

The New York Concert Saloon  
*The Devil's Own Nights*

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## *Where the devil's work is done: New York City concert saloons during the Civil War era*

Well, it won't set you back a peg to visit this institution, for it is one of the attractions of the great metropolis.

The *Clipper* on the Canterbury, 1861

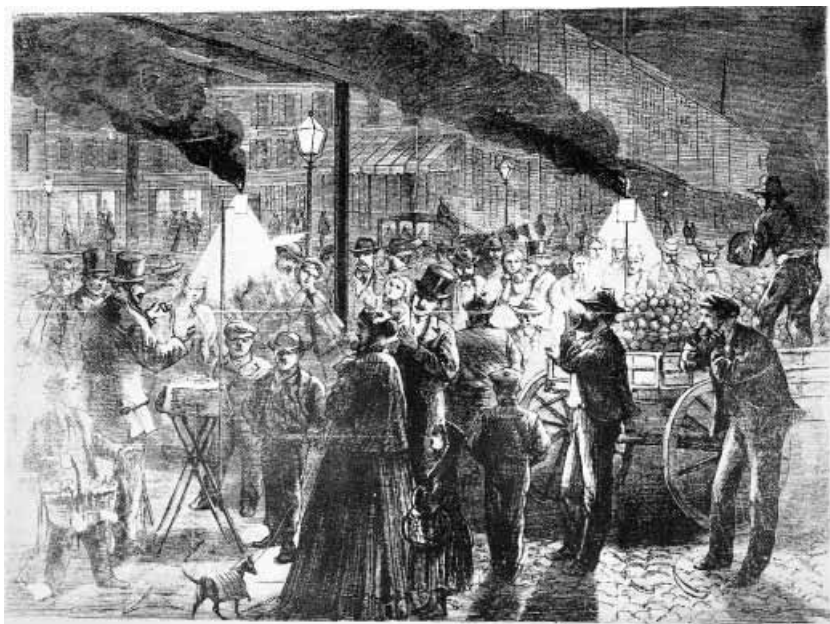
NEW YORK DURING THE CIVIL WAR WAS AMERICA'S LEADING commercial city and, according to the reformers and like-minded people, just what the majority of Americans thought – a sink of depravity. In 1866 a Methodist bishop named Matthew Simpson, for example, just after the war, estimated that New York City, which had about 800,000 citizens, harbored nearly 30,000 thieves, 20,000 prostitutes, 3,000 drinking establishments, and some 2,000 gambling dens. It did not matter whether Simpson's estimate was exaggerated, the fact remains that, during and after the Civil War, there was considerable illegal activity in New York City, and that great wealth, much of which was gained through dubious means, co-existed with grinding poverty. Of course there were both reformers and those who encouraged illegal activities such as the brothels, the gambling houses – and of course the concert saloons.

The concert saloons were of every sort, from the most humble to the most lavish. An article in the *New York Post* on January 2, 1862, trading on the publicity surrounding the up-coming Concert Bill, spoke of one elaborate concert saloon, the Canterbury, between Houston and Prince Streets, in what is now SoHo. It was in the building once occupied by the French Theatre, and was “the most prestigious on our list.” The *Post* especially noted its large size and splendid mirrors. The article compared the grander concert saloons like the Canterbury to the Novelty, 616 Broadway, “a second-rate and comparatively smaller institution.” But everything between them – and *below* the Novelty in quality – existed somewhere in the city, although the Bowery was probably their center.

At the time of the Civil War, the stage in all its forms had a bad reputation with many in New York, especially with some clergy and other conservative people. They saw only lurid displays of the female form in such popular mid-nineteenth century plays as *The Black Crook*, and in the controversial actress Adah Isaacs Menken's *Mazeppa*, as well as in the appearance in the city of the notoriously scantily clad act, The British Blondes.

Houses of prostitution – and the prostitutes themselves – of course, were viewed by reputable New Yorkers as a shocking social evil, especially with so many military men in the City. In addition, there had also been a groundswell for temperance among many respectable residents of the City, and, in some cases, for total abstinence. As a result, saloons – which already had bad reputations – had begun to be increasingly looked on askance by many. The fact that the concert saloons featured a kind of particularly tawdry, low-end theatre as well as liquor and the new fad of “waiter girls” – and, in the minds of many, prostitution – was too much for many so-called respectable people to bear. As late as 1881, *Nym Crinkle* would point out, “they serve as the gathering places for idle and vicious people to drink beer, listen to execrable music, make assignations, and parade in the dirtiest market those common charms which they have to sell.” Their reputations continued to be bad as long as they existed.

