Prologue: sources of the concert saloon and its shows

> The concert saloons are among the social evils. They flourish along certain parts of Broadway, Sixth Avenue and the Bowery, and are simply so many places where the devil's work is done. They provide a low order of music, and the service of the place is rendered by young women, many of whom are dressed in tights and all sorts of fantastic costumes, the chief object of which is to display the figure as much as possible.
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> James Mc Cabe, *New York by Sunlight and Gaslight*, 1882

WHAT WERE THE CONCERT SALOONS OF NEW YORK CITY? The answer is not too complex. Essentially, they were saloons that presented free or low-cost shows as a device to attract (chiefly male at first) customers. The shows featured music – but not, as we shall see, exclusively. They flourished in New York City during, and for twenty years or so after, the Civil War. Most were saloons refitted or initially equipped to include simple stages, probably without traps, flys (if they existed at all) that included only the most basic rigging, and one or two stock settings. A few were in former theatres, but the majority of concert saloons – not all – seem to have had a bar and a flat floor to accommodate tables and chairs for the drinkers/audience members. A few – nobody knows how many – also promoted gambling by their patrons.

Most – especially during the Civil War era – also had "waiter girls" who served drinks to male customers and sat with them, receiving tokens or tickets in exchange for drinks. But, although waiter girls were almost invariably identified as part-time prostitutes, some may have been simply bar maids and perhaps stage entertainers. Some concert saloons did have so-called "private boxes" or "private rooms," used to facilitate prostitution or assignation. But again, nobody knows how many; however, it is clear that

this was the beginning of the bad reputation that concert saloons carried from that time on.

So far as is known, concert saloons were not "tied" houses – to use the British term – that is, they were not owned by a particular brewery or distillery. Rather, they were independent, privately owned institutions. Often, but not always, owners and managers were the same people – mostly men, but occasionally women. The owners or managers frequently acted as masters of ceremonies for the shows that took place in concert saloons. But not invariably; sometimes they hired musicians or other professional performers as masters of ceremonies.

Basically, then, concert saloons were little more than saloons with various kinds of shows. But the mix of females, alcohol, and stage entertainment was thought by many people of the Civil War era and after to promote immorality, wherever some version of the combination existed. It was especially feared and hated in the concert saloons: the dangers of alcohol were well known, the shows were felt to be provocative, and of course all waiter girls were felt to be, if not out-and-out prostitutes, little better than prostitutes. Indeed – if an equation is possible – concert saloons were believed to be civic nuisances, much as many later citizens of New York have often viewed "topless" and nude bars, pornographic bookstores, and gay bath houses as affronts to the city and to particular neighborhoods. Critics often have not always known exactly what went on in such places – but the activity was bound to be illegal and offensive. Its very existence proved that. So it was with the nineteenth-century New York concert saloons.

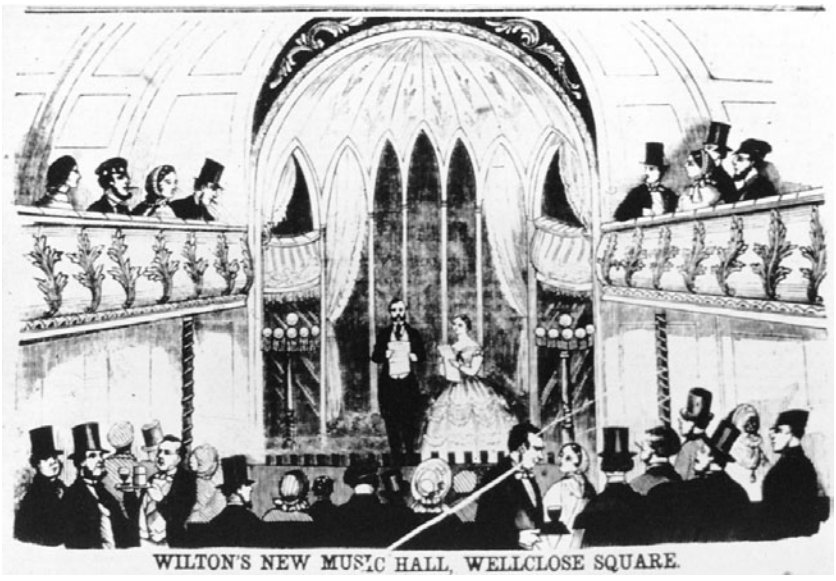
The waiter girls disappeared after the War, but a kind of concert saloon existed in some form or other in New York from before the Civil War until perhaps almost World War I. That is a generous estimate, however; by the turn of the century most had already become history in New York City. "Ten years ago," writes a columnist in *Current Literature* in 1901, "there were numerous 'dives' where now the hard working fathers and families are struggling to make enough to bring up their children as becoming citizens of America." By 1901, he says, such "joints" as did exist were found only below Canal Street on the Bowery. And anybody who was robbed elsewhere on the Bowery had only himself to blame.

