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# Art and Commitment in the British Music Hall in its Golden Age

John Mullen

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# « Art and Commitment in the British Music Hall in its Golden Age 1880-1925 »

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Keynote speech at conference *Artistic Commitments,* l'Université de Bourgogne, Dijon, les 23 et 24 octobre 2013,

Structure :

Introduction :

Music hall fitting into three stories

1 what was the music hall

2 What was happening to the audience

3 The characteristics of music hall

(Eliot said so)

A Musical innovation was difficult

B : Voice

C Theatrical innovation and stage persona

D : Performance innovation

4 Political Commitment

5 Whose voice ?  The debate

6 So what could they do ?

Eliot/ Ormeston Chant/ Adorno

A Cultural resistance

B Energy

C Comment

D Working through fears

E Solidarity

F But conservative populism

Conclusion:

The music-hall, art and commitment 1860-1925

Introduction

First of all I'd like to thank the organizers for inviting me to give this lecture.

My own speciality is the British music-hall, especially its later period, after 1900. I like to see this form of popular entertainment as fitting into a series of stories: at least three stories

Firstly, as an industry, and as a repertoire of songs, it fits into the history of popular music, in the period before the domination of recorded or broadcast music, when live performance and sheet music were practically the only modes of distribution. It is a period when many aspects of today's popular music were not present – there were no live recordings of songs to contrast with their studio versions, no post-production, and where singing along in a group, rather than other activities such as dancing, karaoke or listening on headphones in a bus, was central.

But it was a period where other elements of modern pop music were already present – the use of everyday life as subject matter, fierce competition between producers, the rapid turnover of songs due to the hit system, the three-minute song format, the popular music star, adored by his or her audience (around a third of the singers are women by 1914)

Music hall also fits into a second story: the history of the urban working class in Britain, The history of this class and its struggle for leisure time, and for control over its own leisure time in the face of multiple economic and moral pressures.

Finally, it fits into the history of cultural productions which react to changing society. (Which is something it has in common with other productions we will be hearing about over the course of the conference). Music hall songs often represent everyday life (poverty or courtship or domestic disputes) or new aspects of the world (cars or telephones or gramophones or ragtime music), transforming them for an aesthetic and entertaining purpose… Or they represent dreams and fantasies of ordinary people, (dreams of going home to Ireland, dreams of living in a rural paradise as Dixieland was presented). These are dreams which have roots in their everyday experience. Of course they also omit many aspects of people's life experience, (life at work, relations with children for example), and the omissions can tell us as much as the inclusions.

So today, I want to present this social activity and open up some questions about its position within these three stories.

What was the music hall industry?

Music hall was the dominant form of musical entertainment for ordinary people between 180 and 1920. Musical comedy and operetta are much more expensive. Radio is a long way off, and the gramophone is, after its invention in the 1870s and 1880s, reserved for a privileged minority: Even in 1916, for the price of a gramophone, you can go 200 times to the music hall!

Most people only ever heard live music: around the piano at home, (By 1914 there were four million pianos in Britain), in the streets or on the stage. The week's music hall programme was on the front page of local newspapers in every town: in some of the mines in Lancashire, workers send along a representative from each shift to the music hall on a Monday, to inform workmates about the quality of that week's programme.

By 1910 the industry entertained 25 million people a year, and employed 80 000 people.

At the music halls, or variety theatres as the larger ones come to be called, people went to watch a tremendously varied evening of entertainment.

Acrobats, trick cyclists, "Siamese twins" and other "freaks", trained animals, ballet, and extracts from Shakespeare could all be seen. Fred Dyer "the famous Welsh boxer and singer" competed for top of the bill with "the handcuffed violinist", extracts from Verdi's operas, or "the ugliest woman contest".

But no doubt around half the acts involved singing, and getting the audience to sing along.

Singing in unison is fun, but it is also an activity which has social and cultural meaning. All types of singing have social meaning – responsorial, close harmony, polyphonic, unison. And so on. Singing in unison is particularly appropriate for publicly expressing common values (hence its usefulness at football matches, in hymn singing at church, in the army, in political meetings etc.).

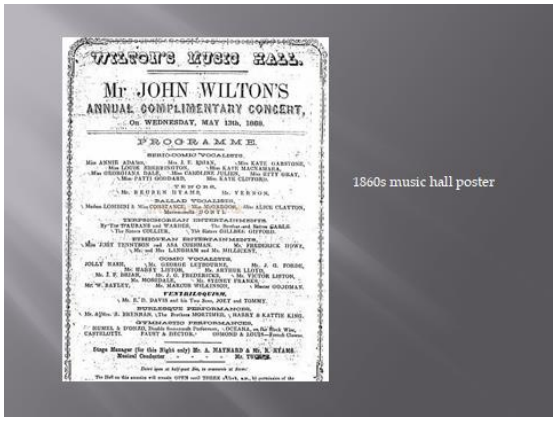
In the architecture of the grand music halls of Edwardian times, we see the community defined and circumscribed : the people in the private boxes are not singing along as a community.

