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“Examine the Contents”: Clowning and Songsters in American Circuses, 1850-1900

This article examines the jokes and songs of circus clowns (often compiled into thirty-page books called songsters), performed during the main show or in the vaudeville-like aftershow. These songsters, largely unexamined by historians, are an important window into 19th-century American culture and popular entertainment. The content of the clown’s routine addressed race and ethnicity, gender, class, economics, politics, and, of course, the age-old comedic fodder of lawyers and mothers-in-law. Clowns and their songsters demonstrate the volatility in American culture during the last half of the 19th century, and circuses became a place where Americans could express their opinions in a public arena. These views were not single-minded, but varied depending upon the clown, leaning to the political right or left, or simply ridiculing both sides. Although the circus provided a one-day vacation from the daily toil of farming or factory work, it could not escape the political debates that took place on the floors of Congress, town halls, courtrooms, churches, and saloons. Micah Childress is a Ph.D. candidate at Purdue University, US, with a special interest in American circus, from 1840 to 1920.

In 1855, a clown stepped to the centre of the circus ring and announced himself as a poet named Billy Nubbs. He explained that he recently proposed to and married his dream girl. Not long after they exchanged vows, however, Nubbs divulges that his “matrimonial felicity was of short duration” and that he sometimes bestowed “a small amount of attention and admiration upon any beauty” that crossed his path. As he walked home the other evening, explains Nubbs, he caught a glimpse at a beautiful figure, but only from a distance, so he chased after her. Nubbs then sings:

Light as a zephyr 'cross my path there sped, / A form, so filled with
every witching grace— / That in her footsteps I was bewildered—led;

/ Hoping to steal a glance at her sweet face. / I watched each movement with a feverish pride, / And longed within my arms to clasp her figure / But when at length I reached her figure, / She was a nasty—darned—black—ugly nigger.¹

This passage clearly establishes clowns as more than silent mimes engaged in endless slapstick entertainment; in 19th-century America, clowns spoke and sang about a number of topics, ranging from economics and business to marriage and gender. The circus, and specifically its songsters, provided “a public conversation in which the broad culture thought out loud about what it believed, feared, and hoped for.”² Sometimes, the songs served more as an airing of grievances than a conversation; similar to the professor behind a lectern and the politician on a tree stump, the clowns were prone to one-way speeches that did not require the audience to offer a countering viewpoint. However, as historian Gregory Renoff illustrates, people that came to town on Circus Day interacted with each other all day, and one can safely assume that the clown’s opinion engendered discussions outside the tent. The focus of this article, however, will be what was said and sung under the big top.³

The 19th-century circus has been the focus of a handful of historical works in the past thirty-five years, but few of them focus on clowns, clowning, or circus songsters. Countless works on blackface have dissected the intersections of politics and entertainment, but the convergence between those two forces that occurred under circus tents remains woefully understudied. John H. Townsen, the only historian to dedicate an entire study to clowns, published his work before most of the significant circus studies.⁴ He does not, however, adequately address ethnic clowns and largely ignores circus songsters. David Carlyon’s work on Dan Rice (1823-1900), arguably America’s most famous clown, suggests that the political focus in Rice’s postbellum routines led to his fall from stardom.⁵ What Carlyon misses by ignoring circus songsters is the fact that their production increased throughout the Gilded Age (parallel to the growth of circuses and circus audiences), while their political subject matter grew even more wide-ranging.

Songsters (typically thirty-page books filled with sentimental and comical songs, with a few jokes, mock speeches, and witticisms largely written and performed by clowns), are an important window into 19th-century culture and popular culture. They offered varying opinions on topics such as race and ethnicity, gender, class, economics, and politics. As the middle class assumed control of the country’s moral, economic, and political direction, popular entertainment in its circus manifestation became an arena in which people expressed their views in a public setting—they either aligned themselves with the middle class or displayed their dissent. Americans waged a battle over the country’s future in the halls of government, churches, and saloons, but these songsters indicate that the circus also served as a forum for a discussion of the nation’s most pressing issues. Clowns, and the shows that employed them, were not a politically homogenous group and their

songsters contained differing opinions, serving as a vehicle for Americans to voice their thoughts and arguments under the guise of entertainment.

Opinions: Sold for a Song

The circuses that sold songsters (and most did) took full advantage of the growth and profitability of popular music. The singing clown had carried popular music from the cities on the eastern seaboard, especially New York, to the rural hinterlands long before Stephen Foster, but as the once boisterous cries of morality-driven middle-class resistance to both popular song and the circus diminished to hushed whispers after the Civil War, the clown began to profit. As a supplemental part of their income, clowns sold songsters for twenty-five or fifty cents. Although songsters had been sold in antebellum America, the business boomed in the postbellum period when the circus became a truly national institution with mass appeal. The Gilded Age, the three decades after the Civil War in which laissez-faire economics became the focus of the government and society, was the dawn of the circus's Golden Age (1872-1918). The biggest circuses had their songsters published in New York, and most were printed at the aptly named New York Popular Publishing Company—whose motto encouraged the purchaser to “examine the contents.”