But old-fashioned – and tough – male-oriented concert saloons also existed elsewhere in the United States. (A brief account of their spread across the United States is given in the Epilogue, but the full story has yet to be written.) At any rate, an account of their growth and change in New York, 1864–1884, is traced in this book, based primarily on the sources outlined

in the Preface. If the book is not a complete history of the concert saloon, it has the advantage of being the first full-length study of the operation and fare of a mysterious but once-important New York institution. And it suggests what may well have gone on across America in the late nineteenth century and the first years of the century that followed.

When did the first concert saloon appear in the City? The answer is not easy, and perhaps not really too important, in any case. Drinking establishments of various kinds, of course, went back to the beginnings of New York. A number of them undoubtedly featured music and other entertainments and sometimes prostitutes, as well as alcohol. But the real vogue for concert saloons (or "concert halls," or "concert rooms," or "music halls," or "dives" or "free and easys," or "the shades," as they sometimes were called) came in the years surrounding the Civil War. In *Horrible Prettiness*, Robert C. Allen says that concert saloons were first mentioned in newspapers in 1850. Slout gives the date at which they "were sharing a sizable part of Broadway night life" as 1860. Both authors are probably more or less right. But it is undoubtedly safe to say simply that concert saloons first became popular in the City in the years before the Civil War, increased in popularity during the war, and altered as the century advanced. The first concert saloons in America may well have been in New York City. Or Philadelphia. No one knows. They may have been American versions of the British music hall. Again, no one knows.

It *is* known that there were perhaps half a dozen influences on concert saloons over the years. The center was, of course music – all concert saloons featured songs, and a large number provided purely instrumental music as well. Almost certainly an important influence was the British music hall, a source of popular song – and other variety acts – aimed at a chiefly working-class audience. The British music hall certainly resembled the American concert saloon in many important ways. Perhaps the French "cafe concert" or "cafe chantant" was also an influence, though that relationship is not very clear. In any case, there is a similarity. An outgrowth of the musical taverns that grew up in Paris in the eighteenth century, by the middle of the nineteenth century there were more than two hundred in Paris alone and many throughout France. They were purveyors of food and drink and various kinds of variety entertainment. At any rate, the January 1862 article in the New York *Post* thought that there was some relationship between the cafes chantants and the New York concert saloon. The writer says: "From the days of the 'Dog and Duck' and 'Finish,' London has had her night houses; Paris, whether monarchical, republican or Imperial, rejoices in her



1 Wilton's Music Hall, Wellclose Square, London, n.d.

cafes chantants; and for the last two years, our cosmopolitan city of New York, emulous alike in good and evil, has produced as vicious and popular a perversion of the two as can be imagined."[1]

At any rate, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, the music hall, which had developed out of tavern shows and "Song and Supper" rooms, became a major part of British entertainment, especially for the working classes, although it was also frequented by representatives of every social level. The passage of the Theatres Registry Act of 1843 had confronted the owners of licensed premises with a hard choice. They could run a legitimate playhouse without refreshments, or they could operate a music hall in which drinks and food could be served but only variety entertainment could be presented. Many took the second option. By 1868, there were some twenty-eight music halls of all classes – from cheap and dismal to lavish – in London alone, and some 300 scattered around England. The show often featured a "compere" or master of ceremonies and various variety turns. They were considered cheap entertainment and "fast" by many conservative people.