Whereas the ordinary people in the gallery, singing along at the music hall are having a cultural experience not available at a classical concert, (where singing along is generally forbidden). In addition, they were singing along with stars who came from their own class, and are not hiding this fact. The stars are singing in working class accents and language,

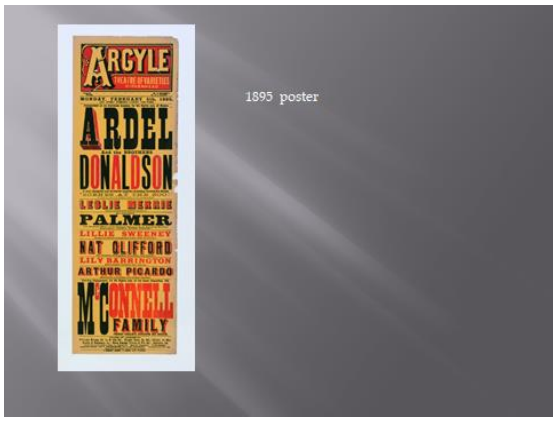
often about the everyday life of the audience. For once they are talking about working class life and not in a judgemental fashion, but, if anything, in a celebratory style.

Slides of music hall posters

1860s




1895




1900

Concentration of capital

After the 1890s, the music hall industry becomes more dominated by powerful theatre chains, able to organize block booking of stars and mobilize more impressive special effects, more luxurious theatres, and more systematic advertising.

These theatre chains run larger venues.

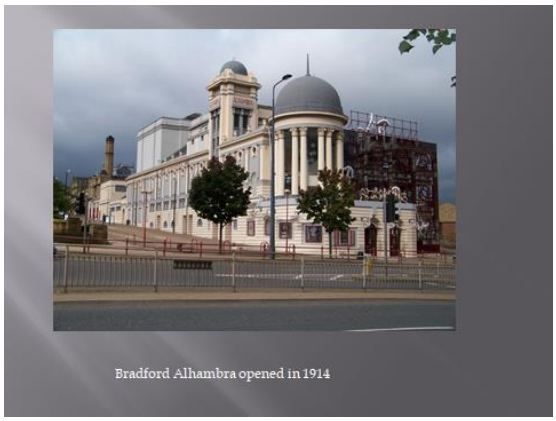
When the Empire in London moved to music hall in 1887 it had 2 000 seats

In 1897 The Palace opened with 1400 seats

In 1904 the London Coliseum opened with 2 500 seats.

The 1400 seat Alhambra theatre, opened in Bradford in 1914, is a typical example,

slide




Slide audience

Music-hall was not just one thing. It changed very much over time under the dual dynamic of the concentration of capital, the development of public transport and the drive for more « respectability » and less « vulgarity ».

and it changed from place to place : When in 1904 the new Coliseum music hall in London's West End was building a royal box so that the King and Queen could come to see their shows, the music hall in the centre of Glasgow , the  Panopticon in Trongate was featuring four shows a day, starting with morning performances for night workers coming off shift work.

## Who was its audience ?

Although the music hall industry has been working hard to attract better-off audiences into the more expensive seats and boxes, it cannot do without its core working class audience.

Further, many of the “aspiring” office workers, civil servants and shop assistants, who believe themselves a cut above the working class, are in material terms close to poverty, as histories of Victorian and Edwardian office and shop trade unions amply illustrate and thus they have much in common with the rest of the working class. The clerk Bob Cratchett of Dickens’ Christmas Carol (written in 1843) or the shop assistant, Arthur Kipps in H G Wells’s 1905 novel may have clean hands, but have more in common with manual workers than with the social elite, and indiscriminate use of the term « middle class » can hide more than it clarifies.

## What was happening to the people who made up the audience ?

### Continuing poverty and exhaustion

Working class remains highly precarious during the whole period.

In 1900 Pioneering social scientist Seebohm Rowntree looked at the plight of the working class in York and found that nearly a third of people earned too little to afford to buy a basic basket of goods

Very Slowly Increasing leisure time symbolized by the 1851 Great exhibition, and the cheap train trips : First national bank holidays 1871 (4 bank holidays a year)

> Deep concern among the elites, in particular after their terror at the upheavals of chartism, that the free time was not being well used, and that radicalism could result. There came about a massive campaign for « improving » or « elevating » activities, rational leisure .
>
> In parallel a tremendous emphasis on the centrality of respectability and self-improvement in living in general. Samuel Smiles wrote from 1859 to 1898 his four best sellers « self-help ». « thrift » « character »’ and « duty ». The ideology of respectability is slowly taking centre stage and largely replacing old-fashioned deference. All this in a world of extremely rigid social hierarchies. After 1884 more than half of working class men have the right to vote, but rigid social divisions will take a long time to relax. At the beginning of the first world war, to have had a private education meant to be taken into the army automatically as an officer.