But that was not all. Another important factor was the reputation of the Bowery and lower Broadway as “fast.” The Bowery was then a cheap entertainment area that ran – and runs today – roughly from Chatham Square, below Houston Street, to Cooper Union, some fourteen blocks north. About the street, a modern history by Lloyd Morris, *Incredible New York*, says that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, “On Saturday and Sunday nights, the Bowery was in full carnival. Along its whole length, the avenue blazed with light, rang with the music of German street bands, Italian organ grinders, itinerant harpists and violinists, the cries of street vendors, the shouts of barkers who strove to lure the passing throng into the shops.”<sup>1</sup> And of course there were the concert saloons that lined the street, along with billiard parlors, dime museums, and houses of prostitution. There were still concert saloons – and the houses of prostitution associated in the public mind with them – on the Bowery in 1892 when Charles Hoyt and Percy Gaunt wrote about the street in a famous and much quoted song, “The Bowery,” in Hoyt’s play *A Trip To Chinatown*. By then the street was becoming less an entertainment district and more a haven for the unemployed and for chronic alcoholics. But to many, more than ever, the infamous Bowery – and with it the concert saloon – still offered a taste of “one of the devil’s own nights.”

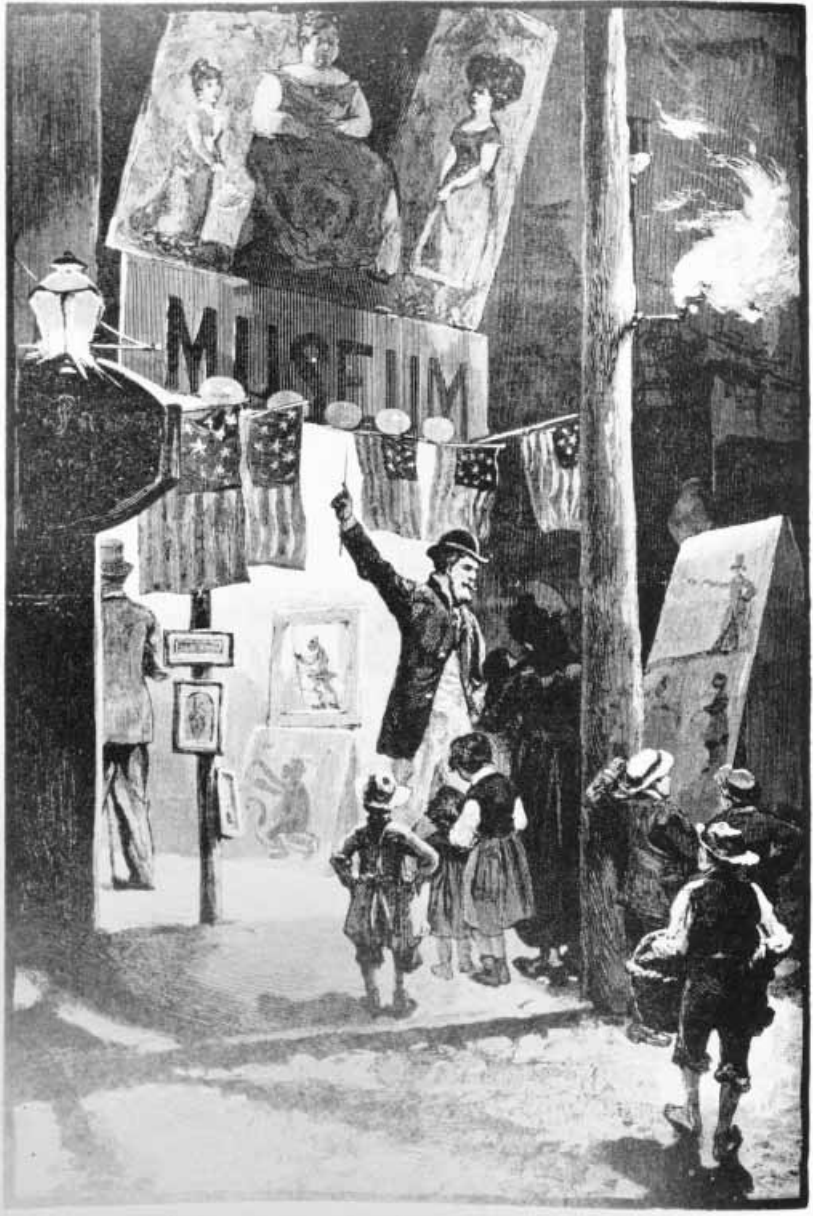


2 "Saturday Night on the Bowery," woodcut, c. 1875

Even before the Civil War, the Bowery had been consistently spoken of by reformers as a sinister place, the resort of "toughs" and gang members. Some time after 1870 it was on the way to becoming a genuine "skid row." By 1882, toward the end of the period discussed in this book, a report by the Bowery Mission and Home for Young Men called the street "the centre of one of Satan's strongholds." The report continued, adding that "haunts of vice and crime line [the street] which is nightly thronged with a mingled multitude of thoughtless youth, hardened criminals, and neglecters of all places of wholesome, and especially Christian influence." The mission estimated that at the beginning of the eighties some "15,000 persons, mostly young men – nightly throng its places of amusement." Not the least of the places were the concert saloons.

Although a great many concert saloons of the war years seem to have been in or near the Bowery, some of the better ones (or at least the more lavish) were in lower Broadway, above Houston Street, along with a jumble of other tourist institutions. Broadway was generally a number of cuts above the Bowery as far as its outward appearance was concerned. But there was something not altogether respectable about it. The street was an extraordinarily varied one, housing some of the finest shops in the city and some





3 Outside "talker" at a dime museum, Harry Muhrman, *Harper's Weekly*, February 26, 1881

fairly raucous saloons of one sort or another. An 1878 article in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* begins by acknowledging this fact, which had been true for years. "Life on Broadway is pretty nearly everything. It is the broadest farce, the heaviest tragedy, and the most delicate comedy; it is tender, severe, sad, and joyous – an available text for the satirist, the moralist, the humorist, the preacher, and the man of the world. No ambition, passion, or creed may not be studied in its magnificent parade, which puts together things that by nature are widely apart, a grand ensemble of vividly dramatic contrasts."<sup>2</sup>