The form was certainly familiar to American tourists traveling in Britain. And it was a haven for performers who worked outside the regular British theatres – in particular the Irish, who often emigrated to America, as

minstrel performers and in other areas of theatre, bringing with them their songs and sketches and their knowledge of music-hall spaces.

But some concert saloons also featured an early form of burlesque and passed along to later American entrepreneurs many conventions and ways of doing business. The concert saloon also is referred to as a variant form of variety theatre and thus as an ancestor of vaudeville. From one point of view, it obviously was. But basically concert saloons were unique institutions – a kind of early musical theatre – although their shows also contained other kinds of variety entertainment. From variety, indeed, concert saloons borrowed a number of acts, many of which had already come from other sources. A number of acts which appeared on the concert-saloon stage of course also were seen in the variety theatres of the day. But most had originated in other forms of American popular entertainment. Performers in minstrelsy, dime museums, pleasure gardens, and the circus had gravitated to variety – and often to concert saloons, as well. But the concert saloon also has been seen as an ancestor of the night club. "The night clubs and cabarets that are such prominent features of our hectic night life," said *Valentine's Manual* in 1927, "are in the main euphemistic terms for what the Elegant Eighties knew as 'dives'."

In the July 23, 2001 *New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik points out that there is a modern institution, the "New Burlesque." "In the New Burlesque," he says, "the money is sort of incidental; the performers are into making art." In the *old* burlesque money was *not* incidental, however. It was the point. And the form that was to become full-blown burlesque was undoubtedly one of the most important influences on the concert saloon beyond music, because it brought in patrons, and hence money. In fact, an early incarnation of burlesque was one of the standard features of many New York concert saloons, and probably helped to lead to their bad reputations. In turn, concert saloon acts – and the ambiance of the concert saloons themselves – almost certainly influenced the course of early burlesque.

Originally, burlesques had been travesties or parodies of plays, operas, or important political or social events. In part, they were to become one of the elements in such musical extravaganzas as *The Black Crook* in 1866, and its sequel *The White Fawn* in 1868. *The Black Crook* was a sensation. From that point on, a host of imitations of every sort featured scantily clad chorus girls and the combination was increasingly appealing – and increasingly inoffensive – to large segments of the public.

In 1868 these influences also were combined with considerable success in *Ixion*, the first American production by the popular British Blondes, an

English troupe that appeared in the United States. They wore what were, for the time, extremely abbreviated costumes, and in the 1870s the vogue for British Blondes-style entertainments increased throughout America. Several imitation troupes appeared, at least one of which played concert saloons. Probably a number did, but we are given no clue in any of the sources, except that the moralists found the costumes of women on stage in concert saloons shocking in the extreme.

Manager M. B. Leavitt gave burlesque its essential form during the latter part of the nineteenth century. It featured chorus girls in revealing costumes, as well as some suggestive material. We know that Leavitt took part of his entertainment from the minstrel show. But the whole affair also must have owed a certain debt to the goings-on in concert saloons, where an ancestor of burlesque had been presented on a much smaller scale, and without the definition it was to achieve later. As Mc Cabe suggests, leg-show acts in concert saloons featured young women in scanty costumes, as well as music, jokes, and songs that were sometimes titillating – if not downright prurient – staples of later burlesque.

