The New York Concert Saloon

The Devil's Own Nights

In this book Brooks McNamara explores the world of the concert saloon in New York from the Civil War to the early years of the twentieth century. A concert saloon is defined as an establishment offering various kinds of entertainment, including alcohol, with some also providing gambling and prostitution. All of these saloons employed "waiter girls" to sell drinks and sit with male customers, and all had bad reputations. Focusing on the theatrical aspects of the concert saloon, McNamara examines the sources of saloon shows, the changes in direction during the century, and the performing spaces and equipment, as well as the employees and patrons. He paints a picture of a lively and theatrically fascinating environment, and his work sheds new light on our understanding of American popular theatre. The book contains informative illustrations and will be of interest to historians of theatre, popular culture, and American social history.

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BROOKS McNAMARA

New York University

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To the late Vera Brodsky Lawrence,
a great friend and
a great historian of the music
of early New York City

Oh! The night that I struck New York,
I went out for a quiet walk;
Folks who are 'on to' the City say,
Better by far that I took Broadway;
But I was out to enjoy the sights,
There was the Bow'ry ablaze with lights;
I had one of the devil's own nights!
I'll never go there any more.

Charles H. Hoyt and Percy Gaunt,
"The Bowery," from *A Trip To Chinatown,* 1892

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Illustrations

The illustrations are from the collection of the author, except Number 8, which is from the collection of the Museum of the City of New York, and Number 5 and 6, which are from Special Collections, Brown University.

Foreword

As an institution the concert saloon has been accepted for many years as an important predecessor to many forms of American popular entertainment, in particular variety and later vaudeville and burlesque. Other early locations for staged variety entertainment included beer gardens and dime museums. Concert saloons developed in the American frontier where organized entertainment was virtually nonexistent. In these rudimentary entertainment establishments the patron was offered alcohol, gambling, women, a rough and tumble atmosphere, and, as an enticement, free entertainment. Not surprisingly, the frontier concert saloon catered almost exclusively to a male audience. Concert saloons spread to major U.S. cities, and urban versions of the concert saloon prospered. The burgeoning urban population was a natural setting for enterprising saloon owners to see the potential in such venues, attracting drinking and carousing patrons with the added appeal of entertainers.

By the late 1850s and early 1860s concert saloons were well established in New York City, located primarily in the lower Broadway area and on the Bowery; but by the early 1860s most major cities had concert saloons and by the mid-1860s they were common in many smaller towns. New York City undoubtedly had the largest number in the nineteenth century – as many as 300. After the Civil War, with public outcries against the prostitution and vice so frequently associated with the concert saloon, variety began to break away from the saloon atmosphere and move into regular theatres, thus gaining a higher degree of respectability, yet for a time still offering similar fare. Even many of the surviving concert saloons in the 1870s and 1880s attempted to minimize the loathsome connotations attached to these venues – and especially the "waiter girls" who hustled drinks, warmed up to the clients, and sometimes were little more than prostitutes – by altering the identification of their facilities with such nomenclatures as music halls,

concert gardens, or concert rooms, and, as Brooks McNamara illustrates, adopting impressive names for their establishments.

Yet despite the enormous significance of concert saloons in the history of entertainment in the United States, precious little has been written about them, especially in terms of what actually went on within their confines, the nature of the performances and the performers, the theatrical configurations of the spaces – some quite elaborate, most simple and basic in their accoutrements – and the structure of the establishments, the nature of their management, the profile of the patrons, and their distinction from other similar venues such as the beer garden. This study by McNamara fills these gaps and provides a foundation for even further investigation.