If the Bowery and the area around it (Green Street, for example, and Mercer Street) seem to have been the center of at least the low end of concert-saloon activity, and lower Broadway of some of the better establishments, a number of them were also to be found in other areas of the city. Thus, some concert saloons were to be located in another "tough" area, Hell's Kitchen, (now called "Clinton" and bounded roughly by Forty-second and Fifty-ninth Street, Eighth Avenue and the Hudson River), in Sixth Avenue, in the so-called Tenderloin (roughly from Thirty-fourth Street to Forty-second Street, between Fifth and Seventh Avenue). During the period discussed in this book, concert saloons were also seen on streets near the Bowery. Houston Street, which intersects the Bowery, seems to have been a favorite, and was the site of the famous Harry Hill's, which is discussed later.

Obviously, a major source of the concert-saloon show between 1864 and 1884 was the tradition of the concert-saloon show itself as it had existed before the Civil War. In volume six of Odell's famous *Annals of the New York Stage*, he reports a flourishing concert-saloon industry in New York in 1857, presenting music of various kinds and a wide range of other entertainments. He notes two dozen concert saloons in his "miscellany" section and tells us, for example, that on January 3, 1857, *The Herald* announced about the Bowery Concert Hall, 257 Bowery, later the Melodeon, that it offered "Music for the Million" and "Free Concerts Every Evening," and advised tourists not to leave the city without visiting this popular place. But the entertainment was not just musical; in addition to comic and ballad singers and several dancers (including a jig dancer), the author lists two comedians and an "Ethiopian delineator" who appeared in the show.

At the grandest concert saloons like the Canterbury, at any rate, it is clear that, before the passage of the Concert Bill, the entertainments were not confined solely to music – and usually with free or low-cost admission. On the eve of the Concert Bill, which shut down a number of shows, the Canterbury produced entertainments that were very large, sometimes made up of more than thirty acts. In 1860, in addition to a broad selection

of musical acts, one could see a team of gymnasts, a tableau, cannon ball juggling, something called “The Flower Girl’s Festival,” and feats with a twenty-five-pound globe. An article in the *Clipper* in 1861, about an evening in the Canterbury, mentions, as well as music, such acts as a pole exercise, ladder groupings, acrobatic feats, a pantomime, a dramatic sketch, dances, a leap from a swinging rope into the auditorium, and an appearance “by a live Indian – Oka-ta-Walla.” In the first paragraph the article attests to the popularity of the Canterbury in the year before the Concert Bill: “We spent a rainy evening there last week and eleven o’clock caught us before we were aware we had been an hour in the place. Time takes to itself wings and speeds away with lightning-like rapidity when the company is pleasant, so it is said; and so we found it on the occasion of our visit . . .”