Minstrelsy – either directly or from the variety stage – was another major influence on concert saloons, and minstrel songs were among its staples. But it provided concert saloons with much more material than simply songs; minstrel quips, sketches, monologues, and much more, also appeared there. Minstrelsy was an American institution that had taken the country by storm at the middle of the nineteenth century. The white actor in blackface had appeared shortly after the first quarter of the century and had reached new heights of popularity with audiences in 1830, in the act by T. D. Rice, who performed a parody of a black stable hand in his famous and much imitated "Jim Crow" routine. The beginnings of minstrelsy as it was later to develop, however, came in 1843, when Dan Emmett and three other minstrels began to perform as "The Virginia Minstrels."

As it blossomed in the years leading up to the Civil War, many minstrel shows were divided into three "parts," the first of which featured white male performers in blackface (women did not ordinarily perform until very late in the history of minstrelsy), seated in a semi-circle, with the master of ceremonies or Interlocutor in the center, and Tambo and Bones, percussionists and comedians, at either end. In this part the performers sang songs, danced, played banjos and fiddles, and responded to jokes between the Interlocutor and the endmen. The second part was an "olio," a performance in front of the main curtain or drop, of sentimental songs, dances, and humorous monologues called "stump speeches." The third "part" was

a "plantation afterpiece," or, in later years, some sort of parody of a popular book or play, or of an awkward political situation. Sometimes the parody was musical.

After the Civil War the emphasis was less on crude satires of the black man and increasingly at the expense of such emerging ethnic groups in America as the Irish, and the "Dutch," as the Germans were popularly called. In addition, a number of minstrel companies featuring actual blacks were organized after the war and gave the white men in blackface serious competition. By 1900, audiences were less interested and the so-called professional "Minstrel Craze" had begun to dissipate everywhere in America in a very serious way.

In 1911, Leavitt tried to set down some of the reasons for the decline of minstrelsy in his autobiography, *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management.* "It is doubtful," he says, "if minstrelsy will ever be seen in its early existence, which at one time was the most popular form of amusement," because,

> The elaborate and spectacular manner that many managers have lately adopted to revive old-fashioned minstrelsy has gone wide of the mark, notwithstanding many of the old-time favorites are still in the field . . . The growth and success of vaudeville are other potent reasons for its decline. The extra-ordinary salaries offered have lured the other shining lights of the minstrel stage into the ranks of vaudeville, comic opera and musical comedy, where they obtain greater scope for versatility and increased remuneration. The public naturally followed its favorites and the minstrel patronage became greatly reduced, and it is now probably at a lower ebb of popularly and financially than ever before in its history.[2]

Newer forms, including the movies, had caught the fancy of popular audiences and absorbed much of the material previously presented in the minstrel show. But the hard times had already begun long before.

When the first minstrel men began to appear in large numbers in New York City, some of them almost certainly found that performing in such places as a variety theatre, a dime museum, a circus, a pleasure garden – or a concert saloon – was a necessary financial alternative when business was slow in minstrel halls. A major difference was that, in such places as the concert saloon, minstrel men presented their material as part of a bill of unrelated acts rather than as part of a show tied together by blackface and by an overarching theme built around fantasies about plantation life in the South. In other words, in the concert saloon, as in variety, a traditional minstrel turn was no longer part of a whole evening of similar acts and songs.

While a song – or joke or sketch, say – maintained a familiar association with minstrelsy, in the concert saloon it was being done in connection with many different kinds of popular material.

Concert saloons also probably shared personnel and material with the dime museums that were so common on the Bowery and in other entertainment areas. Some of the same talent and the same acts (generally edited where necessary for a family audience) were to be found in typical dime museum "lecture halls" – an invented name for the playhouses that existed in such buildings. If there were two versions, performers in both knew both. Like the concert saloon, the dime museum was an important popular venue that employed familiar songs, jokes, and sketches.