Public institutions began very slowly to reflect this elite priority, and even spend money on it. The 1845 Museums act authorized local authorities to raise taxes to establish public museums.

The Public libraries Act 1850 authorized local authorities to establish free public libraries (not without controversy, and fears of social agitation) . By 1900 there were 295 public libraries across Britain.

We also see in this half century the rise of public parks, sometimes donated by local industrialists. The Arboretum park opened in Derby in 1840 was one of the first. Alexandra Park in Manchester opened in 1870 is typical. They often featured bandstands, fountains and boating lakes.

As for music, there were plenty of attempts to persuade working class people to listen to or participate in classical music.

Ever more and larger Choral societies after 1840, with hundreds of singers in most. A popular practice encouraged by the elites, based on a fixed repertoire of religious music and Italian operetta

And there were the Penny concerts for example. The penny concerts were normally classical music concerts, generally organized by local authorities, which emphasized British composers and attracted people from all across the social spectrum. Concert halls were built in the different industrial towns partly to house such events – St George's Hall in Liverpool in 1854 1881 Huddersfield concert hall. King George's Hall in Blackburn 1921

They could be very successful indeed. In the single year 1900, 216,161 people went to Glasgow Corporation's penny concerts, which tried to compete with music hall by playing some popular tunes as well as classical

The characteristics of music hall song

Music hall song contrasted sharply with the repertoire being encouraged by the elites

So what artistic characteristics might be present in music hall ?

Musical innovation was difficult

One of the central values of modern cultural production is innovation – showing aspects of human experience in a new way - is a crucial part of artists' contribution to society.

. Where was the innovation in music hall song ? :

It is not easy to find it in the music.

The singer had little control of their performance. First they did not control the context of the show. A singer might well be preceded by an elephant act and followed by acrobats. They had fifteen minutes to get their act over : little time to build up to a certain sort of reflection or intimacy. « Hit ‘em fast and hit ‘em hard » was often necessarily the name of the game. This meant there were de facto limits on the repertoire compared with, say, sixties rock music or 21st century rap.

The economic structure of the industry didn’t allow you to be innovative in certain areas. Singers could not, like Bob Dylan or Bruce Springsteen, tour with carefully chosen musicians. The music of a music hall star would be learned on Monday morning by the local orchestra, in time for the first show Monday afternoon or evening.

Singers had, before the second half of the 1920s no microphone. Needing to be heard by two or three thousand people without a microphone meant that more intimate songs were difficult ; the range of voice timbre available was limited by this. Voice could be used innovatively, though.

Sam Mayo’ or Marie Lloyd

The musical aspects of song were also limited in other ways by the social experience of technology. A group today in concert knows that most of the audience has heard their song in a recording many times, and is therefore strongly encouraged to do a different version in performance. In music hall, singing stars would often sing identical versions twice a night for thirty years

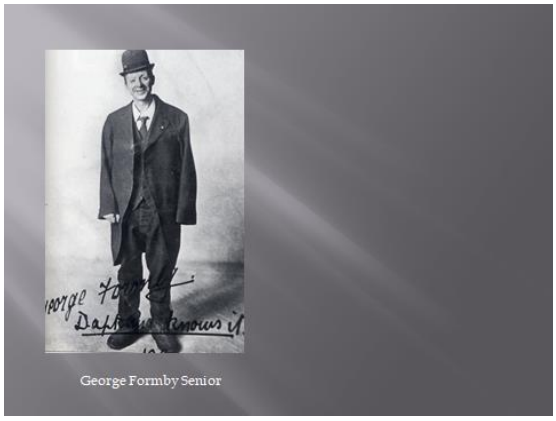
Theatrical innovation was however possible, and was very important.

Artistes often built up a persona and this could allow rather subtle and ambiguous ways of presenting their subject matter.

Let’s look at a few examples :

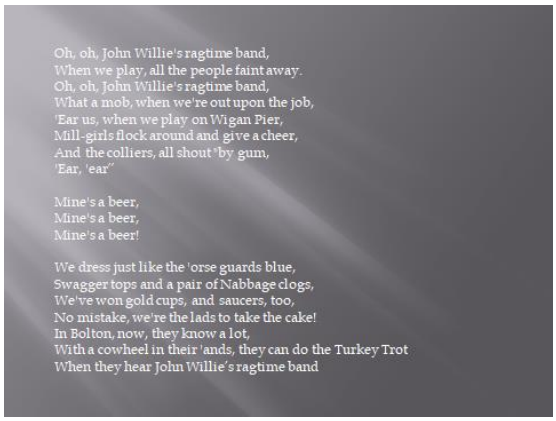
Marie Lloyd

George Formby  senior slide played the rather gormless but chatty, straight talking and loveable Lancashire lad a little lost in the modern metropolitan world. People loved to hear him being ordinary and being a star at the same time.