The piece ends, significantly, with these words: “This . . . will give the readers an idea of what may be seen for a mere trifle at a New York concert saloon, the price of admission to the Canterbury being thirteen, twenty-five and thirty-five cents. The house is nightly crowded in every part, and our little ‘waiter girl’ is kept busy in supplying the wants of her numerous admirers.”

But the potential onset of the Civil War had brought problems for the theatre. As M. B. Leavitt, the burlesque entrepreneur, put it in his autobiography, “The year 1860 made great changes in theatrical affairs, when the election of the first Republican President – Abraham Lincoln – threatened immediate dissolution of the Union. Business was paralyzed for a time and the theatre suffered severely.” Many theatres changed hands, he says, while minstrel houses “were in turn severely crippled by the prevailing financial distress. The music halls [concert saloons] suffered least.” In the first year of the Civil War all was well with the theatres again. Then the slump came, and managers “literally grabbed farmer boys from the streets,” offering them “inducements to go on the stage and act.” Something had to be done by the theatre and minstrel managers. And shortly it was. The result was the Concert Bill.

The bill was possible because *all* of the concert saloons in New York City had a bad name. As Mc Cabe suggests in the quotation that begins the Prologue, they were associated in the public mind with drunkenness, bawdy entertainment, prostitution, and worse. As Leavitt and others point out, more established branches of the theatre, as well as the minstrel show, resented concert saloons because they were taking away badly needed audience members. As Leavitt says, things got even worse for the theatres and minstrel halls and better for concert saloons:

Among the earliest to feel the return of better times were [the concert saloons]. These had become extremely numerous, perhaps because of the increasing number of soldiers. In making their appeal to the public they placed the greatest stress on announcing the “pretty waitresses” they employed. A wave of protest against them was started. The managers of the principal play-houses alleged that the vending of liquor by females was surely killing legitimate attractions. Many ministers of the Gospel preached sermons on the subject and in a short time an Act was passed forbidding women from serving drinks in any place of amusement.<sup>3</sup>

By 1861, theatre owners and managers, who resented the competition of the concert saloons, had begun to issue petitions aimed at suppressing them.

There was probably another important contributing reason, too. Certainly, the social position of the actor was not high in the years surrounding the war, and that of the popular entertainer was even lower; as a group, they were poor and uneducated, as well as being involved in a supposedly godless profession. And those who performed in concert saloons were the lowest of the low. In particular, concert-saloon entertainers were easily connected with the criminal and the immoral in the minds of many right-thinking people. Public opinion was wholeheartedly against them.

Popular performers, then, were already tainted, and the places where they entertained – which obviously catered to all sorts of nameless horrors – hardly helped their image. Thus, any kind of performers in concert saloons were essentially defenseless against charges of immorality, even when their acts were fairly innocuous – as many appear to have been. But by definition, they *had* to be doing something wrong if they were performing in concert saloons; the combination of alcohol, waiter girls, presumed prostitution, and supposedly bawdy theatrical entertainment was simply too much for many middle-class people to stomach. Not that the entertainers did not sing songs and present comedy that was suggestive, or even obscene. They did. But the reports suggest concert saloons did not produce – and entertainers did not present – nearly as much “blue” material as reformers seemed to indicate. In fact, most acts of all kinds were probably basically innocuous, except to the most puritanical of critics.

At any rate, there was certainly confusion in the weeks before the Concert Bill. And a touch of hope. The saloon owners thought their lawyers could stave off the worst. Concert saloon supporters predicted, wrote the *New York Times* on April 26, 1862, that the courts “will have decided that since liquor-selling, theatrical performances and pretty waiter girls are separately legal and proper, that when they are conjoined they cannot be prohibited

by any constitutional statute.” It was wrong. Eventually, the owners and managers got the ear of the politicians in Albany, who used the presence of “waiter girls,” in combination with alcohol and shows, as the very reason for their legislation.

But morality probably was not the crucial issue for the theatres – it seemingly was an excuse to force out of business unwanted competition. The bill seemed to be aimed in large part at the rapidly proliferating concert saloons, which theatre owners and managers thought were unfairly competitive. In any case, in January of 1862, a senator named Robins introduced a bill in the state legislature “to preserve the peace and order in public places in the City of New York.” The initial justification of the bill was that it made it more difficult to pollute the morals – with alcohol and waiter girls, and shows – of Union soldiers and sailors stationed in or near the City – and of course of others, including juveniles.

