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Singers and musicians in the union journal "The Performer" during the First World War

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Singers and musicians in the union journal “*The Performer*” during the First World War 1914-1918

Notes for talk given at Glasgow conference in January 2016

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(20 min + 10 min questions)

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Who are the Variety Artistes Federation ?

At the beginning of the war there are between 2600 and 2700 members of the Variety Artistes Federation, and an editorial suggests that this is out of 4 000 artistes in the country who would be eligible to be members. Like many unions, numbers increased during the war and (DEC19 1918) at the end of 1918, the VAF has 3900 members, which is 700 more than the previous year.

In 1914, members paid a £1 entrance fee on joining, in addition to weekly subs, but the fee could be paid in up to eight instalments if required: we see that care was taken to attract poorer artistes. ¹

I'm interested here not in the stars but in the run-of-the-mill music hall artistes, members of the VAF. A third of them were singers, and many others instrumentalists. Many many artistes earned just enough to scrape by, and were

¹ *The Performer*, 21 January 1915.

frequently unemployed.

What was their working life like? If they were working in London, they would often play at three or four theatres during any given day; but they were often on tour, staying in specialized lodging houses, offering ‘three to a room, [for] thirty five pence, and that included a morning cup of tea and fish and chips at night.’² They would be working by now in quite big theatres, 1000 to 3000 seats. The Paisley Hippodrome had 1400 seats, the Empire in Preston and the New Hippodrome in Folkestone had 3 000 each. Here is a recent photograph of the Bradford Alhambra, which opened in 1914 with 1400 seats.

Slide Alhambra

Musicians in the VAF

The photos in the union journal show that many members were musicians. Here are a couple of examples.

Slide photo banjoists and photo cellist

Virtuosity or novelty - one or the other - would be the Unique selling point of a given turn.

In May 1917, for example, extracts from operas were on tour at the halls and at the Hippodrome in London, a famed Russian pianist was performing.³

² Harding, *George Robey*, 27. At the time there were 240 pennies, or twenty shillings, in a pound.

³ *The Encore*, 24 May 1917.

At other times during the war you might watch *Harry Mutch and the trombone kings* or *Jan Naylor violoncello virtuoso*

On a less traditional note, successful turns included

the handcuffed violinist

the Apache lady violinist

The only girls bagpipe band in the world

The Grainger girls – the only singing cyclists

Or Odette Myrtil, who sings a French song and plays the violin whilst dancing"

(The Encore Jan 4 1917)

SLIDE Three sisters singers and woman bugler

Slide Two more female singing groups

In these photos we see that there were plenty of women members in the VAF, (though almost none on the leadership committee).

Artistes and trade unionism

What was special about the artistes' trade unionism? From an economic point of view, the artistes were in a contradictory position. On the one hand, they were independent artisans, negotiating individually with their customers (theatres or record companies), and were in direct competition with other artistes

to get bookings or top billing.

This helped to ensure that there was some truth in what one member said in their memoirs: that VAF members were ‘Staunch individualists for whom a “red nose” was infinitely preferable to the red flag.’⁴

And yet, the economic power of theatre managers (and the increasingly influential chains of theatres) tended to reduce the entertainers to the status of dependent wage workers.

The revolution in variety which had started just before the war – the rise of the revue – accelerated this tendency. Instead of an evening entertainment made up of individual turns, more and more theatres were moving to a single team show - revue- an artistically centralized form, integrating music hall turns. Revue was a result of the concentration of capital, and a show which created newish groups of semi skilled workers such as chorus girls. In July 1918, the paper lists the titles of 87 revues on tour in the UK.

July 4 1918

All this meant that artistes were ever more prone to use collectivist tactics to improve their situation.

Collectivism was not entirely new. Mutual aid associations had been founded in the 1870s, in particular the Music Hall Artistes Railway Association,

⁴ Peter Honri, *Music Hall Warriors. The History of the Variety Artists Federation 1906 to 1967* (London: Greenwich Exchange, 1997), v.

which negotiated special tariffs for music hall entertainers on trains, and gradually took on other union roles, not without vigorous polemics between pro- and anti- trade union artistes.

By 1897, there were 5 000 members of the MHARA. In 1906, its leaders joined up with other organizations to found the Variety Artistes Federation,

During the great music-hall strike in London in 1907, the artistes were able to force a government arbitration which introduced important improvements in standard contracts. The right of theatres to ban artistes from playing in other venues in the same town was limited, and additional shows such as matinees had from then on to be remunerated.

The strike was active and dynamic and lasted 22 days. On both sides, all the habitual union and management tactics were implemented. Some theatre managers doubled the salaries of non-strikers for the duration of the conflict, and others put pressure on artistes to sign a written promise not to join the union. On the strikers' side, rallies and picket lines were organized in front of the theatres, and over a million leaflets were given out. Strike-breakers were expelled from the union, and alternative evenings of entertainment were held with big name stars to raise money for the strikers. Only the London theatres

were on strike, but union members in the rest of the country gave five per cent of their salary every week to the strike fund.⁵

Solidarity was available from other sections of the labour movement. Southwark Trades Council, for example, held meetings with speakers from a series of manual workers unions and from the Independent Labour Party.