« This next song is about me being one of t boys, And if you don't want to listen, please leave the room because it's only an annoyance to t rest of us ».

Song John Willie's ragtime band




John Willie's Ragtime Band

What is he doing in this song ? Mocking the fashionable ragtime music – modern, young, exotic, exciting - by presenting it as performed by ordinary  - dour, homely Lancashire lads.

Vesta Tilley

Vesta Tilley slide sang dressed as a man, as a male narrator, and gently mocked different types of man from the young and stylish man about town, to the seducer, to the First world war soldier on leave. She was highly professional and precise in her characterizations « She changed her socks for each role » it has been said.

A woman dressed in men's clothing Undermining gender roles ? (this was a genre which involved dozens of women artistes and seems to have disappeared in the late 1920s)

A woman from a very poor family who had made it through the music hall

She could sing songs during the First World War about how wonderful it was to be wounded and taken home away from the war, whereas a man singer would probably have not got away with such songs.

Song extract : girls of the old brigade

Have you noticed what the girls are doing now?
It's simply wonderful, simply wonderful!
One will drive a motor, while another drives a plough!
And one will chase a bullock
When she's told to milk a cow!
The barmaid I used to flirt and frivol with
She's an ammunitions maker so I hear
Quite a lady since the war and the wages she can draw
Must be more than she can draw for drawing beer!

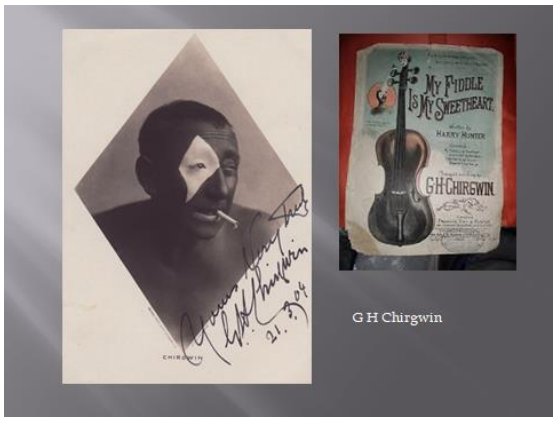
**Chorus:** *Where are the girls of the old brigade?*
*The girls of the once upon a time*
*I've been looking around*
*And there's only one consolation to be found*
*The old girl's still there, old girl new style*
*But whether it's the old girl or whether it's the new*
*It's the same piece of petticoat all the while!*

In this song vesta Tilley is dressed as an officer who has been away to the war and has come back to find that women's role shave been transformed.

Gus Elen slide played the casual London market seller (the costermonger)

We'll be hearing one of his songs in a moment.

Harry Champion slide played the energetic cockney




G H Chirgwin slide played a personal adaptation of the racist Blackface tradition.

G.H. Chirgwin (« le Cafre à l'œil blanc »). Ce dernier avait une particularité intéressante : au lieu de grimer en noir l'ensemble de son visage, il laissait un gros diamant blanc sur son œil droit. Ce masque construit lui permet une distanciation artistique de son travail. Le personnage sur scène de Chirgwin

tenait autant du cockney que du nègre, et ainsi il était différent d'autres artistes qui voulaient que leur masque de nègre soit « réaliste »i.

It was a performance art.

Commitment

Political communication in the normal sense was extremely difficult. The singer was very dependant on the next contract.

As Maloney writes « fear of illness and destitution » haunted many artistes (and the profession established in Edwardian times its own benevolent fund and rest home for sick artistes, formalizing a tightly knit mutual help network which already existed.

Because of this artistes could not afford to upset theatre managers, or the local magistrates who granted licences to the music hall. And strict clauses in their contracts made sure that any independent political voice was extremely difficult.

Even more, the audience came to the music hall to see fifteen or twenty different acts – not to see an evening's concert by one star, as in later decades. This meant that a minority opinion was very hard to put forward. Not only did the singer not want to upset any significant section of the audience, he wanted them to sing along to the chorus – all of them. If only half the audience sang along, because they didn't agree, the singer was in trouble.

So consensual ideas among the audience are what the music hall is about. For the historian, however, this has advantages and disadvantage. One of the advantages is that an attitude expressed in a music hall hit can be assumed to be widely accepted in the working class.