As the circus grew in popularity in the late 19th century, its proprietors engineered larger and larger arenas with multiple rings. Clowns went from performing in circus tents that held a few thousand people in 1870 to massive three-ring tents that routinely contained at least 10,000 people by 1880. Simply put, the crowd could not hear the clown. As a consequence, impresarios of the largest shows moved the bulk of the clown's singing and talking routines from the main show to the aftershow—a vaudeville-like performance in the main tent that required patrons to purchase an additional ticket, a more intimate arrangement that resembled the one-ring antebellum circus. Clowns aimed to elicit the crowd's full participation in the choruses, a participation which generated a spirit of community. In fact, the atmosphere itself appeared similar to a sanitised, middle-class-approved version of working-class saloons. Regardless of its place in the main show or in the aftershow, the clown's performance was part of a public conversation. The circus was not a monolithic, uniform industry; songsters from various circuses did not always have the same opinions about alcohol, immigrants, labour unions, or political parties. What the songsters do reveal, however, is that all of those topics (and more) pervaded the entertainment industry at a time when Americans were squabbling over the era's pressing issues.⁶

A Prejudicial Melody: Race and Ethnicity

Blackface historians have investigated the racial (and racist) overtones in minstrelsy, but the burnt-cork covered clowns have been underexamined. Clown historian George Bishop writes, “The clown knows no prejudice and has no axe to

grind.”⁷ Isaac F. Marcosson, contemporary biographer of longtime clown Jules Turnour, states, “The clown being a world citizen interprets a world humor in which there is neither borderline, race, nor creed.”⁸ The ethnic and racial content in the circus and its songsters, however, belie the claims by Bishop and Marcosson; clowns had axes to grind, and race was one of their favourite targets. Perhaps, as vaudeville historian Paul Distler suggests, the creation of the ethnic clown was a collective comedic defence mechanism, a way to conquer the unknown “by assimilating it through laughter.”⁹ Racism, prejudices, and stereotypes were commonplace in 19th-century America, and the songsters suggest Distler’s vaudeville theory can also be applied to circuses. Irish, German, African American, Chinese, and Jewish ethnicities did not escape the clown’s verbal skewer.

The Irish and Irish-Americans were one of the most consistently attacked ethnic groups upon which clowns loosed their tongues. In 1850, the Irish comprised 30% of New York’s total population but they received 70% of the city’s economic aid. The following year, police in New York estimated that half of their arrests involved Irish immigrants or those of Irish descent. These statistics supported the stereotype of the Irish as drunken and disorderly.¹⁰ The Irish were associated with the New York police force and its violent antebellum conflicts, especially on holidays like St. Patrick’s Day. One 1859 ditty features an Irish-American narrator singing about a stick he used on the Irish holiday to make “bits o’ skull to fly up in the air.” He eventually used it to kill his sweetheart and her admirer, but a jury acquitted the man and his “innocent stick.” Several songs drew ties between the violence and alcohol, and Irishmen were depicted as men that would “rather fight than ate [sic] a meal,” whether they attended “a wake or a fair,” but those types of depictions were replaced as the clown took aim at other groups.¹¹ In the song “Pinafore” from the Great London Circus’s songster, an Irish narrator and his friend (Jerry Shea) have purchased tickets to *H. M. S. Pinafore*. When the two friends arrive at the theatre, they discover that they had been duped: “Oh, but when we got there how the gang did stare, / And the doorkeeper insulted Jerry; / He says ... these Micks can’t read, / And them tickets are from Camden Ferry.” Instead of tickets to the comic opera, the Irishmen had purchased tickets to a transport ferry. The song made light of Irish illiteracy, but it may have elicited a certain amount of pity for the two men who were tricked out of their money and later punched in the face for their trouble.¹²

As the Gilded Age progressed and the Irish integrated themselves into the larger American society, the jester’s verbal jabs softened. In a parody song from the 1890s, the justice system is the target of ridicule and jest, and ethnicity takes an ancillary role, as a recently-arrived Irishman asks a policeman if he can tell the immigrant where to find the police station. The policeman “thought for a moment” and then, “Says he, ‘My friend I couldn’t, for I’m only over here / Two days myself, how could I tell?’”¹³

German immigrants had a slightly different reputation than their counterparts from Ireland, and the songsters bear that out. While the stereotypical

Deutschland emigrant drank stein after stein of lager ale in their *biertgartens*, a significant portion of Germans arrived in America as skilled artisans and could subsequently find higher paying jobs than their unskilled Irish counterparts. Indeed, some German immigrants were themselves wealthy. Frederick Miller left Württemberg and settled in Milwaukee in the mid-1850s. He used the \$10,000 in gold that he had brought with him to purchase a brewery which eventually became the Miller Brewing Company.¹⁴

The fictitious German-American who aspires to be a politician in the song “Political Senator” received praise from his fellow Americans. The song’s chorus proclaims:

Then give three cheers for the happy German race, / They will stick to
their country and never cause disgrace. / The honest-hearted German
can meet you face to face, / They’re the candidates we’re wanting in
our land.¹⁵

It is likely that Bonnie Runnells, the clown that sang “Political Senator,” intended to contrast German immigrants with the Irish-immigrant-powered political machine in New York City which stole millions from the city in the 1860s with bogus public works contracts.¹⁶ Political resistance to and intolerance of Irish-Catholic immigrants had played a major role in spawning the growth of the nativist Know-Nothing Party in the 1850s, a political party that based their platform on anti-Irish and anti-Catholic rhetoric and imagery.¹⁷ Whereas clowns depicted Irish as men that engaged in violence for almost no reason at all (especially in the antebellum period), the Deutschmen in songsters only fought if there was something at stake.

Some of America’s hardest workers, African-Americans, were held in bondage until the Civil War’s end. The entertainment industry rarely depicted the institution of slavery accurately, and the blacks whom clowns parodied or sang about were not portrayed in a positive manner. White Americans in blackface had become popular in the 1820s and 1830s, and several circuses featured blackface clowns and minstrel shows. Originally, blackface was filled with rough humour and fueled by class conflict, but by the 1850s the social commentary that accompanied blackface was toned down (to garner a larger audience) in favour of racial denigration.¹⁸

Blacks received the harshest comedic treatment in the songsters, and no circus gave African-Americans the chance to defend their race, opportunities circuses afforded to the Irish (Patterson) and the Germans (Runnells). In “The Old Farm Yard” from the 1858 songster sold by Spalding & Rogers, the blackfaced clown who played the role of a plantation slave, glossed over the details of “de darkey’s hoe and rake” and focused instead on “de darkey’s joy and pride, de harmony and cake” (a likely reference to cakewalking, a black parody of upper-class white culture,

which itself was later parodied by whites in the Gilded Age). The song's narrator has the stereotypical affection for his master:

Dars old Massa good and kind and allways[sic] look so smiling, / You
would think his heart was full of joy, / And it was over bileing; / But
now old Massa's dead and gone, he lives in death's cold arm, / He's left
poor Jeff, and all the rest alone upon de farm.¹⁹

Falling in line with proslavery arguments, former slaves in most songsters were ignorant or careless without their masters. Uncle Pete, the ex-slave protagonist in an 1876 song, indicates to the listeners that his freedom confuses him, "I'm lost, I'm bewildered, I'm dumbfounded."²⁰ That sort of racist contention had fueled antebellum arguments against manumission and worked against advances for freedmen during Reconstruction (1865-1877), as many former bondsmen were essentially kept in contractual (legal) bondage—economically and racially. One wonders what sort of impact this dishonest depiction of slavery had on white Americans born after the Civil War: did a clown in blackface singing about bondage form the base of white America's working knowledge of slavery? It could not have helped the Gilded Age's racial volatility: more than 2,500 blacks were lynched between 1882 and 1899.²¹

Songsters did not address those violent racist outbursts, but they did perpetuate violently racist stereotypes. The song "Miss Jones Came Back" reveals the middle-class's fear of miscegenation and amalgamation when "a bran' new coon ... ran away with another fellow's wife," a white woman named "Miss Jones."²² The song serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it ridicules money-chasing women, as Miss Jones abandons her black suitor "when the money got slack," and secondly, when Miss Jones eventually returns, she arrives "with a pair of black eyes and a hump on her back," seemingly explaining to white women that running off with a black man would surely result in domestic abuse. Whites' fear of miscegenation and amalgamation sat as part of the bedrock for legal and paralegal segregation, which spread across America during the Gilded Age.

The Chinese and Jews were two other minority groups which endured the sting of the clown's verbal barbs. In addition to helping construct the Transcontinental Railroad and other railroads in the western United States, the Chinese also planted, cultivated, and harvested citrus fruits, grapes, nuts, and other produce. As many as one-third of California's farm workers were Chinese immigrants. Faced with this influx of non-European immigration, American congressmen took action. The Page Law in 1875 barred Chinese women on suspicion of prostitution, and Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which virtually eliminated immigration from China. Nativist pro-labour forces, American-born whites who lobbied for limited immigration in order to exclude newcomers from industrial employment, resented the Chinese well after the exclusion act became law.²³ Talking clown John Lowlow bitterly complains in one

1896 ditty that the Chinese had taken jobs from whites because employers had already hired “those heathen Chinees [sic].” Lowlow implores the audience to “join hands with the bold King of Labor” in order to “get rid of ... the curse of our country, / The vampire that’s sucking our blood , / ... the dirty Chinees [sic].”²⁴ Contrary to Lowlow’s belief that Chinese workers deprived whites of industrial employment, racial hostility had forced Chinese labourers out of most industries by the 1880s. One clown wanted to “banish” the existing Chinese immigrants in the 1890s (along with “Poles ... and Turks”), while Adam Forepaugh’s circus introduces a song with a chorus that contained two lines of, “Ki yi, ki yi, ki ipi, ki yi,” indicative of the xenophobia that contributed to the exclusion act, as well as organised labour’s nativistic motivation to drive the Chinese from industrial jobs after the exclusion act had won congressional approval.²⁵

The irrational prejudices with which Jews had to deal in the Old World followed them to the New. The xenophobic Forepaugh songster also contained a number of “Hebrew Jokes, Gags, Chesnuts [sic], &c.” which pigeonholed Jews as dishonest and greedy. One “chesnut” tells the story of two Jewish suspender peddlers who had emigrated from Jerusalem and who made an agreement that the last one living had to put five thousand dollars in the other’s coffin. One of the men finally died, but the other peddler did not put his money in and consulted a Rabbi about the situation: “Der Rabbi says, ‘Put in der five thousand dollars, or you’ll never have a day’s rest.’ Der Rabbi met him two veeks afterwards and says, ‘Isaacs, vat did you put in, silver, gold or bills?’ He says, ‘I put in a check.’”²⁶

The expansion in targeted ethnic groups, from the Irish, Germans, and blacks during mid-19th century to include Chinese and Jews, demonstrates that race and ethnicity remained two of the clown’s favourite subjects regardless of how or when they arrived on America’s shores. The racial and ethnic clowning underlines a consistent pattern of racism and resistance to non-Anglo-Saxons throughout the 19th century.

Gender Relations: Men, Women, Marriage, Sex

“Who is it work from morn ’till night and never gets a rest?” asks a song in an 1887 songbook. “Man, poor man,” is the response which an entire audience is likely to have sung after lines like:

Who is it wears the old clothes while his wife will wear the best?
(Man, poor man) / Who is it that on Saturday night, when he receives
his pay, / Takes his money home, and into her lap does lay? / And only
asks for ten cents to go and have a shave?

The chorus explains that men ruled the country and died in the wars to save it, but men were governed by women, a prospect so bleak it causes the narrator to ask,

“Ain’t you sorry you was ever made?” The lyricist then turns his ire towards Gilded Age business concerns:

Who is it screamed murder when the [price of] coal began to raise
[sic]? / Who is it says coal dealers are monopolists to the core? / And
says he’ll sift the ashes before he will buy more? / And says he’ll burn
the fence, the front stoop and back door?

