

Introduction

In 1852 a Select Committee on Public Houses published the results of its enquiry into the licensing laws relating to pubs, beerhouses, dancing saloons, coffee houses, theatres and other public places of entertainment. A part of the report was also devoted to the early manifestations of a new place of entertainment: the music hall. One witness to the committee stated that many pub owners, especially in the large manufacturing towns, had begun to set up so-called 'music saloons' which offered entertainment in addition to alcohol. This entertainment consisted of music, singing in character, many forms of dancing including clog dancing, and juggling and tumbling by specially engaged performers. Some of the music saloons were already remarkably large. The three largest venues in Manchester – the Casino, the Victoria Saloon and the Polytechnic Hall – enjoyed average audiences amounting to 25,000 a week, the majority consisting of young mill hands of both sexes. The witness had undertaken random surveys in the Casino on seven Saturdays and, as a result, was able to establish the following age-structure of the audience. About 10 per cent were young people under the age of fifteen, a further 25 per cent were teenagers; 50 per cent were between twenty and thirty, and the rest were men and women over thirty. The relationship of men to women was roughly 3:1; in the Victoria Saloon 2:1.¹

The committee was set up to enquire whether the current laws were sufficient to cope with the delicate aim of protecting both the revenue derived from alcohol taxes in the institutions under review and also public morality. Time and again the members of the commission tried to establish the influence which the various institutions had on their audiences. In this respect the early music halls made a comparatively bad impression. The above witness, for example, suspected that music saloons had only been introduced in order to promote the consumption of alcohol by keeping customers in the beerhouses for a longer period of time.

The witness's statement gives a more precise description of the sceptical public perception of the early music halls, their programme of entertainment and their audiences than the majority of the ensuing literature on the halls. Music Hall began around the middle of the nineteenth century in the industrial centres of Britain and the capital, London. At first it took place in pubs which had been extended to include a singing saloon. But before long the singing saloon developed into an independent institution in which pub gastronomy,

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although still playing an important role, took second place to entertainment. And singing saloons in turn gave birth to the music hall. The halls spread quickly in the 1850s, offering the inhabitants of the major conurbations a mixture of pub gastronomy and social communication with entertainment from the fairgrounds and concert rooms. As early as 1850 the Star Music Hall in Bolton (population 60,000) could boast of a capacity of 1,500; and in the 1860s the four largest halls in Manchester (population 350,000) had a combined capacity of over 8,500. London, in 1866, contained between two and three hundred small halls and thirty large ones with an average capacity of 1,500, some of them holding up to 3,500. In the 1890s the music halls developed into variety theatres catering to all classes of society. But in the early decades they catered predominantly to working-class audiences of both sexes and also to some members of the lower middle class.

The music hall can thus be characterised as an institution which was born 'from below' (i.e. from the pubs) and was rapidly subjected to a thoroughgoing process of commercialisation. In the context of this book it is regarded as a vital element in working-class culture because it catered mainly for the working classes and played an important part in their everyday life. It offered them a variety of attractions and amenities which were missing in other institutions. It was somewhere they could meet for companionship and entertainment without outside interference; a place where social trends and values could be presented and commented on by performers and audiences alike, and where social identities were shaped.

One aim of this book is, therefore, to take a closer look at the complex relationship between the halls and the working class. As C. E. B. Russell and E. T. Campagnac put it in an article on 'Poor People's Music Halls in Lancashire' in 1900: 'It is important to know what is the nature of people's work: it is not less important to know how they amuse themselves; for a man's favourite diversions provide a clue to his character and to his tastes.'² The book then goes on to ask how Victorian society at large perceived and reacted to the music hall as an element of working-class culture.

From its very beginnings the music hall was a socially disputed institution. It was financed by the sale of alcohol and, in many cases, the entertainment on offer did not correspond to what was regarded as socially acceptable. The halls made a mockery of middle-class interpretations of 'Victorian values' and set up their own alternatives in opposition. For this reason, during the early decades of their history, the halls were at the centre of passionate social and political disputes. And it is these disputes which form the major interest of this book. By examining the clashes between the halls and middle-class reformers, municipal authorities and the state I hope to be able to put this specific expression of British working-class culture into a larger social and political context and, thereby, establish connections between the areas of working-class culture, society and politics.