Don B. Wilmeth
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Preface

Why should anyone care about the life and death of the New York concert saloon? There are, I suppose, at least a few reasons that appear here, along with the details of operation. First, the concert saloon is a "new" form of American entertainment, relatively little known to the public or, for that matter, to scholars. As I point out, the concert-saloon show was apparently designed as a musical entertainment, but it contained other elements. It seems to have been influenced by the minstrel show, variety, and all the other American popular entertainments of the day, as well as by British music hall. In turn, it almost certainly influenced American vaudeville and early burlesque. But the New York concert saloon has hardly been written about – and certainly never in detail – and it often has been conflated with the variety theatre, which it resembled in many ways and to which it was related. But it was a unique and extraordinary form.

Perhaps it is quite enough that this book has provided new information about an origin of American vaudeville and burlesque. But, in addition, it suggests a few of the ways in which the concert saloon was operated and influenced by non-musical popular forms. Another point is that this book does for the concert saloon what I also attempted to do earlier for the medicine show in my book *Step Right Up* – to suggest that there is a link between entertainment and the growth of advertising in America after the Civil War. Increasingly, advertising seems to have used popular entertainment as a tool – and it obviously continues to do so today. In the nineteenth century, both the medicine show and the concert saloon seem, for example, to have been important, little-discussed parts of that development.

And finally – by implication, at least – this book is about the influence of entertainment in America. It reflects my long-held conviction that live popular entertainment is important, not perhaps because it was so

good – much of it clearly was not – but because it is so much an expression of those who created it and watched it. Like radio and television in the twentieth century, one can scarcely talk about performance in the second half of the nineteenth century without bringing up the concert saloon. Not to do so would be to tell only part of the story of performance in America. Perhaps the nineteenth-century American theatre was not precisely what we thought it was. The details of the New York concert saloon suggest that conclusion.

In a way, this book is a detective story. There has always been a great deal of mystery about what constituted a nineteenth-century concert saloon. They have often been confused with variety houses, ordinary saloons, dance houses, and other establishments. And very little has been written about the shows that appeared there. Indeed, references to the concert saloon from the period – and later – *are* often misleading, and one may legitimately come to different conclusions about what was and was not a concert saloon and what took place there. But a few sources help when they are studied in detail, even though much remains to be done. This book employs two of those sources in relation to the New York concert saloon – the New York *Clipper* and some of the papers of The Society for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquents. It also uses the works of James Mc Cabe and other commentors.

The *Clipper* was first published in 1853. Its editor at the time was Harrison Trent, and it was founded as a fairly conventional "sporting and theatrical" paper, covering, in addition to the theatre, such topics as prize fighting, baseball, and walking races. It was sold to Frank Queen in 1855. Between about 1865 and 1875, it was the only American newspaper carrying extensive news about popular performance forms such as minstrelsy, variety halls, circus, and concert saloons and their shows. In so doing, as William Slout points out, it became known as "The Showman's Bible." Competition from *Billboard* and *Variety* caused the paper to close in 1924.

Some years ago, I became aware of a series of fourteen *Clipper* articles from 1864, a great repository of material on the male-oriented concert saloon and its shows in New York. At the time of the so-called Concert Bill, two years earlier, the concert saloons had been widely discussed in the newspapers and other periodicals. But later they were profiled in a series in the *Clipper*, the only New York paper with a genuinely sustained interest in them.

As a publication widely read by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century showmen, the *Clipper* naturally portrayed concert saloons as relatively

innocuous if somewhat colorful haunts. It *did* discuss them in detail, however. The *Clipper* series, which ran from January 2 through April 3, 1864, is known to some historians but much neglected. It provides a great deal of useful information, but it struck me at the time that there was not enough for a book.

Later, however, I was given a collection of reports on concert saloons and their shows, created by the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents, dating from about 1874 to about 1884. The Society, a venerable organization, had for some time operated a famous reformatory, the House of Refuge. The Society, founded in the early nineteenth century, had become something of a New York City institution. It was a prominent and powerful organization in the City, and the legislature was anxious to tap into that prominence and power when they needed help. And, as we shall see, the Society was willing to cooperate.