Interestingly, the song suggests that only men could unite to deal a blow to the coal industry, but doesn’t address the question of who was raising the prices of coal and profiting from the monopoly.²⁷

As wages rose and the middle class expanded, the clown suggested that fine attire did not equate with trustworthiness or manhood. A song from the 1877 self-proclaimed *The Jester’s World Songster* did not obscure its song’s message, but placed it in the title: “Judge Not a Man By His Clothing.” In an obvious attack on the middle and upper classes, the lyrics proclaim “Give me the man as a friend and neighbor, / Who toils at the loom, with the spade or the plough; / Who wins his diploma of manhood by labor, / And purchases wealth by the sweat of his brow.”²⁸ The second-to-last verse indicated that those engaged in jobs that did not require manual labour (and sweating) earned their “diploma of manhood” in a manner that was not fully masculine. The number of Americans that held “professional service” occupations (for example, salaried office and managerial positions) grew exponentially during this time. In 1860, roughly 750,000 people were “professionals,” but by 1890 that number had grown to over 2 million (and almost 4.5 million in 1910), outpacing the country’s rate of population growth.²⁹ Perhaps the way some of those managerial men dressed earned them scorn. The song “I’m a Dude” poked fun at dandies—men who seemed preoccupied with their looks. Fashionable Fred, a character from the song of the same name, wears stylish attire in order to fraternise with “all the world,” because “seedy dress” results in “distress.”³⁰ The Gilded Age man, not often associated with fashion concerns when compared to the Victorian woman, seemed to be in a precarious position: he could not place too much emphasis on his clothes, lest he were labelled a dandy dude, but if he did not invest in decent attire, he would be judged for his choice of clothing and, as Fashionable Fred warns, “All your friends will quickly turn their heads away.”³¹

Not content with joking about the male gender, clowns consistently attacked the women’s rights movement and procured laughs at the expense of the so-called fairer sex. Women’s suffrage, a cause associated with the middle and upper classes, gained neither traction nor support from circus songsters. Clowns depicted it as absurd and part of a dangerous trend. “Mrs. Johnson,” an 1855 song, places the wife alongside her husband in situations that any respectable antebellum or Gilded Age woman would have avoided: in a bowling alley, as a sailor on a ship, as a judge on the bench, on a firefighting engine, and as a boxer. The song ends with the one

occupation that was completely acceptable for women to have—motherhood—while also making an allusion to sexual intercourse: “But we’ve tasted deep of wedlock’s joys; / And I never mind the darling’s noise; / I’m pap to seventeen lovely boys.”³² Another tune from the same songbook ridicules women’s and African-American rights, two causes that were intricately related in 19th-century America. “There’s a queer time coming boys—a queer time coming,” warns the clown, “When the women will have got their rights, / And rule the world in black dress tights.” Not only would they “rule the world,” but when it came to courting, the song suggested that women would “pop the question to the men,” but the tables would eventually be turned on them because men would be able to say no. The 1855 song became unintentionally prophetic and declared there was “a queer time coming ... When all the darkies will be free, / And just the same as you or me.” Until the day arrived when women and blacks achieved equality, the song advised the white male members of the audience to enjoy their current dominant position.³³ In 1877, a “proken-hearted” and “boor old” Dutch clown laments that his wife had joined “Der Vommen’s Righd’s Sorosis” and then abandoned him. Tony Pastor’s “Don’t Get It on the Brain” simply stated, “Against Women’s Rights just make a dead set.” One wonders if the women in the audience were persuaded to sing along.³⁴

Like Barnum and other entertainment impresarios of the day, clowns tried to titillate without going so far as to cause an outrage. Bob Sherwood, a jester who had been apprenticed under Dan Rice after the Civil War and later performed for Barnum’s shows, admitted in his memoir that performances were sometimes “uncouth,” and proved as much with his version of the song “Pull Down the Blind.” The song has a number of verses in which the singer and his lover attempt to “make love,” but a soldier, a policeman, and neighbours interrupt them, so the chorus advises, “Pull down the blind, love; come don’t be unkind. / Tho’ we’re alone, bear this in mind: / Some one is looking, love, so pull down the blind.”³⁵ The songster for the 1884 Barnum & London circus contains a song suggestively titled “I’ll Meet Her When the Sun Goes Down,” with veiled phrases such as “In the woods we stroll all around,” and “We’ll be married when the sun goes down.”³⁶ Another song tells a cautionary tale about one man who went to see “living pictures” (live depictions of classic works of art or sculptures by men and women dressed in little clothing or in tights). Dan McCann, the song’s protagonist, took his wife to “a female show” and “when the [living] pictures came to view, he completely lost his head.” Mr. McCann “went wilder and on the stage he went, / And nearly bit the ears off the lady who was doing the Living Pictures.” The next living picture was Adam and Eve, “with their summer clothes on,” and Mr. McCann told his wife, “I cannot love you as I used to.” The moralistic message about the effects of nudity on a man and his marriage could not have been any clearer.³⁷

Allusions to sexual intercourse are absent from the majority of Gilded Age songsters, but almost all of them contained songs about love—the hope of winning one’s sweetheart, the struggles of a loveless marriage (often presented in a comical manner), or the sentimental and sorrowful tale of unrequited affection. A clown’s

performance would not have been complete without a joke about a mother-in-law or a wife with a sharp tongue. Many jokes also touched upon the ways in which wives spent all their husbands' money or their refusal to allow their husbands to enjoy themselves: drinking, smoking, and late nights at the saloon. One clown jokes that if a man wanted a wife but also wanted to enjoy himself once in a while, he should choose his partner "judiciously" by marrying "a woman with a wooden leg, and when you want a spree, steal the leg—she can't run after you!" The same clown later jokes about his sweetheart, the blacksmith's daughter:

Did you notice her bonnet—wasn't it a little duck—I gave her that;
then her boots did you see them—I gave her them; and her jacket did
you take notice of that:—wasn't it a beauty—I gave her that; and her
eyes: you must have noticed them.