So we are quite a long way from the romantic poet or the singer-songwriter-prophet or troubadour. Music hall is not about « what I am the only one to have understood », it is about collective attitudes, just as religious singing often is. But collective attitudes of the urban working class in a rapidly changing society.

Although it can be an art of social identity it is not an art of social resistance.

So what could they do ?

So what was the main role of music hall song. This is a difficult question : we are talking about thousands of songs dealing with hundreds of themes. I have a corpus of 1200 songs from the four years of the First World War. The authoritative catalogue of music hall songs, which lists the forty or so most influential songs from each year (by Michael Kilgarriff) includes thousands. What's more, as I have already suggested, the songs on the page do not portray well the effect of the song.

As Maloney writes « "the very nature of music Hall performance lay in the triumph of delivery over content" .

Nevertheless I would like to pull out and illustrate a few major functions of the music hall song

One of the first is symbolic empowerment of the dominated classes.

Cultural resistance against the penny concerts, the circulating library, the mechanics institute which weren't expensive but you still had to go in disguise to some of them, or watch people who were in disguise..

The whole idea that art is to elevate working people, a tremendously influential discourse at the time, was read as an argument for access for working people to classical music and high art. But it was also read as a declaration that the voices of the working people themselves had no value.

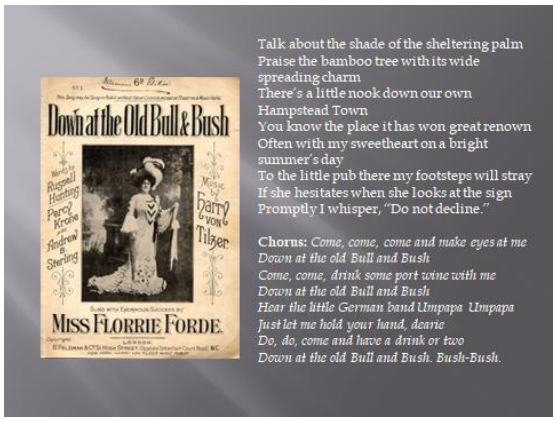
Music hall was an answer to that devalorization.

The singers sing with our accents, speak our language, they sing about aspects of our everyday life.

This is a symbolic empowerment of the working class audience ; ( a dynamic which has continued in some forms of popular music until today).

Although it included contradictory elements. It was about being ordinary all together, but in luxurious and grand surroundings.

The appearance of luxury was essential, and this characteristic is suggested by the very names of the theatres : The Empire, the Palace, the Coliseum or the Alhambra. At the Oxford theatre in London one moved among « Corinthian columns and bars smothered in flowers and glittering with mirrors ». The Nottingham Empire boasted smiling idols representing Krishna on either side of the stage and four giant gilt elephant heads in the four corners of the auditorium. The new theatres in Glasgow (the Empire, opened in 1897 and the Pavilion, opened in 1904) were lit by electric light and featured huge sliding roofs which could open in fine weather .




Slide down at the old Bull and Bush

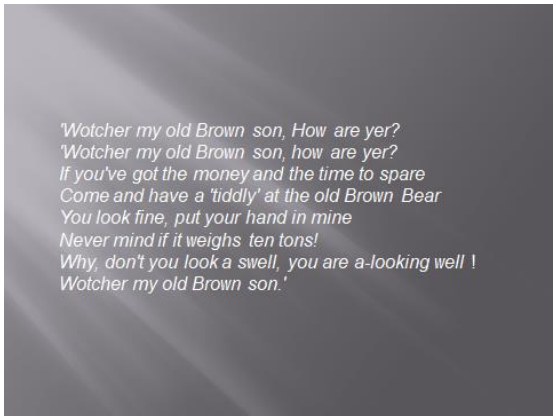
Song down at the old bull and bush

Down at the old Bull and Bush last one

Indeed for MANY PEOPLE ENERGY WA STHE KEY ELEMENT OF MUSIC HALL

( as it was to be of rock and of rap)

The tremendous pressure to become respectable, « rational » and sedate was contradicted by a music full of energy and participation :




Song Wotcher my old brown son and slide(no live recordings).

Wotcher me old brown son

**Chorus:** 'Wotcher my old Brown son, How are yer?
'Wotcher my old Brown son, how are yer?
If you've got the money and the time to spare
Come and have a 'tiddly' at the old Brown Bear
You look fine, put your hands in mine
Never mind if it weighs a ton
Why, don't you look a swell, you are a-looking well
Wotcher my old Brown son.'