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There is a large amount of literature on the halls and their history. A bibliography on the *British Music-Hall 1840–1923* published in 1981 lists over 3,000 titles ranging from newspaper articles to academic studies.³ The latter, however, comprise only a minority of the available literature which for the most part consists of contemporary source material, more especially impressions and memoirs or selective journalistic descriptions. Despite the amount of material such writings only cover single aspects of music-hall history. Up until now the focus of interest has been almost exclusively on the London halls, their songs and their stars. Significantly enough this is true of the first general study of the halls, which set the criteria for all its successors. *Variety Stage: A History of the Music Halls from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* by Charles Stuart and A. J. Parks was published in London in 1895. Stuart and Parks were both journalists and music-hall agents and were therefore able to view their subject both as outsiders and from within. Their book is well-informed and deals with a variety of themes: the development of the London music hall, its songs and its stars, the organisations of the artists and the proprietors, the foundation of agencies, the music-hall press and the London licensing laws. Even if this is in no way a comprehensive history of the halls, the authors do throw much light onto the London scene. By comparison the great majority of their successors manage to deliver only fragmentary impressions. The ensuing literature to the end of the Second World War is dominated as a rule by subjectively tinted, journalistic memoirs whose themes are restricted to the world of the London West End variety theatres in the 1890s and the great music-hall stars of the age – not forgetting the ballet girls. In the majority of these studies the authors' youth happens to coincide with what they call the 'golden age' of the music hall and their efforts are mostly devoted to portraying the 'cheery and irresponsible life of the roaring "nineties" and early nineteen-hundreds in the square mile of London that mattered' as one witness put it.⁴ The results are mostly anecdotal and confined to dealing with those aspects of the music-hall scene which were important for the authors at the time. These writings are not so much histories of the music hall as accounts of London bohemian life in the 1890s.⁵ Historiographically they tend to reflect the Whig interpretation of history in that they portray the history of the halls as a continuous development from pothouse to palace; from the beerhouse with its coarse songs and rough audiences to the variety theatre with its sophisticated allusions and smartly dressed visitors. Although the halls are characterised as the *vox populi* the audiences themselves are only rarely mentioned, and even then are scarcely thought worthy of special attention.⁶

These tendencies continue in the post-1945 literature. But by contrast with earlier writings authors now devote their efforts to more studious examinations of the halls with a corresponding search for new themes and approaches. Harold Scott's *Early Doors: Origins of the Music Hall* which was published in 1946 is a descriptive portrait of the pre-history of the halls and their early years. Although its presentation is somewhat chaotic it is full of solid material and based on orig-

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inal sources.⁷ Succeeding books are more systematic in their conception and have a wider range of themes. Particularly worthy of mention are Manders and Mitchenson's *British Music Hall: a Story in Pictures* (1965), Laurence Senelick's 'A Brief Life and Times of the Victorian Music Hall' (1971) and a collection of source material with introductory texts by David Cheshire entitled *Music Hall in Britain* (1974).⁸ With these texts the history of the halls passes from managers and journalists into the hands of literary and theatre historians and, finally in the 1970s, social historians.⁹ First among these are Gareth Stedman Jones and Martha Vicinus. Both writers include the halls in their researches into the history of English working-class culture, published in 1973 and 1974: Stedman Jones in a study entitled 'Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870-1900. Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class'; and Martha Vicinus in her analysis of the literary achievements of the working class, *The Industrial Muse*.¹⁰ Both authors come to similar conclusions with regard to the music hall. They interpret it as the embodiment and affirmation of the values and norms of English working-class culture and, as such, a pillar of class solidarity. Like other working people's institutions it was resistant to outside influences and was able to preserve its relative autonomy. This autonomy, however, only had space to manoeuvre within the system and was never an alternative to it. In short the halls, as Stedman Jones puts it, remained conformist and defensive. Their character reflected the political culture of the English working class with its friendly societies, trades unions and Labour Party, all of which were orientated towards reform rather than revolution. Stedman Jones concludes that the music hall was basically 'the symbol of a culture of consolation', a thesis which succeeding historians have increasingly thrown into question.