Essentially, the Concert Bill made it unlawful to conduct any kind of spoken or sung “performance” in the entertainment venues of New York – “interludes, tragedies, comedies, operas, ballets, plays, farces, minstrelsy, or any other stage entertainment” – until a license had been obtained from the City. (And what constituted a performance was not clear.) In any case, no license was to be given to any place where wine, beer, or ardent spirits were sold when female “waiter girls” – who clearly “hustled” drinks and of course were widely suspected of being prostitutes, as well – were permitted to be present. The fine for infractions was then a large one, as much as \$500, along with six months imprisonment.

The new bill went into effect on April 24, 1862, and – theoretically, at least – did produce the desired results, although, as Wilkes’ *Spirit of the Times* suggested in May of 1864, “the keepers of such places have sufficient influence with the bench and the bar to evade or deny the execution of any law designed to restrain their devilish business.” But many concert saloons turned out not to have “sufficient influence” and went out of business. Others stopped serving liquor, or giving shows, or fired their waiter girls. In any case, after the Concert Bill was passed in 1862, the overall size of the average show now seems to have shrunk and sometimes featured scarcely half the number of acts presented before the war years. At the less important institutions the number of acts often seems to have been even smaller. And non-musical acts were now becoming scarce in *any* concert saloons.

The Concert Bill was hard to interpret, and many owners and managers were being careful. It was widely thought that musical acts of any kind – since they were not really “shows” or “performances” – were exempt from the

Concert Bill, and for a while at least many concert saloons apparently tested out the theory by presenting material that they claimed was exclusively musical. It was worth a try, at any rate. Some attempted to get around the law by having only a piano or fiddle on the premises, or by sponsoring a kind of “community sing” among their customers, which had the double advantage of being both cheap and – at first glance – legal under the Concert Bill.

Others, however, stayed very much in the traditional business, giving what were obviously illegal shows free or for a small charge to customers – that is, retaining some combination of shows, alcohol, and their waiter girls, and trusting to luck that their activities would not be discovered. In 1862, for example, there still were probably in excess of seventy traditional concert saloons of all kinds operating illegally in New York – which is to say, in Manhattan, since consolidation was more than thirty years in the future. But most paid at least surface attention to the Concert Bill, although it was confusing. It was difficult, almost impossible to determine what was legal and what was not, but the legislators and some officials of the City of New York liked it that way.

It worked – at least to a certain extent. In volume seven of his *Annals*, Odell wrote about the coming of the Concert Bill and its immediate aftermath, pointing out that “all this froth and frivolity of drink and variety ran, we remember, synchronously with the darkest days of the Civil War, when we might suppose people were on their knees praying for peace on earth and a life free from heartbreaking worry!” He continued, quoting from the *Herald*:

The legislature at Albany [had] passed a law against such resorts, and the New York police at once stopped the sale of liquor by the “waitresses” so much advertised by places like the Gaieties, and especially flaunted in a publication advertised in the *Herald* of April 6th: Belles of the Concert Saloon . . . a complete list of the Waiter Girls of New York, with a portrait and biography of each – “one hundred engravings and three hundred pages.” On April 26th the *Herald* stated that the ‘Broadway [and Bowery, etc.] concert saloons, with one or two exceptions, complied with the law last night, and in all probability, this week will end all of them.

Odell went on, quoting from the *Herald*. The police, it said, kept a close watch on each concert saloon found to be open:

Canterbury Hall was well attended, Fox, the proprietor was complying with the law, “by closing his bar and allowing no females among the

audience.” At the Melodeon, however, a number of girls were in attendance, but withdrawn by the command of Captain Helms, “though they intend to continue them every night as they do not wait on the gentlemen.” The Gaieties opened, with only theatrical performances.<sup>4</sup>

The concert saloon probably was, in large part, a political target, and the new bill understandably was not a popular one with either liberal spirits or concert saloon promoters. Many people, indeed, thought that the Concert Bill was confusing, clumsy, and unfair. “Why,” asked the *Mirror*, “this invidious selection of [popular entertainment] for the payment of a penalty which aligns it with the criminal classes and the violators of social order?” Slout quotes a *Clipper* editorial written at the time, pointing to the obvious lack of evenhandedness behind the Bill:

Are the theatres altogether free from the drinking business? We think not. Attached to nearly, if not quite every theatre in this city, is a bar-room or more properly speaking a “drinking station.” Entrances to these saloons are, in some instances, actually connected with the auditorium, check takers being stationed at such entrances to pass and repass those who may be desirous of taking their “beverage” . . . Indeed, in one or two of our theatres we have seen liquor brought into the auditorium and handed to purchasers in their seats.<sup>5</sup>

Many theatres, said the *Clipper*, were themselves unsavory establishments, whether alcohol was served or not, and whether or not the infamous waiter girls were present: “The charge of immorality brought against concert saloons,” the paper said, “might also, to a certain extent, be brought against our theatres, for many of the ‘pretty ballet girls’ that are made to do duty in low necked dresses and short skirts at theatres at so much per night are no better in a moral point of view than some of those ‘pretty waiter girls’ we are accustomed to see at music halls.”

It was also clear that one result of the 1862 bill was not precisely what prominent theatre owners expected – though, from some points of view, what they deserved. “In making the attempt,” said the *New York Times*, “they have bitten themselves.” As the newspaper pointed out, the bill had backfired on some of its originators. First, and most obviously, “not alone are the concert saloons amenable to the new law, but the theatres are alike sufferers, for on Thursday evening the bar rooms connected with Niblo’s Garden, Wallack’s, the Winter Garden, etc., were closed according to the law, and thus some of the very men who set the ball in motion are first to feel its ‘depressing effect’.” The ultimate reason was that “many of the theatrical

drinking saloons bring the managers large yearly sums of rent, and this sum cut off, they will atone in sackcloth and ashes for the part they took in the dirty work of attempting to kill off minor rival establishments.”

In any case, the *Clipper* proceeded to make fun of the Concert Bill. In its 1864 series of articles, in a piece on the Oriental, it said: “When, in the spirit of mock morality, the gentlemen from the rural districts, represented at Albany, undertook to make laws for the Empire City, every sensible man laughed and snapped his fingers and thumb at their astute and asinine wisdom; but they were a ‘power’, and made themselves felt in many instances, particularly in abolishing waiter girls from concert halls.” Anger at the upstate legislators (no unusual thing among Manhattanites) led to a fit of reminiscence on the reporter’s part:

Who of our young fellows doesn’t look back with pleasure to the time when Fox’s Canterbury and Rivers’ Melodeon were in full blast, when on dull Sunday evenings a person could go and sip sherry cobbler and mint juleps – served up by delicate, lily white hands, belonging to young girls with alabaster “low necks,” and silks and satins, short at both ends – and listen to a fine song and operatic instrumental music. Those were indeed “merry days of old,” and formed one of the peculiar institutions of this great and glorious country.

At the end, the reporter returned to an indictment of legislators’ veniality and hypocrisy, which, he felt, had caused much of the trouble in the first place:

But it is a trite saying that “every dog has his day,” and that with the theatrical combination and money shelled out to crush the waiter girl system, thinking that the concert saloon business would be knocked in the head at the same time, a law was eventually passed to abolish the good old custom, to the intense mortification and regret of both young and old bloods. We all know that these same legislators, who – goaded by that same power behind every throne, glittering gold, which was never known to fail – were instrumental in framing the obnoxious law, were the first to feel the effects of it when, away from home and family, they came down to York on “business,” and missed their favorite crinolined divinities at the accustomed posts.<sup>6</sup>

The *Clipper’s* fourteen articles on the concert saloon provide an interesting picture of an entertainment that flourished during the Civil War. And it seems true, as it said, that concert saloons were immensely popular, both with soldiers and civilians, during the war years. But the catspaw, of course,



had been the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents. As Alan Neilsen says in *The Great Victorian Sacrilege*, it was one of a group of organizations that wielded considerable power in local affairs in the Civil War era. The Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents and similar “vice societies,” were “funded by the wealthy,” he says, “ostensibly for the purpose of ‘protecting’ public morals. Many of these societies were all too often a means of keeping [the public] under control. Although unallied to any specific sect, they sought to promote Christian morality – in the arts, as in society at large – through individual self-censorship and public conformity.”<sup>7</sup>

In 1839, a bill authorizing certain benefits for the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents had already appeared before the New York State Legislature. Its existence is specified in a set of papers that survive concerning an establishment called Hartmann’s Theatre, 174 Forsyth Street, in 1857. The papers say that Hartman has no license to present theatre and continues that, after the fact, he and his employees are “restrained and enjoined” from opening a theatre in the Forsyth Street building, without a proper license, according to the provisions of an “Act of the Legislature of the State of New York,” and “An Act to Amend An Act to Create a Fund in Aid of the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents in the City of New York’ passed February first in the year one thousand eight hundred and thirty nine . . .”