The song is slightly ambiguous because the verses include the sentiment that people will always come and be friendly at him even when he wants to be alone

Many songs defend good wholesome working class food. Harry Champion seemed to specialize in these . Song titles include :

Boiled beef and carrots

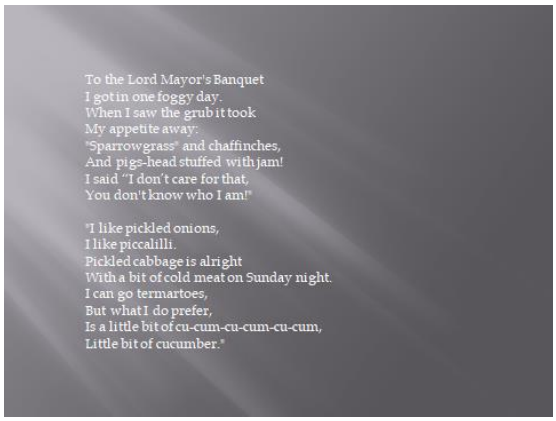
Hot meat pies, saveloys and trotters

Let's have a basin of soup

Home-made sausages

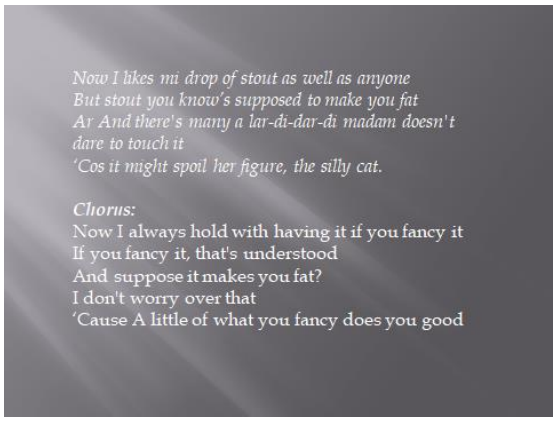
A little bit of cucumber

The popularity of many of these songs cannot be separated from the fact that most of the people in the audience know what it feels like not to have enough to eat. But there is more than that : there is also the defence of cheap down to earth food as against bourgeois, la de da food intended to impress.




A little bit of cucumber slide and song

Other songs too mock the moralist creed which was so dominant at the turn of the century.




A Little of what you fancy does you good slide and song

Never let your braces dangle !

Comment on our situation

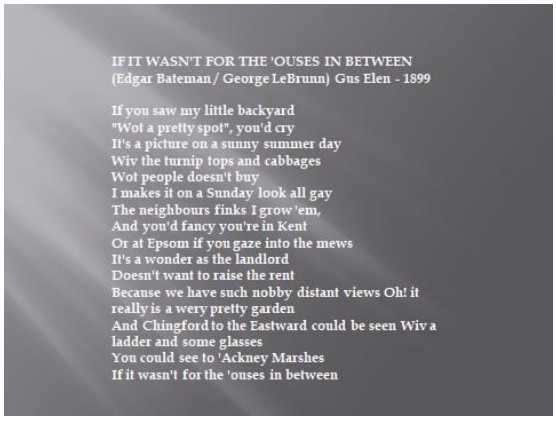
Song If it wasn't for the Ouse's in between

IF IT WASN'T FOR THE 'OUSES IN BETWEEN

(Edgar Bateman / George LeBrunn)

Gus Elen - 1899

Slide lyrics of  ouses in between




If you saw my little backyard

"Wot a pretty spot", you'd cry

It's a picture on a sunny summer day

Wiv the turnip tops and cabbages

Wot people doesn't buy

I makes it on a Sunday look all gay

The neighbours finks I grow 'em,

And you'd fancy you're in Kent

Or at Epsom if you gaze into the mews

It's a wonder as the landlord

Doesn't want to raise the rent

Because we have such nobby distant views

Oh! it really is a wery pretty garden

And Chingford to the Eastward could be seen

Wiv a ladder and some glasses

You could see to 'Ackney Marshes

If it wasn't for the 'ouses in between

We're as countrified as can be

Wiv a clothes prop for a tree

The tub-stool makes a rustic little stile

Ev'ry time the blooming clock strikes

There's a cuckoo sings to me

And I've painted up "To Leather Lane A Mile"

Ackney with the ouses took away 1901 vesta Victoria

The narrator goes to the countryside, and tries to describe it to her urban working class audience who she imagines has never been there.