I own about twenty-four boxes of Society materials. The various documents (many of which describe male-oriented New York concert saloons or their inmates) were designated to be used in the Supreme Court of the state of New York. A majority of these documents are in effect reports by investigators hired by the Society. (Of course, like the *Clipper* reporters, none of the investigators was a prominent New Yorker. They were simply ordinary men, hired to investigate – or, if the reader prefers, to spy on – concert saloons, and later other institutions.) The reports provide information about the operation of the concert saloons, as well as about changes that took place after the so-called Concert Bill was passed in April of 1862, and a later licensing bill was passed in 1872 and amended in 1875 and 1876. It struck me that the information in these reports, though not complete, when put together with the *Clipper* articles, offered good pictures of an almost unknown American post-Civil War theatrical institution, as well as its offerings.

My later Society reports, especially, provide information on German beer gardens, variety theatres, and other performance venues investigated by the Society, on the grounds that they *might* be concert saloons, even though they were called something else. The majority – not all – of the reports before about 1874 and after approximately 1884 are missing, probably discarded many years ago. Perhaps they will turn up at a later date. I hope so; there is much more to be done.

It soon became clear from both the *Clipper* articles and the Society reports that the New York concert saloons were influenced by minstrelsy, variety, and a kind of pre-burlesque burlesque, as well as other American popular

forms, and, very likely British singing saloons, pleasure gardens, and of course the music hall. Much of the material makes clear these relationships. This book revolves around the *Clipper* articles and the Society papers. Some chapters depend primarily on one, some on another. In a few chapters I use both of them. My chief sources seem to hold very different points of view about the concert saloon. In fact, they do. The Society was rigidly proper, quite different from the live-and-let-live *Clipper*. But I have also used other works, as well.

An example is the work of James Mc Cabe, Jr. A prominent New York guidebook editor of the concert-saloon era, his guides are widely known, but take on a new importance in the light of the Society documents and the *Clipper* articles. Indeed, his views became an important addition because they are colorful and personal, if slightly hysterical. One sees the concert saloon more clearly through contemporary eyes because Mc Cabe wrote about it. The son of a minister, Mc Cabe (born Edward Winslow Martin) seems to have inherited much of his father's point of view about morality. In many ways he was superficially a reformer, though, like most writers of guides to the City, he was also commercially minded, and understood what his readers wanted. His pictures of the concert saloon and the other low-life haunts of New York are mixed in certain subtle ways. His ambivalence makes him a useful witness: He was aghast at the goings on in the concert saloons of the metropolis, but not *too* aghast to offer interesting texture.

From 1868 to 1882 Mc Cabe produced several guidebooks to the City. In all of them he provided a grim – but titillating – portrait of the concert saloon. I have used material about concert saloons and other cheap entertainment venues from his *Secrets of the Great City* (1868), *Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (1872), and *New York by Sunlight and Gaslight* (1882), re-issued as *New York by Gaslight*. In them Mc Cabe was quite specific about the dangers concert saloons presented – as well as their seedy allure. He seemed to be saying, "stay away from concert saloons. They are evil. But if you *do* go, you will encounter a kind of anonymity found only in New York."

Of course, I also employ other sources on the nineteenth century, including M. B. Leavitt's useful *Fifty Years in Theatrical Management, 1859–1909*, a number of newspaper and magazine articles, and a few other books. Occasionally there is some helpful more or less modern commentary, for example, material from Herbert Asbury's invaluable *The Gangs of New York*. But the chief sources are the Society papers and the *Clipper* articles.

To recap: the Concert Bill took place in 1862, and a second bill in 1872, which I give in full in Appendix I, with important additions taking place

in 1875 and 1876. The *Clipper* articles appeared in the winter and spring of 1864. The Society papers range from about 1874 to about 1884, with scattered material earlier and later. My major sources, however, require some additional interpretation: the *Clipper* author (or authors, we do not know) writes in a slangy, often impenetrable "insider" style that reminds one of the later *Variety*. And, of course, the articles were written for an audience that already was generally familiar with concert saloons and, hence, leave out some important detail.