Whereas Stedman Jones regarded the music hall as an integral part of working-class culture over the whole of the nineteenth century, Vicinus saw in its history a development from 'class' to 'mass entertainment'. This perspective also gave a boost to further research. Later studies on the history and importance of the music hall (most notably by Peter Bailey, Penny Summerfield, Hugh Cunningham and Bernard Waites) are rooted in the context of the history of leisure and popular – rather than class – culture.¹¹ What they have in common is a greater interest, firstly, in the role of the music-hall proprietor as entrepreneur in a rapidly expanding leisure industry; and secondly, in the question of how the State and its organs reacted to this new product of popular, urban culture. Another factor common to these studies is that they are closely tied in with the heated debates conducted amongst British social historians in the 1970s; debates concerning the reception of theoretic models from sociology, most particularly the model of social control or the Gramscian concept of hegemony.¹²

The major themes of Summerfield's essay, 'The Effingham Arms and The Empire' with its programmatic subtitle 'Deliberate Selection in the Evolution of Music Hall in London', are the London licensing laws and their application.¹³ The author sees these as a framework within which managers and owners could

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operate, i.e. somewhere between potential state repression and the needs of the consumers. She further argues that the factor which finally defined the halls was not so much their audiences but rather a process of selection whereby certain music-hall proprietors came to the fore according to the extent to which they conformed with the intended or actual proscriptions of the state. Summerfield's arguments are basically functional in their approach and use a vocabulary of music-hall history which Peter Bailey has described as 'cultural materialism or sub Marxism', a counter-model to the Whig interpretation.¹⁴ This approach sees an analogy between the development of the music hall from beerhouse to variety theatre and the shift from domestic to factory production and ties this in with factors such as economies of scale, division of labour and structures of domination.

Although Bailey himself was at first influenced by concepts of social control he has increasingly turned to anthropological approaches and, most recently, to analysing specific music-hall discourses and practices. He argues that the music hall should be seen as a cultural phenomenon on its own terms with its own specific content, structure and contradictions.¹⁵ He does not dispute the capitalist features of the business – the exploitation of the performers by multiple appearances per evening, the extra burden of matinees and benefit performances and the consequent rise of trade unionism. What he does show is how these features were at the same time tempered by the persistence of traditional customs and practices.¹⁶ Even when caterers became large scale entrepreneurs, they would still have felt duty-bound to the 'small businessman's traditions of public service and mutuality' which were part and parcel of the roots from which they sprung: the networks of the pub, the friendly society, the masonic lodge and the local vestry.¹⁷ Using benefit performances as an example Bailey illuminates how entrepreneurial practices which were regulated by expectations both customary and modern not only gave the halls their own distinctive style but also gave proprietors and managers a social role which differed considerably from that of the traditional factory owner. Performers cannot be regarded exclusively as exploited workers as their market value was determined as much by consumer as by employer demand. And the audience refused to allow itself to be reduced to the role of passive consumers. Features such as the dialogue with the performers and the boisterous reception of the various offerings demonstrate that the audience asserted its traditional role of popular control in determining content and form. To Bailey the music hall is at one and the same time the prototype of the modern entertainment industry and an autonomous expression of popular culture.¹⁸ Using these contradictory features as a starting point he is able to deal successfully with the music hall's own particular nexus of complexities.