**Chorus:** *You must try and fancy Bethnal Green with turnips all in bud*
*Where the little dry land winkle strolls about the garden mud*
*And 'orses with no trams behind can bust themselves with 'ay*
*Well, it's absolutely 'Ackney with the 'ouses took away.*

All because e's minding a ouse – wilkie bard

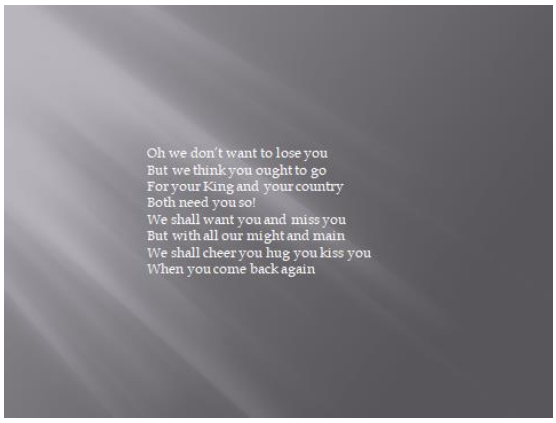
Wait till the work comes round

Here Gus Elen and his audiences are both laughing at the bad housing situation well known by their audiences. Laughing at it momentarily takes away its sting, and the pain of year after year living several families in one house, as was common at the time.

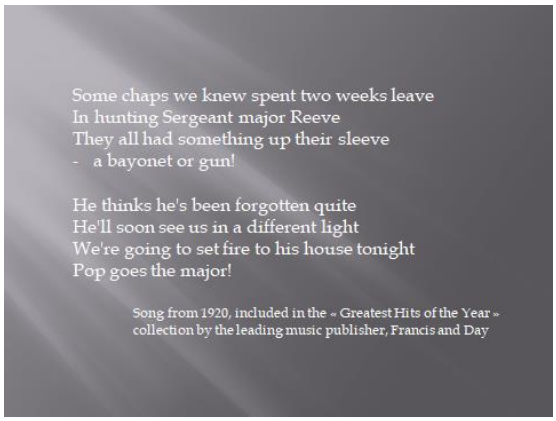
In Glasgow over fifty per cent of all households had three or more people for each room. In Gateshead and in Newcastle thirty per cent. Thirty per cent also in poorer areas of London such as Stepney and Bethnal Green. (Gazely and Newell 2009)

COMMENT ON THE WAR

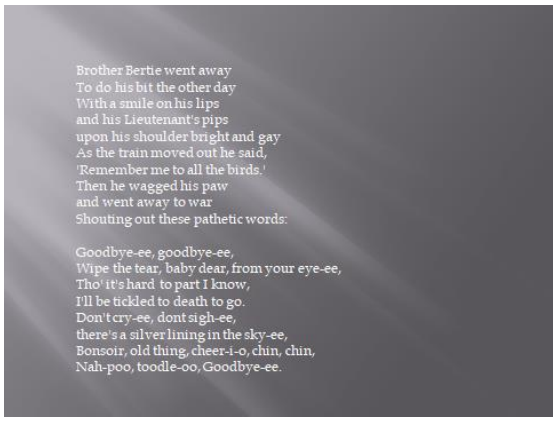
We don't want to lose you slide




Pop goes the major ! slide




Goodbyee slide and song




Other Examples :

The military representative

Burlington Bertie

I may be a millionaire

I belong to Glasgow

My Old Dutch

Working through fears

« I've never lost my last train yet » recounts in a humorous tone the adventures of a young lady who goes into town of an evening to enjoy herself. She takes risks with the young men she meets but always manages to avoid missing the last train back home. « Missing the last train » naturally enough is code for losing one's virginity and respectability.

**Chorus:** *Yes, there's nothing half so sweet*
*As the days on which we meet*
*For he's quite the nicest boy I've ever met*
*But although I love a lark*
*In the day and in the dark*
*I have never lost my last train yet, Oh no*
*I have never lost my last train yet.*

« I live in Trafalgar Square » laughs about homelessness, as does

My Old Man  said follow the van

They're coming wi a barrow at half past twa

(and an example from Scottish book)

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When Father said he'd pay the Rent
Have you paid the rent?
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The war songs also deal with fear

Oh what a lovely war !

Other songs mock the powerful, or figures of authority (which i also think is a way of dealing with fear)

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It's part of a Policeman's Duty
Send for a policeman
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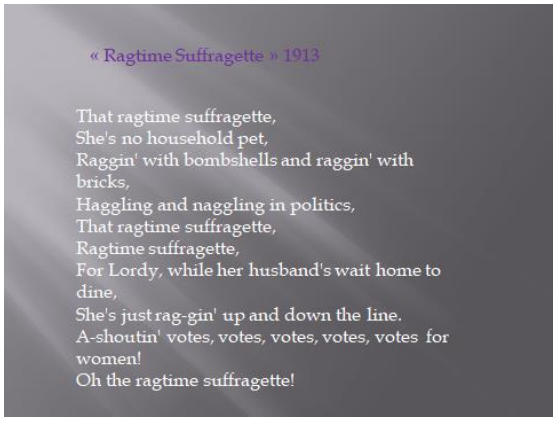
The process server