In general, the Society for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquents reports use the phrase "concert room" interchangably with "concert saloon." In addition, the reports refer constantly to "minstrels" as appearing in concert saloons, by which they do not mean the blackface minstrels of the day. In fact, the reporters are simply using an archaic word that at the time corresponded roughly to "variety performers" or "variety artists" – singers, dancers, musicians, comedians, and the like – rather than so-called legitimate stage actors.

Blackface minstrels did indeed perform in many, if not all, concert saloons – in fact, they probably provided the bulk of material – but they were ordinarily referred to in the Society documents as "negro minstrels"; minstrel performances by actual *blacks* took place in some concert saloons, but the phrase "negro minstrels" seems usually to have referred to white men in blackface.

Women seem not to have blacked up on concert-saloon stages. Females did, however, often appear in concert saloons. Some of them were "waiter girls," and of course some were patrons, or dancers and singers in the show. Sometimes – perhaps in addition to their other duties as waiter girls or performers or both – women were "in-house" prostitutes. In fact, it is not clear what percentage of New York concert saloons had attached houses of prostitution. Some did; some did not. By the same token, it is unclear how many of the routines and songs performed on their stages were scatological. Some were; some were not.

With these caveats in mind, both the *Clipper* articles and the reports by Society investigators provide highly detailed information about what appeared there. I do not deal in detail with institutions not mentioned in the *Clipper* articles or the Society documents, with the exception of two forms related to the concert saloon that I cover late in the book – dance houses and German beer gardens.

Dance houses are usually not discussed by the Society for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquents, since, although they were avowedly "low,"

they generally did not offer shows, and the Society was only genuinely interested – at least at first – in institutions that featured alcohol, shows, and – especially – the institution of the waiter girl. Most of the German beer gardens, many of them on the lower East Side of New York, were more or less respectable and catered to a reputable clientele, including wives and children of male patrons.

But the direction of the law changed, and with it the concerns of the Society. Some dance houses and German beer gardens were, in fact, investigated by the Society in the later years – almost certainly in part because of the Society's continued need for money, and in part because they were suspected of being concert saloons in disguise. The book also considers a few other forms that were given a hard look by the Society after the war, such as unauthorized theatrical performances in hired halls, small theatres, and the like. In fact, however, the old male-oriented concert saloon was dying out in New York in the seventies and early eighties, along with the institution of the waiter girl.

As much as possible, I have tried to work the necessary references into the text. I have been as complete as I can be in my references to particular concert saloons, including the address, if I know it, the first time a concert saloon is mentioned, as well as the year (sometimes the day and month) when information about it or its acts appears in a *Clipper* article or a Society report. I have only provided notes on lengthy direct quotations (if they are not already identified in the text). In addition, I have tried to explain in the text any names, places, or objects connected with the theatre that I imagined would not be familiar to most readers. At the end of the book I have provided a list of useful sources, some of which I have used here and some of which shed light on concert saloons or the forms of entertainment that influenced them or were influenced *by* them.

A number of examples were possible in the chapters, but in an attempt to avoid anything like an annals, I have selected only a few examples that relate directly to the theatrical (and, of course, musical) practice of New York concert saloons. In general, I have not changed spelling or grammar, or interpreted nineteenth-century slang, except when not to do so would have resulted in confusion. When I have made changes, they are generally silent.

I should also point out that my aim was to investigate certain entertainment topics concerned with the New York concert saloon rather than offering a comprehensive account of all the various changes that took place in the period 1864–1884. Here, I simply treat an unusual example of entertainment history.

