

***Afterpieces:  
A miscellany of well-considered trifles***

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## For the sake of Variety

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In the historiography of popular entertainment during the 20th century, we face a regrettable imbalance. For the period following World War 2, a wide range of studies has grown up covering all the significant areas of popular entertainment, so we not only have extensive knowledge of its historical development over this period but also in many cases sophisticated analytical treatments of the forms of entertainment that have prevailed. The imbalance is with the first half of the 20th century, for there is no equivalent body of work covering this period. An immediate qualification is in order, for this claim does not apply to historical studies of film and cinema during the age of the dream palace, with similar work on the early days of radio not far behind. The claim I am making is specifically with Britain in mind, and most of all with the tradition of variety theatre that developed out of the music hall. Popular music studies and popular culture studies are both highly relevant to this tradition, yet compared with the work devoted to the period subsequent to the advent of rock 'n' roll and skiffle, there is a huge dearth of scholarship, and variety entertainment has been the main victim of this. It is a serious case of neglect, and it is high time it was redressed. The purpose of this afterpiece is to sketch out why it has happened, and to ask why we should care.

Another term for popular entertainment is light entertainment, and variety falls squarely within its semantic ambit. Eric Maschwitz, head of Light Entertainment at BBC television in the late-1950s/early-1960s, hated the term and is said to have asked rhetorically what it was meant to be opposite to, for obviously heavy entertainment is a contradiction in terms, and while dark entertainment could be applied to certain film and television genres, it sounds rather contrived. Maschwitz's hostility and frustration are understandable, but as a term denoting forms of diversion that are neither intellectually nor emotionally taxing, the term is entrenched in common usage and cannot simply be swept away. Variety's close

association with it may explain the lack of serious interest, yet we are long past the cultural values that informed Leavisite cultural elitism, mass culture critique and Sir John Reith's 'distaste for levity,' and while television's own many varieties of light entertainment, from chat shows to *Strictly Come Dancing*, do not receive as much critical attention as other broadcast genres, they have not been neglected in the same way as live variety. If the humanities and social sciences have at least accommodated popular aesthetics in their purview, there is nevertheless a strongly residual snobbishness evident in the neglect of variety. For many of those who came of age in the late-1950s and 1960s, there was a definite turning away from variety in its associations with entertainment enjoyed by their elders, its contrast with the energy and excitement of skiffle and rock'n'roll, and its amalgamation of musical and non-musical acts. Those who have been influential in the emergence of popular music studies as a distinct field of scholarship have, to a great extent, inherited this attitude of rejection with regard to the variety tradition, not only because it is old hat, but also because it is felt to lack in seriousness, passion, expressive quality and social import. Variety has long been distinctly uncool as a form of popular entertainment, and music scholars have colluded in making it so.

If this explains the burgeoning of work on post-war popular music genres in comparison with their pre-war counterparts in variety, we need to confront another historiographical imbalance, for a considerable body of work has also grown up around popular leisure and entertainment during the Victorian period. Three obvious examples of this show how the principles of variety developed prior to its golden age in the middle decades of the 20th century. The circus, the music hall and the minstrel show offered a motley assortment of acts and performances. They did so of course in the different ways that defined them but each of them presented an eclectic package of entertainment. The variety show extended the popular appeal for miscellany and did so to some extent in its own manner, with no Chairman or Mr Interlocutor, for example, just programmes and number boards on either side of the proscenium. Variety refurbished and streamlined the rich mixtures offered by its forebears, and in its heyday was open to innovation, inclined to sophistication and ready to incorporate ragtime and jazz. As a result it became the most significant form of live popular entertainment in the 1930s and 1940s. Why, then, is there no academic literature dealing with it to match that focusing on the circus, music hall and minstrel show?

It is true that blackface minstrelsy in Britain has suffered neglect, certainly in contrast to its North American counterpart, but that has to some extent been redressed. The circus has not attracted the same amount of historical attention as the music hall, but there are serious studies of it nonetheless. Of these three examples, the music hall has generated the most diverse research and the most fertile scholarship.<sup>1</sup> This is, at least in part, due to a sense of considerable contrast between music hall and its successor, with music hall being seen as culturally more vibrant and democratic, less governed by the forces of commercialism, less hemmed

in by the constraints of respectability. Such perception of their differences provides a further reason for the prejudice that has grown up around variety, when compared both to the nostalgic celebration of early-20th century writing about the music hall, and the analytical interrogation of it in work of the past thirty years or so. Yet as Dave Russell has noted, in a measured push against anti-variety prejudice, the negative assessments of variety, whether made retrospectively or by diehard music hall aficionados, ‘underestimate its success in constructing new constituencies of support and its fostering of new entertainment styles and practices, while overestimating the extent of its “respectablization”’.<sup>2</sup> Such assessments also detract from, and fail to contribute to, the analysis of its enormous popularity. Its popularity may have been exploited, but clearly many people across Britain relished the changes that were being made to the variety format. They flocked to the shows and refused to pine for yesteryear.