"Yes," replied the ringmaster, "they were black." The clown responds, "*I gave her them!*" On the other hand, only a few pages later in the same songbook, the clown states, "If a man was a woman a fortnight he'd never / Strike a woman again."³⁸ An 1868 song gives a picture of the other side, a man who is bullied and physically abused by his spouse. The wife has also surprised her husband by bringing home two children (from a previous marriage or an adulterous affair) and has told him to raise the children; the husband refused, and his bride responded by hitting him with a broom, knocking him down a flight of stairs.³⁹ One joke makes the analogy that bad husbands are like bad coals because "they smoke, they go out, and they don't keep the pot boiling."⁴⁰ No doubt that the women in the audience laughed a bit more freely at that joke than ones about suffrage or domestic abuse.

Staying Classy: Economics

1879 to 1889 may have been America's most volatile decade in terms of civil disorders and labour unrest. Moreover, in the twenty-five years after 1880, more than 35,000 strikes, involving seven million participants, demonstrated the rift between management and labour. Clowns had not shied away from race or gender, and the subject of economics proved equally attractive. The same anti-monopoly sentiment embraced by Democrats and Republicans during the Progressive Era (a period which saw widespread support for moral and economic reform), also resonated with the clowns. The songsters are generally pro-labour and anti-capital—although as is the case with other topics, the songs do not all take a single-minded economic approach. Although the labour-management duel is sometimes thought of as an urban issue, the rural audiences to which circuses most often played understood the conflict, due to their interaction with and dependency on railroads and oil. The labour-oriented and pro-charity songs (which scolded the wealthy and uncharitable) must have resonated with spectators, otherwise the clowns would not have repeated them year after year, and the ideas clowns sprinkled throughout the songsters eventually gained traction in the Progressive Era.⁴¹

The American economy experienced unprecedented growth, but also suffered “panics” in 1857, 1873 and 1893, the last of which resulted in the failure of over 15,000 businesses.⁴² The middle class, composed of white-collar workers in urban office buildings, foremen and managers in factories, and large land-owning farmers in rural areas, did not escape the financial fallout these panics produced. The song “Poor, But a Gentleman Still” reminds those that had been bankrupted by the panics that a lack of wealth should not mean a lack of morality:

Reverses in business brought me to a stand; / ... My friends advised
me to fly from the land, / And seize upon all my loose cash; / But my
reputation was dearer to me / Than all the bright gold in my till, / So I
paid what I owed and proudly said, If I’m poor, I’m a gentleman still.⁴³

Some Americans survived the economic downturns through the charity of churches and other benevolent institutions; the have-nots, however, often felt that the haves were not charitable enough. In a song called “The Moneyless Man,” one poor man bemoans a lack of charity (“Is there no secret place on the face of the earth, / Where Charity dwelleth ...?”) and castigates the upper class for its opulent lavishness and ostensible indifference to those in need:

Then go to your halls where the chandelier’s light / Drives off with its
splendor the darkness of night; / Where the rich hanging velvet in the
shadowy fold, / Sweeps gracefully down in its trimming of gold ... / Go
there in your hall and find if you can / A welcoming smile for a
moneyless man?⁴⁴

Irish clown Tom Barry told economically-struggling spectators to wait for the financial tide to change in their favour, but not to expect such change to come through the aid of others. If some changed their financial situation with ill-gotten gains, Barnum’s clown told them not to worry, “For gold will gloss and cover quite a multitude of sins.”⁴⁵

More of the Gilded Age’s class rancour is to be found in the song “A Bit of My Mind.” Published in 1871, the song presciently told of the violence and unrest that occurred between labour and management in the following decades. The author spots “a young chap with more money than brains, / Dressed out in the finest clothes, / Look scornful and turn up his nose” at “some laboring man, with true blood in his veins,” and the singer confesses, “My arm is hard to restrain / From knocking the idiot blind.” In the next verse, the clown witnesses “a poor seamstress” working through the night:

While her wealthy employer grows rich; / If that man who grows fat
on the blood of the poor, / Were to my tender mercies consigned, / I
mightn’t assault him, but really, I’m sure, / I’d give him a bit of my
mind.⁴⁶

The enlarging middle class was matched in growth by the expanding industrial labour force, which, by the turn of the 20th century, comprised one-third of the nation's population (a third of which was immigrant). Roughly 40% of those workers hovered below the poverty line and the 1894 song "The Almighty Dollar," seems to justify—or at least provide reasoning behind—the violence associated with labour unrest:

A man without a dollar is in very hard luck, / It is folly then to preach
to him of energy and pluck, / He is bound to think the ship of state
upon a snag has struck, / If he hasn't got a dollar in the world.⁴⁷

While performing as a clown for John Robinson's show, John Lowlow satirically critiqued society's monetary obsession: "Then beat your neighbor all you can, / No matter what you do; / For they all look out for number one, / And paddle their own canoe." A few tunes spoke of the bond between working and middle classes: "When the bell rang for meal time my father'd come down, / He'd eat with the workmen about the ground, / He'd share wid a lab'rer, and say he'd go bail, / You would ne'er reach the bottom of dad's dinner pail."⁴⁸

The good feelings engendered by the "dinner pail" did not extend to big business in the songbooks. As American commerce underwent a revolution in scope, strength, and organisation after the Civil War, some lamented the sea change. An 1887 ditty reminisced about "golden years ago": they had vanished and "the mill-wheel now is silent." Incorporation, mechanisation, and the migration of New Englanders to the American west popularised the sentiment that the only flourishing part of New England were its graveyards.⁴⁹ A 1901 tune paints a bleak picture of American life under the rule of Big Business:

The trusts own ev'rything in sight and some things that are not, / The
stuff we eat and drink with in their clutches they have got, / They've
jumped the price of all we use, including what we wear, / And now
they've organized a trust to sell us liquid air ... / They'll shut off the air
until you [pay the price], and you don't breathe, that's nice!⁵⁰

Interestingly enough, the clowns offered no comment on the merging and monopolistic tactics in which some of the circus's more famous impresarios engaged: after the colossal merger between the circuses of P. T. Barnum and James A. Bailey in 1881, Bailey over the next two decades acquired ownership stakes in the shows of Forepaugh, Sells, and Buffalo Bill.