The gaffers of the gang

Some of the fears are conservative




The Ragtime Suffragette slide and song or OMIT

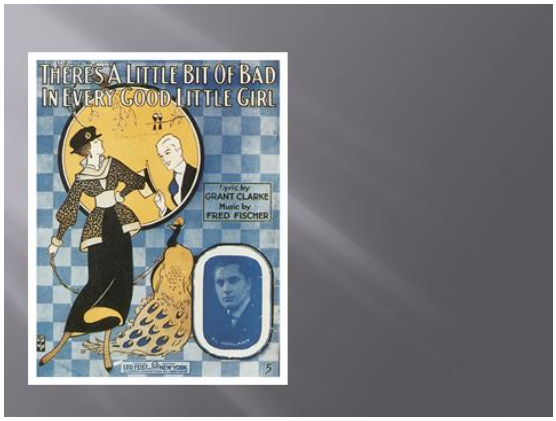
- Kitty, the Telephone Girl 1914
- The Ladies Football Club 1915
- The Editress 1915
- Which Switch Is the Switch, Miss, for Ipswich ? 1915
- If the Girlies Could Be Soldiers 1915
- The Lady Bus Conductor 1916
- Tilly the Typist 1916
- Dance of the fire brigade girls 1915
- Women's Work 1917
- Where Are the Girls of the Old Brigade? 1917
- Polly from the GPO 1918

COURTSHIP SONGS

WALTER Walter LEAD ME TO THE ALTAR

Moderate transgression (which is a form of working through fears)

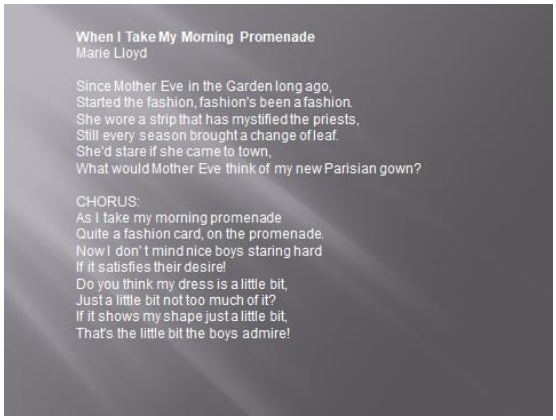
Suggestive songs




There's a little bit of bad in every good little girl

I've tried to be good but the girls won't let me.

- I Was a Good Little Girl Till I Met You! 1914
- I'll Make a Man of You 1914
- A Little of What You Fancy Does You Good ! 1915
- It's the Girls that Make the Seaside 1915
- I've Tried to Be Good But the Girls Won't Let Me 1916
- Shall We? Let's ! 1916
- They Go Wild, Simply Wild, Over Me 1917
- Every Girl Is Fishing 1917




When I take my morning promenade slide and song

Moderate transgression will remain popular in pop music until today. A recent example is Katie Perry's song and video « I kissed a girl » which refers to girls kissing each other, at the same time as underlining that the narrator has a boyfriend in the line « hope my boyfriend don't mind it ! and in the video clip the narrator wakes up and finds it was all a dream which didn't happen.

As well as love songs (which are part of working through fear) although love as a theme is not dominant as it can be in later popular music

A vast number of them are humorous, and the centrality of humour has a meaning.

Slide sister Susie (maybe song sister susie but without lyrics)

Others could be sentimental or comic, but show important facts about popular attitudes at the time.

The prevalence of unapologetic popular racism is shown in the rise of the coon song

Slide « All coons look alike to me » and « We'll go back to Erin someday, Mavourneen »

The many hundreds of « Irish songs » show both the experience of the Irish diaspora, but also, seeing that in order to be successful in Britain they had to appeal to a mass audience many times bigger than the Irish community, they show something about the representation of the Irish and Ireland, both the Irish as inferior (since they had been colonized) but also moving reminders of a simpler life in a rural paradise of yore).

Slide She works at Woolwich Arsenal now and

Are we downhearted ? –No !

Oh what a lovely war

My presentation of favourite themes of music halls songs is far from complete.

- The conflict between town people and country people
- The celebration of regional or national identity : notably Scottish, Irish, Lancashire and Yorkshire

My conclusion then, is that music hall is of interest in itself, but especially for

what it tells us about the history of popular music, both as a musical product and a social phenomenon (the two being very much mixed together) and how it can help us understand what popular music does in society, and what people are doing when they sing a song for mass consumption.

For what it tells us about the history of the urban working class, because, bland and consensual though it often was, music hall song shows us what consensuses were present, and that helps us understand popular attitudes which are less present in written sources of all sorts, including literary ones.

For how it can contribute to taking a step backward and seeing what cultural reactions to changing society consists of .

Finally the question of whose voices can be heard has often ignored important characteristics of the music hall form.

Thank you very much.

[i] Michael Pickering, *op. cit.,* p. 98.