Most recent research has concentrated on two particular aspects of the music hall as a popular mode of expression: its language and meaning and the relationship between text and audience. The language of the halls, for example, plays a major role in Patrick Joyce's *Visions of the People*, an analysis of how nineteenth-

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century labouring people saw the social order of which they were a part. Popular art is considered as central here, since it created social identities of self and other and formed a sense of belonging to a specific community and culture. Language is thereby analysed 'as a sign-system of what might be called the semiology of the social order'.¹⁹ Joyce thus takes up an old theme in music-hall historiography – the music hall as *vox populi*. But whereas earlier scholars assumed that music-hall texts directly reflected the attitudes of the audiences, Joyce analyses the language of the halls as an expression of experience and as a factor which constituted experience. Language and content also figure prominently in Peter Bailey's 'Conspiracies of Meaning: Music Hall and the Knowingness of Popular Culture'. Bailey concentrates on 'knowingness', because it was considered to be a distinctive and also an objectionable mode of expression in nineteenth-century halls. Bailey's approach is to treat it as a discourse and practice which help us to understand the style and character of the halls as well as the culture of their audiences in a more differentiated way. After exploring what 'knowingness' actually entailed, he argues that the typical participatory style of performance and the way in which it was experienced were major factors in forming a separate identity and culture of the halls and their public. And although this culture did not question the social or political order, 'music-hall engaged its public in a more complex set of meanings than that proposed in the compensation model – the relish in knowingness suggests strongly that this was a culture of competence more than a culture of consolation'.²⁰

Social historical studies of the music hall have led to changes in perspective and a broadening of themes. But there are still considerable gaps to be filled. Despite the interpretation of music hall as an institution of popular culture, the audience and its relationship to the halls and their content are subjects which still need more research. The major spotlight of research is still focused on the London halls. True, Russell and Campagnac's article appeared in the *Economic Review* as early as 1900. But subsequently regional halls quickly disappeared into oblivion. Apart from a few small contributions by local historians, a more comprehensive study was not available until 1970: G. J. Mellor's *Northern Music Hall*.²¹ Although it claims to be the first complete study of the history of regional music halls, the book is in fact more a history of the 'famous halls' and their syndicates. Like many other portraits of the music hall it is notable not only for its richness of detail but also for its complete lack of footnotes and source references.

It was not until the mid 1970s that regional halls began to reappear – albeit sporadically – in studies on working people's culture. Apart from the already mentioned book by Martha Vicinus, M. B. Smith published an essay on 'Victorian Entertainment in the Lancashire Cotton Towns'.²² These studies were followed at the end of the 1970s by case studies either of leisure in particular towns or the history of individual music halls. Amongst the most noteworthy are writings by Peter Bailey and Robert Poole on Bolton, Douglas Reid on

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Birmingham, Jeremy Crump on Leicester, as well as essays by Dave Harker on the Tyneside concert hall and Chris Waters on the battle over the Palace of Varieties in Manchester.²³ Nevertheless all these contributions can only be regarded as building blocks for a future synthesis.

The approach I shall take in my book is rooted in the debates conducted by British social historians on content and methodology concerning the music hall. It conceives the music hall as a form of popular culture according to the definition adopted in these debates i.e. as a mixture of spontaneous and oppositional people's culture 'from below' and commercialised mass culture 'from above'. The concept 'popular' will be dealt with in both these senses. I shall first enquire into what made the music hall so popular. In doing so I shall not restrict myself solely to studying the songs, as has been usual up to now, but the programme as a whole and also the functions of the music hall and its role in the everyday lives of working people beyond the provision of entertainment. I shall then turn my attention to the audience, try to define its particular composition and analyse its relationship to the halls by studying its behaviour. The major part of the book, however, is devoted to case studies of local social conflicts. Music halls did not develop in a vacuum but within external frameworks such as licensing laws and building provisions, as well as recurring disputes with various groups of opponents, two of which were particularly prominent. As an element in the leisure and entertainment industry music hall represented a new form of competition to the already existing institutions, above all the theatre. And as a part of working-class culture it was inevitably bound up with conflicts involving working people.

Controversies about the halls were both vertical and horizontal in nature and involved various and varying social groups and institutions. By analysing them at a local level with its clearly visible social structures it is possible not only to pinpoint their specific features but also to illuminate the more general relationships between working-class culture, Victorian society, local government and the state – i.e. the 'big social-historical questions'.²⁴ I intend to examine the various forms of interdependence 'from below' (from the perspective of working-class culture) and thereby hope to throw them into a different light. The following example should give an idea into the insights to be gained by using such an approach.