More often than not, songsters took the side of labour in the virulent labour-versus-capital struggle that waged throughout the Gilded Age and into the Progressive Era. An 1883 song made it clear for whose side it cheered: "I do not like to see the power of capital increase, / By labor was our country built—and may its

power increase.”⁵¹ Clown Bob Hunting explained that the Knights of Labor, “a friend of the working man,” could help raise wages and destroy monopolies.⁵² Not all songs, however, harboured the hostility evident in the battle between management and workers. “Let capital shake hands with labor,” one clown crooned, “Let the poor have the bread that they earn.”⁵³ Capital and labour, however, did not shake hands, and the hostility of which the clown sang continued well into the next century.

Binge Thinking: Government, Politics, Temperance

You can quench fire with oil, you can knock a gnat’s eye out with a brickbat, but there is one thing you can never do—find a policeman when you want him; or so went the Gilded Age joke. Authority figures were frequently the focal target of clown capers, from the local police, to the White House, to the middle-class moralists pushing for a Constitutional prohibition on alcohol. The clown had aped and goaded the ringmaster, a tangible figure of authority, for a century, and he simply broadened his brushstrokes to include targets outside the big top. The period from 1850 to 1901 was one of tremendous political tumult and Americans had a hard time escaping politics and political opinions, even in the circus.⁵⁴

Policemen and lawyers, two groups associated with local government, also found themselves in the clown’s comedic crosshairs. Multiple songs made connections between the Irish and their ranks in the police force. Michael Karney, the fictitious cop in the 1855 song “The New Policeman,” confesses that he has just arrived from Dublin. The chorus then defines the job’s qualities: “Ranting, rollicking Irish joys, / Always quarrelling ne’er at peace man, / Kissing the girls and licking the boys; / Oh that’s the life of a new policeman.” The final verse hints at how he made use of his occupation’s position of authority over women:

I’m in with every servant maid, / For mutton and love I’ve ever an itching, / And of being caught I’m not afraid, / For sure I’m there to guard the kitchen. / And then, too, don’t the scriptures say, / Multiply too, and increase men, / So if we only have our way; / We’ll fill the city with little policemen. ⁵⁵

Forty years later, the police still had a reputation for corruption and abuse. One jester attacked the entire law enforcement system in an 1894 song that alleged that for every five years on the force, a cop received another promotion stripe, but the singer insists that their coats and pants would have prison stripes if they were investigated.⁵⁶ Another singer quips that “a policeman’s club gently lays down” men that are painting the town, and in addition to the bump on the head, they get fined twenty dollars.⁵⁷ The songsters alleged that lawyers possessed the same type of greed. One merrymaker likens the world to a frog pond:

The lawyer is a marsh frog, he croaks but for his job, sir, / Upon some mossy bank he sits awaiting for a job, sir, / But if you chance to want

his aid and come without the pelf, sir, / He'll quickly leap into the stream, and let you croak yourself sir.⁵⁸

The avaricious lawyer is one of the only songster stereotypes that still plays well in modern America; the other is the corrupt politician. The graft and corruption of the Ulysses S. Grant Administration angered many Americans and an 1877 clown voices his displeasure, though he does not have much faith in change:

Our country has been in a very bad fix, / Things have been going rather queer, / Some office-holders have done bad tricks, / And should be made to pay very dear; / They squandered our money, impoverished the poor, / The country they'll soon disarrange; / If politicians would leave off their stealing, / Don't you think it would be a great change?⁵⁹

Barnum's clown had little faith in his elected leaders and apathetically chimed, "Whoever is elected 'twill just be the same" in one song, and "Which party's most honest no voter can tell" in another.⁶⁰

Clowns did not comment on past events only but actively took sides in contemporary debates—something demonstrated by the split in society over temperance. The American Society for the Promotion of Temperance, more commonly known as the American Temperance Union, was founded in 1826. Seven years later there were 4,000 local offices and 500,000 members (Barnum was a strong advocate of temperance). Temperance Union members signed a pledge that they would never touch a drop of alcohol thereafter—an insurmountable task for some. The clown in the Tom Vance Circus tells a tale of hypocrisy; after the singer and his wife had "stood on poverty's brink," they "joined the Teetotal Society," but the clown reveals that his wife "goes on the spree." The man admits that he had got drunk with an old friend (also a member of the Society) and that a priest had reported them, not only to the police, but, as the man exclaims, "D—n him, he told the Society." To top it off, the singer reveals that he is drunk at that very moment, but tells the audience not to worry:

I'll go and get a strong cup of tea, / And some pickles—they'll soon bring me round ... / As chairman I must be all right, / And fill up my post with propriety, / So I'll wish you all very good night, / I've got to lecture up at the Society.⁶¹

The moral high ground upon which the middle class had founded the Temperance Union had become a part of the battleground.