If we turn to popular culture studies to seek an explanation of the academic indifference to variety theatre, we can see that it did not sit happily with the agenda that developed in this field from the 1970s onwards. High up on this agenda was the generalised experience of those at the lower end of the social scale, while popular culture from below, especially in the interests of protest, strife and resistance, was of far more interest than commercially-driven escapism, so seen. The term ‘escapism’ is now regarded as conceptually naive and simplistic as well as critically dismissive, but implicitly at least this is the view that has prevailed, particularly as the wind has dropped out of the sails of popular culture studies since the 1990s.

It is of course not the case that variety has been entirely overlooked. It is easy enough, for example, to find detailed information about particular acts and performers, whether online or in such printed sources as memoirs and biographies, while a small handful of scholarly studies deal with forms of music, entertainment and leisure closely akin to interwar and immediate post-war variety. James Nott’s investigation of popular music and dance in interwar Britain, and Catherine Parsonage’s examination of the introduction and development of jazz in Britain, are both fine examples of how the propensity to focus exclusively on post-World War 2 music genres may be effectively countered.<sup>3</sup>

The most significant study of variety, following on from Roger Wilmut’s pioneering and still valuable work of the mid-1980s, is the recent historical study by Oliver Double.<sup>4</sup> To a considerable extent Double retraces the historical steps taken by Wilmut. This is true mainly of the first half of the book, and is in some ways unavoidable because it is there that Double charts the rise and fall of variety theatre. Wilmut similarly moves from the 1920s to the end of the 1950s, but intermixes a chronological and thematic treatment. Double most significantly advances beyond Wilmut in the second half of his book where he attends to performance dynamics and the sources of variety’s popular appeal. These he ascribes to personality, ‘the first requisite when it comes to pleasing an audience,’ as variety critic Reginald

Barlow put it; intimate connection between performer and audience, the art of rapport and 'getting over'; extraordinary skills, as for instance in acrobatics, escapology, trapeze, paper tearing, prestidigitation and ventriloquism, making particular acts distinctive and special; and finally, novelty, the constant quest for new faces, new acts, new turns to old tricks. The chapters dealing with these four core elements begin to recreate a sharp appreciation of what drew the crowds to the twelve weekly shows offered at the grand-scale palaces of variety. Richard Dyer, who Double does not mention, has also attributed the pleasures of variety to one or other combination of eliminating qualities which break through starkly to reality, acknowledging everyday reality but against it offering a celebration of fellow-feeling and the warmth of the immediate moment, accentuating the positive, and making the best of a bad world.<sup>5</sup> Both Dyer and Double are at one in affirming the key purpose of variety – 'the honest, unashamed pursuit of delight' – for sheer, unadulterated delight in attractive personalities, active audience response, astonishing feats of skill and continual novelty was what variety offered, and what lay at the heart of its success as stage entertainment. In the words of John Carlsen, admittedly a partisan correspondent as press representative for the Moss Empires chain, the music hall had changed, yet 'with all the streamlining and improved comforts consistent with present-day requirements, the principles involved remain the same – to transport the public to delights outside the normal experience of their daily lives.'<sup>6</sup>

There is much to be learned from this, particularly because it contrasts so much with how popular entertainment has developed over the past fifty years or so. Variety has been ignored by theatre historians as much as music historians because of its lack of realism and seriousness, and even more because of its garish vulgarity and cheap thrills. Yet how dated these terms of opprobrium – vulgarity and cheapness – now seem, especially in the face of the abundance of talent and the liveliness of the entertainment stemming from its incessant switches of apprehension across such a heterogeneous assortment of acts. Variety's vibrant collage of acts and performances presaged in a number of ways what came after it. Although he was referring to Edwardian variety, Dave Russell's view – that variety 'held within it the seeds of many of the most successful elements of later-20th century popular culture' – applies just as much, if not even more to its mid-twentieth century revivalist forms.<sup>7</sup> If this is so, then it is not only our historical understanding which will remain deficient, for we shall also fail to refine our appreciation of the enduring legacy of the variety tradition. Variety may contrast with much post-war popular culture, but as Double makes clear in an interesting final chapter, there are significant lines connecting it to variety, not only in television's various adaptations and extensions of it but also in the ways it has provided aesthetic styles and approaches for the alternative theatre movement (Theatre Workshop and the 7:84 Company, for example) and the contemporary comedy circuit, which has been partly founded on a conscious attempt to revive variety. He shows that both stand-up and the rock gig are rooted in variety, and