Patrick Joyce's book *Work, Society and Politics* was published in 1980. Here Joyce aims to study class relationships where they were at their most intensive; at the workplace, the dominant area of a worker's life.²⁵ One of his major theses is that the 'culture of the factory', defined on the one hand by the social hegemony of the entrepreneur and, on the other, by the deference of the workers, intruded into the areas of family and leisure. Working people lived in dwellings provided by factory owners and made use of the latter's leisure and educational facilities. Seen in this light patterns of domination and dependence in the factory were continued outside it.²⁶ The primary hallmarks of class relationships, particularly in towns with a well-developed factory system, were entrepreneurial

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paternalism and class harmony. Joyce's study was widely recognised as a new approach and his conclusions confirmed the old thesis of 'mid-Victorian stability' in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

One of the towns which Joyce takes as a model of 'the culture of the factory' is Bolton with its textile factories. The town has since been the subject of various studies from a different perspective: that of an independent working-class culture, which does not and cannot exist according to Joyce. Both Peter Bailey in his case study of Bolton in *Leisure and Class in Victorian England* and Robert Poole in *Popular Leisure and the Music Hall in Bolton* document a powerful, independent working-class and popular culture which was able to adapt to the economic and social changes of the time, and whose traditions and institutions not only remained independent of the culture of the factory but in many cases provided a counterweight to it which should not be underestimated. Their theses are thus directly opposed to that of Joyce. For Bailey and Poole Bolton is marked less by class harmony and deference than by class conflict and resistance, especially in the area of leisure. The conflicts here arose from the eighteenth-century traditions of popular culture with its wakes and fairs, its 'undisciplined' games and 'excessive' traditions of drinking which stood in direct opposition to the new industrial order. They continued in the controversies around public holidays, 'free time', and the ways and places in which this time should be spent i.e. in the controversies concerning 'St Monday', racing, blood sports, gambling, pubs and street life, common land and the annual fairs. To all these must be added the controversies caused by reforms undertaken by the state, religious bodies and private philanthropists, all of whom attempted to provide alternatives. Such reforms included restructuring the educational system and building Sunday schools, founding temperance societies, mechanics' institutes and working-men's clubs, erecting museums and libraries and introducing concerts at affordable prices as well as organised sporting activities. In all these areas conflicts arose with regard to self-determination, the control of time and territory, content and form and 'the production of meanings'.²⁷

If Bailey's and Poole's 'history from below' brought fresh perspectives to the area of class relations, their detailed analysis of individual conflicts in the context of local social and power structures led to a picture of both classes – in particular the town's elite – which was more differentiated than Joyce's. Joyce portrayed Bolton's elite as a homogeneous group of traditional Anglican country squires and early industrial Tories with the addition of textile entrepreneurs who had risen to prominence in the industrial revolution. This group contained many sub-groups who had soon formed mutual associations and were bound by many cross-cultural links, one of the most important being the culture of the factory.²⁸ The conflicts around working-class culture, however, primarily reveal internal differences and interests individual to Whigs and Tories, Anglicans and non-conformists. These were also expressed as differences of style: the Quaker textile entrepreneur Ashworth put his paternalism into action by providing reading and

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school rooms in his factory, whereas the Conservative entrepreneur Ridgway preferred to celebrate with his workers in the pub.²⁹ But such individual interests also found expression in the town council in a more concrete manner as party disputes and power struggles. The debate on Peel Park is a good case in point. The Liberals wanted to offer the park to the workers as an example of rational recreation and an alternative to the pub. The Conservatives rejected this idea because it was a Liberal project and they succeeded in prolonging the argument for sixteen years. The dispute, however, also revealed splits within the Liberal/non-conformist camp. They were indeed unanimous in wanting to provide alternative leisure pursuits for the working class, but the sabbatarians amongst them rejected the idea of opening such amenities on Sundays which, in the case of the park, would have been practically counter to the aim.³⁰