One of the prominent points of argument advanced by temperance disciples was that the expenditure on alcohol kept Americans from achieving economic stability and financial advancement. Bonnie Runnells, Barnum's Dutch burlesquer,

sang the purposefully ironic song “A Night Cap,” in which its main characters stayed out all night drinking and took their night cap at dawn. “Night Cap’s” most interesting content, though, was the sentiment that there was no point in getting up early to work hard if one stayed poor: “There’s lots of early risers, / All for Poverty’s sake.”⁶² Why abstain from alcohol if there existed no genuine chance of monetary improvement? The song “Loafer’s Advice,” on the other hand, stood in direct opposition to Runnells’ ironic song and embraces the middle-class belief that alcohol and chronic poverty were interrelated: “Some loafers you will see go to work, / And work till they get paid. / And then around the bar-room will lurk, / Until their money is played.” The chorus pointedly asks: “Now what is the good of hard working, / While you love whiskey? / You may work hard all your life-time, / And then will have no money.” The final verse offers this advice: “But if you want to be prosperous, / And lay your money in store, / Go join some temperance society, / And then drink whiskey no more.”⁶³ In order to help the working class save its money—and show up to work on Monday morning—the middle class pushed for a prohibition amendment to the Constitution and Congress entertained the notion for the first time in the 1870s. The clown in the song “New Laws” decries the notion of such an amendment:

I’ve just been thinking what strange things we’ll see, / If they keep on making new laws; / And if you’ll just listen with me you’ll agree ... / We can’t get a drink, we’ll be left in the lurch, / We’ll have to drink tonic that’s made out of birch, / And they’ll have us all members of the Methodist church, / If they keep on making new laws.⁶⁴

Like most Americans, circuses and their clowns and songsters were divided in their stance on temperance. Clowns, however, were not prohibited from making anti-temperance statements, even if they worked for teetotal employers (as in the case of Bonnie Runnells who clowned for Barnum). Several impresarios fined or fired employees for drunkenness, even while the songs of their jesters seemed to criticise such measures. The divide over temperance in songsters not only mirrors the split in the general population, but it suggests clowns voiced their own opinions, even if they stood in opposition to those of their employers.⁶⁵

Conclusion: Clowns, Children, and Cultural Commentary

The three-ring circus spelled the downfall of the talking clown because arenas became so large that clowns could only communicate through pantomime and slapstick. After the turn of the 20th century, most circuses discontinued aftershows as their employees demanded extra wages for performing in an ostensibly “extra” show. With the death of the talking clown, the circus lost some of its political dimension—a fact that perhaps contributed to the public’s growing perception of the circus as more of a child’s amusement than an arena that entertained (and instructed) all ages. Gregory Renoff suggests that when circuses stopped offering street parades in the 1910s and 1920s, the industry’s ability to

transform towns and cities “into amusement spaces” resulted in a significant loss of popularity.⁶⁶ As well, the amount of self-generated discussion that the circus created diminished after the abolition of the street parade. Moreover, the jester’s ability to offend was significantly lowered when he was no longer able to speak or sing. The death of the talking clown also signalled the jester’s demise as one of the show’s stars. No longer did the acts come to a halt as a single clown sang a song attacking Women’s suffrage or advancing Temperance. By 1900, most big shows had a score of jesters, and Ringling lead the way with forty men that performed their zany tasks without words. What comment could the clown offer on monopolies or miscegenation in a mime-like straightjacket? The decrease of vocal clowning and the increase in the quantity of jesters “organized” clown performances “into a children’s entertainment.”⁶⁷

What the circus and their songsters reveal are the thoughts and fears of an entire generation expressed in a public setting—often with a dose of laughter (at least for 19th-century audiences)—sometimes supported by the middle class as it sought to bring the circus into their sphere of influence. The circus, its clowns, and their songsters aimed to “amaze and instruct young and old,” and it is clear that although the instructions differed as various groups offered their varying opinions on the public issues, popular entertainment remained an arena for political and cultural debate.⁶⁸

¹ “Billy Nubbs the Poet,” *Tom Vance’s Circus Songster* (New York: T. W. Strong, 1855), 16, Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays [hereafter HCAPP], John Hay Special Collections Library, Brown University, Providence, RI.

² David Carlyon, *Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You’ve Never Heard Of* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 7.

³ Gregory Renhoff, *The Big Tent: The Traveling Circus in Georgia, 1820-1930* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2008), chapters 5 and 6.

⁴ John H. Townsen, *Clowns* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1976).

⁵ Carlyon, 180.

⁶ Carlyon, 5.

⁷ George Bishop, *The World of Clowns* (Los Angeles: Brooke House Publishers, 1976), xi.

⁸ Isaac F. Marcossou, *The Autobiography of a Clown as Told to Isaac F. Marcossou* (New York: Moffat, Yard, 1910), 46.

⁹ Paul A. Distler, “Ethic Comedy in Vaudeville and Burlesque,” in *American Popular Entertainment: Papers and Proceedings of the Conference on the History of American Popular Entertainment*, ed. Myron Matlaw (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 36.

¹⁰ Laurence Senelick, *The Age and Stage of George L. Fox, 1825-1877* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988), 45.

¹¹ “Darling Old Stick,” *Clown’s Comic and Sentimental Song Book* (New York: Torrey Brothers, 1859), 34-35; “Paddy Is the Boy,” *Clown’s Comic Songster* (1871), 25; “The Maguires,” *Billy Burke’s Barnum & Great London Circus Songster* (New York: NYPPC, 1882), RLPLRC.

¹² “Pinafore,” *Johnny Patterson’s Great London Circus Irish Clown Songster* (New York: NYPPC Co. [hereafter NYPPC], 1879[?]), 14, HCAPP.

¹³ “Irish Jokes,” *The Great Forepaugh Show Songster* (New York: NYPPC, 1887[?]), 28, HCAPP;