The implication is that the Society was the beneficiary of a special bill, which may have gone largely unenforced, except when it was convenient to do so. Then, in the Civil War era, at the demand of prominent theatrical managers, the Concert Bill was enacted. The powers granted to the Society earlier were evidently recalled and turned against concert saloons. The money was not an issue. The theatre managers were supporting a worthy charity. And besides, it was a small enough matter to those in control of the leading playhouses that they would not receive money from the fines, as long as what they thought of as unfair competition was eliminated.

The recipient of all the fines, then, was the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents. The story of its involvement with the Concert Bill and a later law goes something like this: all funds collected from fines went to the highly respectable – and very powerful – Society, not to the city or the theatres. The reasons seem clear enough. The Society was an organization whose board contained some of the most prominent names in New York, people whose rectitude – and often financial power – could not easily be challenged. And the Society was glad to lend its prestige; compliance was

potentially profitable. But all was not financially well with the Society after the Civil War. It fought back.

In 1872, when the fad for waiter girls was passing, another bill made clear that not only concert saloons but theatres and “other places of performance” still required a license from the Mayor – granted at his discretion. Of considerable significance was one part of the 1872 law, which provided that recipients were required to pay \$500 for the license – a large sum of money at the time which, once again, went to the Society. Waiter girls were no longer an issue and were not mentioned.

What constituted a “place of performance” was left unclear, a fact that would be of considerable significance to the money-making potential of the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents who once again were the beneficiaries. The established theatres generally paid the license fee more or less automatically, or, at any rate, were left alone. But it was now open season on smaller theatres, the remaining concert saloons, and other places that could not muster powerful allies or the rather exorbitant fee. Many of these small institutions appear in various Society documents, and the Society made a great deal of money from what were apparently quite dubious fines. In 1880, for example, it would make some \$35,000 from its licenses and penalties, none of which was publicly accountable.

On the eve of the 1872 law, the police staged a “show” raid on three concert saloons. The Assembly, the Oriental, and the Canterbury had been chosen. The raid was widely discussed in the newspapers of the day. A typical article appeared in an unknown paper on January 23, 1872. Some sixty-five waiter girls and half a dozen other employees, it said, were arrested at a concert saloon (chiefly managers, bartenders, and the like; the police did not arrest any performers). The females were later released, though a point was made that they were generally unrepentant. (“The doors were thrown open and the sixty-five women scampered down Spring Street shouting and laughing, their two hours’ incarceration having seemingly had no effect on them.”)

But the 1872 law was not accepted unreservedly by the courts. The following news item from the *New York Times* that appeared on February 2, 1872, tells part of the story:

The proprietors of the three concert-saloons in Broadway, which were recently visited by the Police, were brought up at Special Sessions yesterday, before Justice DOWLING, charged with keeping disorderly houses. The police described the character of these dens and the costume worn by the women, but Justice DOWLING said he could not take the nature

of the costume into consideration at all. The question to decide was, were the houses disorderly, and no acts of a disorderly character having been proved he dismissed the complaints, but directed Capt. MOUNT to make complaint to the Board of Excise, with a view to having the licenses revoked, on the grounds of having sold liquor to minors.

But this did not stop the Society for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquents. It continued to send in informers. It is the 1872 law that is mentioned most often in the surviving reports of the Society. This was not quite enough; in 1875 and 1876, as we shall see, there were other changes, designed to exclude from protection amateur presentations for charity.

The Society and other reformers, of course, were not objective. Nor was the *Clipper*. They scarcely saw the same places. From the first, in fact, the reformers and the *Clipper* pictured quite different establishments; there was already a kind of *Roshomon*-like quality to descriptions of concert saloons at the time of the Concert Bill and later. The concert saloons, of course, were what they were, but the picture one gave depended in large part on what side of the Concert Bill and later the 1872 bill one was on; that is, whether one agreed with the Society or in fact opposed it and probably violated the various bills. During and after the war, the *Clipper*, for example, seemingly visited no dismal honky-tonks. (“The Boulevard is a very neat and capacious saloon, fitted up with all the paraphernalia of a first-class concert hall”; Lee and Hatstatt’s Eureka was a “nice, clean room, painted, papered and oil clothed”). Reformers and the Society visited nothing else but foul dens of iniquity. Depending on their readership, the newspapers essentially were allied with the righteous and were scornful of concert saloons. But on the whole they tended to be somewhat more clear-eyed and realistic than the out-and-out reformers. (The *Police Gazette*, of course, characteristically threw up its hands in horror at what went on in concert saloons, but nudged and winked at the same time.)

