em in the Old Kent Road’ and ‘Waiting at the Church’ were about situations with which the urban poor were very familiar. The couple in ‘My Old Man’ are obliged to move house quickly in the middle of the night because they can’t pay the rent. They fill up the van with their possessions. There’s no room for the wife so the husband instructs her to follow the van. She does this carrying their pet bird.

The rebuilding of the **London Pavilion** in 1885 marked a new era of ‘variety theatre’.

“The highest efforts of the architect, the designer and the decorator were enlisted in their service, and the gaudy and tawdry music hall of the past gave way to the resplendent ‘theatre of varieties’ of the present day with its classic exterior of marble and freestone, its lavishly appointed auditorium and its elegant and luxurious foyers and promenades brilliantly illuminated by myriad electric lights.”
(Charles Stuart and A. J Park ‘The Variety Stage (1895)

The Empire, Leicester Square was one of the most famous of these new palaces. It obtained its music hall license in 1887. It appealed to men of leisure by featuring alluring ballet dancers and had a notorious promenade used by courtesans. **The Tivoli** in the Strand was completed in 1890 in neo-Romanesque style with Moorish-Indian embellishments. 'The Tivoli' became a brand name for music halls all over the British Empire. The Coliseum Theatre was built in 1904 and the London Palladium in 1910. By this stage firmer regulation led to the auditoriums being drink free. The first Royal Variety Performance took place at the Palace Theatre in 1912. Marie Lloyd, the best known entertainer of the time, was deemed to be too 'saucy' to be invited to take part.

By 1907 the development of syndicates controlling a number of theatres, such as the Stoll circuit, increased tensions between employees and employers. In January a dispute between artists, stage hands and managers of the Holborn Empire worsened. Strikes in other London and suburban halls followed.

Marie Lloyd and other star music hall entertainers were strong supporters of the strike. She said that people like herself could dictate their own terms, but the poorer members of the profession earned from thirty shillings to three pounds a week. This was after doing double turns and matinees as well. They were forced to submit to unfair terms of employment.

The strike was known as the '**Music Hall War**' and it lasted for about two weeks. It ended in arbitration which satisfied most of the main demands. A minimum wage was agreed as well as a maximum working week for musicians.

The pressure for greater rewards for music hall songwriters resulted in the application of copyright law to musical compositions. This increased the profitability of the music publication industry. The main music publishers were large and very profitable companies. They sold the right to sing songs to particular artists. No one else was allowed to sing these songs in public.

The term '**Tin Pan Alley**' came from the practice of rival publishers banging together pots and pans in order to disrupt the musical auditions of their competitors.

The music halls were very popular during the **First World War**. The artists and composers set out to rally public support for the war effort. **Vesta Tilley** was the most famous and well paid male impersonator of her day. She was a star in both Britain and the USA for over thirty years. She and her husband ran a military recruitment drive. Young men were sometimes asked to join the army on stage during her show. She had the nickname 'Britain's best recruiting sergeant'. Her husband was knighted for his services to the war effort.

Patriotic music hall songs during this War included 'Keep the Home Fires Burning' (1914), 'Pack up Your Troubles (1915) and 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' (1914).

The most notorious music hall song of the time was 'Oh! It's a Lovely War' (1917) sung by the American born **Ella Shields**. She had performed at the opening night of the London Palladium in 1910. Her husband wrote 'Burlington Bertie from Bow' in 1915. It's a song about a penniless Londoner who assumes the manner of a well-heeled gentleman. Ella toured the world singing this song. The persona of Bertie haunted her for the rest of her life. Like many performers she had a bad time during the depressed 1930s. She worked with many stars over the years. In the late 1940s she took part in a Royal Command performance with a young Julie Andrews who also recorded Burlington Bertie.

Matilda Alice Victoria Wood became very famous as **Marie Lloyd**. Her assumed surname came from 'Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper'. She formed her sisters into a singing group called the 'Fairy Bells Minstrels' singing temperance songs in local missions and church halls. Seven of her eight sisters had theatrical careers. Her first major success was 'The Boy I Love is up in the Gallery'. Her songs were fairly harmless by modern standards, but they gained a reputation for being "racy" and filled with 'double entendre'. She added winks and gestures and created a conspiratorial relationship with her audience. However, when she wanted to, she could sing her songs "straight". Legend has it that when the moralists objected to her song "I sits among the cabbages and peas" she changed the words to "I sits among the cabbages and leeks" to roars of laughter from her audience. She told the New York Telegraph that:

" If I were to sing highly moral songs, they would fire ginger beer bottles and beer mugs at me. I can't help it if people want to turn and twist my meanings."

She was refused entry to the USA in 1913 for "moral turpitude". Her private life was controversial too. Over 100,000 people attended her funeral at Hampstead in 1922 and there were twelve cars full of flowers.

Music hall continued in the inter-war period, but it was no longer the single dominant form of popular entertainment in Britain. The major stars in this period included George Formby, Gracie Fields, Max Miller and Flanagan and Allen.

Flanagan and Allen were a singing and comedy double act popular during the Second World War. They were also members of the 'Crazy Gang' which dominated the Palladium up to the war years. Flanagan and Allen's songs had a gentle humour. 'We're Gonna Hang out the Washing on the Siegfried Line' mocked the German defences. 'Underneath the Arches' (which Flanagan co-wrote with Reg Connelly) was virtually their theme song. The 'Arches' seem to refer to the railway arches near Charing Cross Station. People bought filled baked potatoes from a stall in the Arches and ate them whilst listening to a band on the Embankment. Flanagan was a competent singer and sang the melody lines. Allen used an almost spoken delivery to provide the harmonies.

Eric Browett
September 2009