Circuses were still another influence. Circus is one of the oldest forms of popular entertainment in America. A small traveling circus was a feature of the early eighteenth century, and circus "amphitheatres" appeared before 1800 in many American towns. To supplement their regular equestrian numbers, managers added variety acts to their bills. During the nineteenth century the population growth in rural areas led to an increase in touring, and circus tents appeared by 1830. In the forties bands were featured, as well as bareback riding and similar thrilling feats. The development of railroads led to the movement of performers and animals by rail and, in large part, the replacement of the traditional wagon show. The circus now expanded tremendously.

In the 1850s, museum magnate P. T. Barnum had entered the circus business, later going into partnership with James Bailey, and helping to build the ante-bellum circus into an imaginative display that combined bareback riders, clowns, acrobats, freaks and animals. This idea, centered around a spectacular but essentially eclectic collection of entertainments, was later taken up by such figures as the Sells Brothers, who eventually were to merge their show with the old Barnum and Bailey circus. Many circus acts – and circus performers – eventually found their way onto the concert-saloon stage. It was a natural move. (Tony Pastor was perhaps the most famous of the New York entertainers and entrepreneurs to have got his start in circus.)

It is clear that many people who appeared at concert saloons also performed from time to time at pleasure gardens. Pleasure gardens existed in both Britain and America. Throughout the eighteenth century the gardens were found in London and other large cities in Great Britain and elsewhere, often as adjuncts to inns and taverns. They usually provided food, gambling, and various kinds of variety entertainment. Pleasure gardens first became

popular in New York early in the nineteenth century, in part growing out of picnic groves, and serving as one ancestor of the later amusement park. In an era before the advent of the public park, these proprietary parks served as important sources of summer amusement, usually featuring fireworks, and amusement rides, as well as a number of performers, who often routinely appeared in other forms of popular entertainment, among them the concert saloon.

A final influence was probably the growth of advertising in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. At base, a show presented in a saloon was an effective advertising device, a kind of precursor of the sponsored entertainment that was to appear on American radio and television in later years. It was also the equivalent of "dragging the town," the parade at which advertising fliers were distributed by a circus or minstrel company. Perhaps the most obvious parallel was with the medicine show, which also developed in America in the Civil War period. Here various nostrums were pitched and the show represented the free or low-cost "come on" that brought potential buyers to the medicine-show lot. So it was with the concert saloons: alcohol – and apparently sometimes prostitution – constituted the chief attractions, and the performance, like the waiter girls, was the equivalent of the advertising parade. Unlike variety theatres, concert saloons sold drinks – and maybe more – as their main business, and the acts were basically the come-on, rather than the central attraction.

The show at the New York concert saloon during the Civil War and the decades following it was an eclectic form, depending heavily on song, but borrowing from virtually all of the successful types of American popular entertainment – and not limiting itself to American forms. These it combined with the saloon, the fad of the waiter girl (at first), and, in some cases, the house of prostitution, creating a sometimes rough-and-ready, sometimes elaborate kind of theatre. It is often confused with variety. It was clearly related to the British music hall in important ways, but it was not simply the music hall transported across the Atlantic; it seems to have been a distinctly American take on a kind of people's entertainment.

Many of the acts and songs seen in concert saloons during and after the war descended to early vaudeville and burlesque. In the case of burlesque, owners and managers institutionalized the sexual essence of the old male-oriented concert saloon – and in the process helped to limit their business.

Especially after the Civil War, some owners and managers, however, went the other direction, taking some pains to make their shows respectable

enough for women and children. But "moral reform" was probably less on the minds of concert-saloon people than it was with some vaudeville entrepreneurs later. The realization that family entertainment represented an untapped resource, however, had almost certainly been a key issue. It almost certainly meant bigger audience potential – and hence assured survival. But in exploiting and systematizing suitable family entertainment, of course, they helped spell the death of the old male-oriented shows, probably without changing their character too much. There seems not to have been all that much to change. Yet, until its demise, the concert saloon was always surrounded by rumors – justified or not – of dark doings.