notes that such singers and musicians as Ray Davies, Ian Dury, Billy Bragg, John Lydon, Suggs and Damon Albarn have acknowledged that they have feelings of affinity with, or have drawn inspiration from, the variety tradition. Taking up only the most obvious examples here, Davies's 'Dedicated Follower of Fashion' stands in a clear lineage with the *lions comiques*, while many of Dury's character songs strongly echo those heard on the music-hall stage.<sup>8</sup> If ever there was a cue for an as yet unwritten study in popular music scholarship, here it is – staring us in the face.

Jacky Bratton has commented that as a site of national nostalgia, the Victorian music hall has 'come to be a glittering, warm, tinkling projection of "the world we have lost"'.<sup>9</sup> Virtually the opposite could be said of interwar and immediate post-war variety in Britain, and this also helps explain its scholarly neglect. It is a world which few seem to care about having lost. Contrary to this, I would argue that we should care about variety theatre in the middle years of the last century because without insightful study of the kind to which Double's book is pointing, we lack in historical understanding of one of the major forms of early-20th century popular culture, one which earlier generations savoured and often treasured in the memory. If nostalgic sentiment has not been woven around it, that in itself is significant, and we should explore why. Indeed, we need a fuller and historically more extended explanation of anti-variety prejudice as a first step to overcoming it, but far more importantly we need to make good the neglect of this distinctive form of stage entertainment, building on Oliver Double's summary history and discussion of its key dynamics as a protean cultural form. Variety possessed so many features and facets, and they cry out for thematic treatment and finely spun cultural analysis. Following Double's new book, my aim in this short piece has been to think again about the scholarly neglect of variety, and finally to issue a call to action, for paying serious attention to variety is long overdue. We should not hesitate to do so any longer.

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<sup>1</sup> For the circus, see Brenda Assael, *The Circus and Victorian Society* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005); George Speaight, *A History of the Circus* (London: Tantivy, 1980); Helen Stoddart, *Rings of Desire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Paul Schlicke, 'Circus' in Schlicke ed. *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). For the music hall, see Peter Bailey ed. *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986); Jacky Bratton ed. *Music Hall: Performance and Style* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986); Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), Part 2. For the minstrel show, see Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (Aldershot UK and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2008) and Derek Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Other important forms of popular entertainment espousing the principles of variety include cabaret, musical comedy, revue, and the pantomime, all of which have not suffered the same neglect as variety theatre.

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<sup>2</sup> Dave Russell, "Varieties of Life: The Making of the Edwardian Music Hall," in Michael Booth and Joel Kaplan eds. *The Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 64.

<sup>3</sup> James Nott, *Music for the People* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Catherine Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880-1935* (Aldershot UK and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2005). For a detailed 'who's who' of music hall and variety, see Roy Busby, *British Music Hall* (London: Paul Elek, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Roger Wilmut, *Kindly Leave the Stage: The Story of Variety 1919-1960* (London: Methuen, 1985); Oliver Double, *Britain Had Talent: A History of Variety Theatre* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). Louis Barfe's *Turned Out Nice Again* (London: Atlantic, 2009) offers some background to variety but this is 'thin gruel,' as Robert Hanks put it in his review (*Independent*, November 14, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Dyer, *Light Entertainment* (London: BFI, 1973), chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> John A. Carlsen, "Music Hall Memories," *The Times*, September 1, 1951: 5.

<sup>7</sup> Russell, "Varieties of Life," 61.

<sup>8</sup> For *lions comiques*, see Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chapter 5, and Christopher Breward, "As I Walked Along the Bois de Boulogne": Subversive Performances and Masculine Pleasures in Fin-de-Siècle London' in Rudy Koshar ed. *Histories of Leisure* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2002), chapter 13.

<sup>9</sup> Jacky Bratton, "The Music Hall" in Kerry Powell ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 180.