Another item is worth mentioning: the book handles details of New York concert-saloon practice from the mid-1860s through the mid-1880s as though there were few significant changes in that period, except that the waiter girl fell out of fashion and "family" entertainment became more common in concert saloons and elsewhere. Perhaps there *were* other important changes that I have not caught, but the male-oriented concert saloon seems to have been basically traditional and "conservative" in its operation. Concert saloons disappeared with alarming frequency. But there do not appear to be many substantial alterations in the way surviving concert saloons operated until the fad for waiter girls declined and the family-oriented establishments became popular in the late seventies and eighties.

Of course, this book does not attempt to catalogue *all* the male-oriented concert saloons that existed in New York. There were many others. In that sense, then, the book is roughly the opposite of my earlier work, *Day of Jubilee*, published in 1998. In that book I attempted to pull together all of the chief celebrations of nineteenth-century New York, and to find the common theatrical devices; this book tries to analyze in detail a limited number of documents – and concert saloons – in a limited time span, primarily to reconstruct the details of operation of an important nineteenth-century New York entertainment institution. But both books have a somewhat similar purpose. In this book, as in *Day of Jubilee,* I attempt to draw attention to – to widen the public vision of – aspects of a popular performance form in New York.

The *Clipper* articles and a few other essays were collected in 1994 in book form as an anthology called *Broadway Beneath the Sidewalk,* carefully edited by William Slout. I have taken a number of things from his anthology and I owe Slout a great debt. A number of other works use a discussion of the concert saloon to introduce a different topic, often vaudeville or burlesque. Scholars who have dealt intelligently, but not at length, with the concert saloon include Robb Snyder, in his *Voice of the City,* an account of vaudeville as popular culture in New York, Robert C. Allen, in *Horrible Prettiness*, his history of burlesque, and Richard Butsch, in his recent *The Making of American Audiences*.

Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace have included a very good, brief account of the concert saloon in *Gotham*, their history of New York to 1898. My old friend Parker Zellers, wrote a 1968 article in *Educational Theatre Journal,* "The Cradle of Variety : The Concert Saloon." So far as I know, it is one of the few modern articles – if not the only article – on the subject. I have used the Zellers piece in my book. It was especially helpful about the

earliest and latest concert saloons. Sometimes, however, I arrive at different conclusions from his because I have new information. In addition, I have been helped a great deal in my thinking by Madelon Powers' *Faces Along the Bar*, an account of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century workingmen's saloons. Marilyn Wood Hill's *Their Sisters' Keepers*, about prostitution in New York City to 1870, and G. C. D. Odell's compendious *Annals of the The New York Stage*, were also important to me. And of course I have learned much about the world from which the concert saloon came from Herbert Asbury's classic *The Gangs of New York*, and from the always useful *Police Gazette*.

It might be of help to point out what is *not* intended. The music hall in Britain was obviously important. But it is not discussed, except as one influence on the New York concert saloon; the music hall is a complex subject and deserves its own treatments. Likewise, this book is not focused on explaining the impact of the concert saloon on the society of Civil War and post-Civil War New York, except as that connection is inevitable. Conversely, it does not try to deal in detail with the influence of that society on the concert saloon, except where it also is inevitable. Such studies remain to be done. This book is about a popular entertainment venue and what took place there.

But I am glad to have provided some background on a virtually unknown piece of American entertainment history. I trust that my book will sketch out some details of a pivotal moment in the life of the concert saloon and will awaken interest in and add to our knowledge of the popular entertainment of New York City – and of entertainment in nineteenth-century America.

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New York City

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Even an intentionally limited book spreads out in time and space. I appreciate the help of my assistant Sylvia Wang, and my former assistant Liz Cherubino-Hess. I also am grateful to my friend George Thompson of the Reference Room of the New York University Library, my daughter Jane McNamara, formerly of the New York Public Library, now of the Los Angeles Conservancy, Andy Davis and the staff of the Museum of the City of New York, and to the following institutions and their staffs: the Billy Rose Collection of the New York Public Library, the Hatch-Billops Collection, the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the Archives of the City of New York, the New York University Library, the New York University Law Library, the Special Collections at Brown University, and of course The Shubert Archive.