The precise alliances and composition of the ruling elite and the individual policies they followed naturally played a considerable role in the conflicts around the music halls and also focuses attention on each specific local case. My analytical approach is based on the long-standing debates on working-class culture in Britain. These debates at first took the form of social controversies in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century working-class culture became established as an independent area of studies, an area which has been recognised as 'one of the major frontiers of social change in the nineteenth century'.³¹

The occupation with this area of studies stimulated a lively discussion on methodology amongst social historians and strengthened the change of perspective instigated by E. P. Thompson which was centred on the rejection of the Whig interpretation of history. The nineteenth century was now seen not so much as an age of progress and change, liberty and democracy, but as a period in which the old elite was able to restore its position of power by means of a comprehensive exercise of social discipline.³² Sidney Pollard, in a report on research into English working-class culture published in 1979, noted various examples both of the repression of pre-industrial eighteenth-century folk culture and the attempts of the nineteenth-century British middle classes to shape the working class according to the former's own ideas.³³ Measures aimed at discipline and reform undertaken by religious and educational bodies as well as pressure groups like the temperance movement played a considerable role here. Looked at methodologically the choice of these specific thematic areas of interest and the perspectives from which they were studied gave rise to a discussion of sociological models of social control which a number of British historians attempted to introduce as an analytical method and theoretical framework. The high expectations which were for a while placed on sociology were however not fulfilled. In the first place the diverse concepts of social control were never precisely defined and discussed in all their implications. Even the collection of essays entitled *Social Control in Nineteenth-Century Britain* edited by Antony Donajgrodzki, whose specific aim was to introduce the application of the model developed by the American sociologist Ross as an analytical framework, used

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this more as a *leitmotif* than a theoretical concept.³⁴ And secondly a considerable number of British social historians felt uneasy with such an overwhelmingly functionalist model.

The opponents of the concept questioned whether social history which increasingly understood itself as ‘history from below’ should really work with a theory which continued to put the ruling elite at the centre of events. They further asked whether it was possible to live with a theory which practically disqualified all actions of the subordinate classes against the system as ‘deviant’ behaviour, and whose main concern seemed to be how to stop such disturbances and reintroduce order and equilibrium. Alongside a number of practical problems – which order and which equilibrium should constitute the starting point in view of the empirical findings that in the area of leisure new developments ‘disturbed’ the old order less than a new order ‘disturbed’ old traditions? – one basic question had to be answered: how do you tie in a functionalist model with the concept of social change? Parsons, for example, uses the category ‘change’, but restricts it to change within the system.³⁵ This means that crises and conflicts are seen by him as disturbances to be eliminated, as dysfunctions rather than contradictions inherent in the system itself which might give rise to innovatory impulses. It also follows that reforms can only be assessed as restorative measures rather than the means by which social change is effected.

In the light of the concept of social control the nineteenth century took on a completely new character. As one writer put it: ‘The century of change becomes the century of non-change.’³⁶ Critics of the concept therefore spoke out in favour of using it, at most, in a restricted manner and even went so far as to recommend that it be replaced by a more dialectic and dynamic model.³⁷ This was partly to be found in Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. By contrast with the functional models of social control Gramsci’s concept was more dynamic and placed its emphasis on processes and change. It was also notable for the fact that it did not regard the subordinate classes exclusively as passive recipients of disciplinary measures instituted by the ruling class but rather as participants in a two-way negotiation of ‘spiritual and moral leadership’ which, by definition, included transformation and modification.³⁸ Thus Gramsci’s concept of hegemony gradually established itself as the key theoretical model.

Although the concepts of social control were finally rejected and replaced they had nonetheless stimulated a fruitful discourse which opened up new themes and perspectives. The debates on working-class culture can be summarised in the following four theses which also provide the structural framework for the approach I intend to take.

1. Many disputes in the area of working-class culture and leisure were sparked off by the social and political ruling class attempting to establish a new social consensus. These attempts took the form of various initiatives to oppose or modify traditional popular customs and stem the growth of forms of working-class culture which sprang up in the (industrial) conurbations either by banning