An example is the conflicting descriptions of the concert saloon called the Bon Ton, on Broadway between Houston and Bleeker. The account in the *Clipper* emphasized its wholesomeness but James Mc Cabe – an interested party who was superficially a reformer, or at least masqueraded as one – made the place appear to be a low dive. The irony lies in the fact that their descriptions are not very different.

The Bon Ton, said the *Clipper* in 1864, was in a cellar, but was a “well lighted and nicely oil-clothed room,” and had “the appearance of an ordinary Broadway drinking saloon.” The piece goes on to point out that there was

a back room of sorts (probably where the stage was located, though it is not mentioned). "An extensive screen is attached to the end of the bar, about six feet in height and about eighteen in width, painted white. Upon opening the door in same, there was another room, half again as big as the bar, full of females and sightseers paired off at the various veneered tables . . . On the walls of the Bon Ton are steel portraits of nearly all the celebrated actors, interspersed with some little gems of rural scenery for the lover of nature to contemplate. To those fond of the ridiculous, there are some very good caricatures of crinoline, published in Germany, which are enjoyed just as well by those who wear sixteen steel hoops as the breached lords of creation. They are worth looking at as a memento of the days when women wore crinoline."<sup>8</sup> The reporter adds, "there are no 'private supper rooms,' but all is conducted openly."

In 1868 Mc Cabe saw what was undoubtedly the same place through rather different eyes in *Secrets of the Great City*. (Though, in fairness, the establishment was probably then under different management.) "On Broadway, near — street," he says, "we notice, just above the entrance to the cellar, a flaming transparency, with the inscription 'Madame X—'s Arcade.'" Going down a few steps, Mc Cabe found a large screen, painted white, with a dancing Venus painted on it. It was the only entrance to the main hall. He and his companion were required to go around it. "We find the floor handsomely covered with matting and oil cloth. On the right hand side, nearest the door is the bar [which is] well furnished, and any drink called for, from beer to champagne, can be instantly obtained."

"A significant feature," Mc Cabe continues provocatively, "is a formidable Colt's revolver, a foot in length, suspended immediately over the sideboard." It was clearly placed there as a warning to the disorderly element. "On the walls are black engravings of the French school [*sic*], fit ornaments for the place . . . In the back of the hall on a raised platform, is an asthmatic pianoforte, upon which an individual with a threadbare coat, colorless vest, and faded nankeen pantaloons, is thrumming away for dear life."<sup>9</sup> The concert saloon, Mc Cabe says, was filled with loose women and disreputable waiter girls, and was a well-known front for prostitution and assignations.

But a different, more acceptable kind of concert saloon than the Bon Ton was developing in New York after the war. It was aimed at a family audience, and the sources were the German beer garden, as well as traditional male-oriented resorts. Of course, the traditional concert saloon also continued to exist. But after the war, the emphasis of the Society now seemed focused on fines leveled at those institutions that had no proper license from the

mayor, regardless of whether they really served alcohol or employed waiter girls. Increasingly, nobody seemed to care much about liquor and waiter girls one way or the other – except, of course, the Society and other social conservatives. The old line that was regularly written into a majority of earlier Society reports – “said audience contained females who sat at tables drinking & conversing with men” – was disappearing. And new accusations were surfacing.

Some concert saloons were always fronts for prostitution. But all in all, many classic New York concert saloons of the Civil War era seem to have offered little more than a relatively brief, pleasant interlude in the drinking. Their story suggests – if it was not clear before – that alcohol – and of course prostitution, where it existed – rather than entertainment was really their first order of business. It continued to be. A free or low-cost show – and waiter girls, when they were a fad – were evidently just inducements to customers to drink their fill in congenial circumstances.

Like the medicine show, the acts may not have been very good. But the show was often offered for the price of a drink served by a pretty waitress, free, or for only a few pennies more. Probably, in some cases, it also acted as prelude to a paid tryst with a prostitute. But not necessarily. Much of the time, it was just drinks that were being sold – and the show and the women who served drinks and undoubtedly sometimes performed seem simply inducements to drink. In any case, the fact is that, like the medicine show, the concert-saloon show represented one of the beginnings of the use of entertainment as an advertising device.