- ¹⁴ Kathleen N. Conzen, *Immigrant Milwaukee, 1836-1860: Accommodation and Community in a Frontier City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1976), 106.
- ¹⁵ "Political Senator," *Bonnie Runnells' Great Barnum & London Songster* (New York: NYPPC, 1881[?]), 6, HCAPP;
- ¹⁶ Andrew B. Callow, *The Tweed Ring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 17.
- ¹⁷ Ronald P. Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1971), 7-8.
- ¹⁸ Robert M. Lewis, ed., *From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2003), 66-69.
- ¹⁹ "The Old Farm Yard," *Ross' Minstrel Melodies [Spaulding & Rogers Circus]* (Philadelphia: R. F. Simpson, 1858), 9, HCAPP.
- ²⁰ "Poor Uncle Pete," *Heywood Brothers* (New York: Ornum & Co., 1876[?]), 46, RLPLRC.
- ²¹ Leslie H. Fishel, Jr., "The African-American Experience," in *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America*, ed. Charles W. Calhoun (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996), 146.
- ²² "Miss Jones Came Back," *Sun Bros. Songster* (New York: Dicks, 1894), 13, HCAPP.
- ²³ Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876-1915* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 42; Joan S. Wang, "Race, Gender, and Laundry Work: The Roles of Chinese Laundrymen and American Women in the United States, 1850-1950," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 24 (Fall 2004): 60-61.
- ²⁴ ; "Heathen Chinees [sic]," *John Lowlow with John Robinson's 10 Big Shows Songster* (New York: NYPPC, 1896[?]), RLPLRC.
- ²⁵ "Change in Business All Around," *Bob Hunting's Great New York Songster* (New York: NYPPC, 1893[?]), 3, RLPLRC; "Little Ah Sid," *Forepaugh* (1887), 18.
- ²⁶ *Great Forepaugh* (1887), 29.
- ²⁷ "Man, Poor Man," *Forepaugh* (1887), 19.
- ²⁸ "Judge Not a Man By His Clothing," *The Jester's World Songster* (New York: Clinton T. DeWitt, 1877), HCAPP;
- ²⁹ Schlereth, 29.
- ³⁰ "I'm a Dude," *Hurlbert & Hunting's Great Circus Songster* (n.p.: 1887[?]), RLPLRC.
- ³¹ "Fashionable Fred," *Stone & Murray's Circus* (n.p.: 1870[?]), RLPLRC.
- ³² "Mrs. Johnson," *Tom Vance*, 5.
- ³³ "There's a Queer time Coming Boys," *Tom Vance*, 32-33.
- ³⁴ "Don't Get It on the Brain," *The Jester's World Songster* (New York: Clinton T. DeWitt, 1877), 20, HCAPP.
- ³⁵ Robert E. Sherwood, *Here We Are Again: Recollections of an Old Circus Clown* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1926), 66.
- ³⁶ "I'll Meet Her When the Sun Goes Down," *Barnum and London Circus Clown and Concert Song and Joke Book* (New York: NYPPC, 1884[?]), 20, HCAPP.
- ³⁷ *Sun Bros. Shows Songster* (New York: Dicks Publishing House, 1894[?]), 9, HCAPP.
- ³⁸ Thomas Lawrence, "The 1871 gagbook of Thomas Lawrence," in *The Victorian Clown*, ed. Jacky Bratton and Ann Featherstone (London: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 165, 205, 215.
- ³⁹ "Scolding Wife," *Bob Smith's Song and Joke Book* (New York: Robert DeWitt, 1868[?]), 44-45, HCAPP.
- ⁴⁰ Lawrence, 200.
- ⁴¹ Schlereth, xi-xiv.
- ⁴² *Ibid*, 33.
- ⁴³ "Poor, But a Gentleman Still," *Jester's World Songster* (1877), 19.
- ⁴⁴ "The Moneyless Man," *Barnum and London* (1884), 23-24.
- ⁴⁵ "Wait for the Turn of the Tide," *Stone & Murray*, 11-12; "Gold! Gold! Gold!" *P. T. Barnum's Show: The Clown's Song Book* (n.p., 1873[?]), 2.
- ⁴⁶ "A Bit of My Mind (Tony Pastor's Version)," *The Clown's Song Book* (1871), 4.
- ⁴⁷ "The Almighty Dollar," *Sun Bros.* (1894), 1.

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- ⁴⁹ "Maid of the Mill," *Great Forepaugh* (1887), 12; Schlereth, 35.
- ⁵⁰ "For Further Particulars, Read the Papers," *Forepaugh and Sells* (1901).
- ⁵¹ "Things I Don't Like to See," *Great New York Circus Songster* (New York: NYPPC, 1883), RLPLRC.
- ⁵² "Got There Just the Same," *Hurlbert & Hunting* (1887).
- ⁵³ "Don't Put the Poor Workingman Down," *Great London Circus Songster* (New York: NYPPC, 1880), 4-5, RLPLRC.
- ⁵⁴ Lawrence, 183.
- ⁵⁵ "The New Policeman," *Tom Vance*, 48-49.
- ⁵⁶ Parody on He's a Good Thing, Push Him Along," *Sun Bros.* (1894), 8.
- ⁵⁷ "Don't Cher Know?," *Wheeler Bros.* (New York: Dick's Publishing House, 1893[?]), 27.
- ⁵⁸ "The World," *Bob Smith* (1868), 47.
- ⁵⁹ "That Would Be a Great Change," *Jester's World Songster* (1877), 13.
- ⁶⁰ "Not Much" and "In Other Respects We Are Doing Quite Well," *Barnum & London Songster* (New York: NYPPC, 1885), RLPLRC.
- ⁶¹ Don't Tell the Society," *Tom Vance*, 39-41.
- ⁶² "A Night Cap," *Bonnie Runnells* (1881), 10.
- ⁶³ "Loafer's Advice," *The Clown's Song Book* (1871), 24;
- ⁶⁴ *Wheeler Bros.*, 23.
- ⁶⁵ A contract for Barnum & Bailey stipulates that the employee must "remain sober." Barnum's Circus Records, Small Collections, RLPLRC; An 1887 contract from the Ringlings to a funambulist asked for the vague term "proper conduct" ("drunkenness" is specifically prohibited in the regulations for one of their 1910 contracts). Ringling Bros. Records 1883-1917, Small Collections, RLPLRC; Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Renoff, 166.
- ⁶⁷ Ringling Bros. World's Greatest Shows courier, 1900, RLPLRC; Ibid., 1902, RLPLRC.
- ⁶⁸ *Miami County (Peru, IN) Sentinel*, 17 April 1884.