The VAF : A Trade Union of a hybrid type : with elements of the friendly society and the professional association

So by the time of the first world war, the VAF was a real modern trade union ,

With union discipline, the giving legal advice and legal representation

Feb 1 1917 (77 legal cases were supported in 1915: 52 in 1916).

The union also supplied pro forma contracts, was involved in national negotiation with employers, and occasionally supported strike action.

⁵ Honri, *Music Hall Warriors*, 12.

But the union retained important aspects of a friendly society, highly necessary in these pre-welfare state days.

For example death grants. Each member paid in addition to weekly subs, a fixed sum every time a member died. The sum collected in this way was given to the family of the dead man or woman. In 1915, the death levy was sixpence that is to say the family received around three hundred pounds death grant – this represented a year's wages for the smaller artistes. In 1915 there were 19 death levies to pay, in 1916, 20. Nov 22 1917: So the amount given to the widow or family varies, but the VAF hands over immediately 25 pounds on proof of death (enough to pay for the burial).

The VAF is also closely associated with the music hall sick fund, and with the rest homes for retired artistes set up in 1895 in Scotland and in 1911 in England. Regular charity carnivals were held in aid of the rest homes as well as events to raise money for the Variety artistes benevolent fund, and the music hall ladies guild. This last would take children of poorer artistes on holiday in the summer (40 went to Bognor regis in 1913) and in the Winter would visit sick or retired artistes and give them free coal. (Jan 7 1915)

Finally the VAF had aspects of a professional organization, defending the profession and the sector, as we shall see.

« The Performer » and its wartime priorities

Here then is the Union journal

Slide two front pages

- it's main sections included

Debate and opinion on all aspects of show business

Slide editorials and letters' page

As well as the down to earth necessity of finding a gig. Here are adverts for turns with vacant dates:

Slide lots of adverts for turns

July 3 1913 But also frequent legal notices remind us it can be a cut throat industry

« notice is hereby given to all whom it may concern that the idea and title of the living piano (huge capital letters) is registered and full protected". Sole agent A Goldstein

Slide adverts for hampers and agents

And then there are adverts for essential accessories such as hampers, and agents.

And adverts for digs in every issue, as thousands of artistes tour the country.

These small ads claim

July 3 1913

« cooking and cleanliness a speciality »

« electric light » for one or two of them

« troupes accommodated »

« patronized by leading professionals »

« piano in each room »

« lavatory in house » say a few of them

« one minute from halls »

« trains met with lorry on receipt of wire »

What are the priorities of the union during the war ?

- patriotism

Like many milieux, the music hall milieu is patriotic and support for the war drive goes without saying. ? Nevertheless it is consensual patriotism and not jingoism.

6 AUG 1914

EDITORIAL

« It is impossible as yet to say or even to imagine what effect this terrible tragedy of a european war will have on the music hall industry »

We know nothing of politics, and the Variety artistes federation is not a political organization. We have been good friends with the International

Artistes Lodge of Germany for many years , and they have done much to lighten the burden of the British artiste when on the Continent. If Fate places us in different camps, it is for each to do his duty to the State to which he belongs, trusting, when it is « all over » to renew the friendships of the past. It is neither « ours » nor « theirs » to reason why – and neither would respect the other who did not put his duty to his country before everything. What has to be in the meantime is in the « lap of the Gods ».

December 2 1916 Conscription and the music halls is discussed

“with the political aspect of the subject we are not interested. What is of more direct importance to variety artistes is... to what extent would the music hall and the music hall profession generally be affected?”

The newspaper shows itself proud of the men who join up, and it refers favorably to an attempt to put together a battalion only made up of men from the music hall industry ^(42.15) All VAF members who are called up are kept in benefit for the duration provided they were fully paid up when they joined the army “the federation is thus loyally backing up the patriotism of all its members who are with the colours” ^(13 April 1916).

Slide cartoon war worry

and cartoon war cloud

So the union paper doesn't not **at all** go in for recruitment propaganda or arguments for or against conscription, but is in favour of music hall artistes playing a full role in the national mobilization.

- Building the union

Slide cartoon recruiting new members

The main priority throughout the war was recruiting new members.

23 July 1914 A « gold medal » is awarded to the member who recruits the largest number of new members.

A specific campaign was run to recruit workers in revue: members of the chorus in particular. Demands were put forward of particular interest to these groups : strict limits on unpaid rehearsals, no dismissal without notice etc. (*4 Nov 1915*)

June 5 1916

Chorus girls at Drury Lane complained to the VAF that they had been rehearsing for six to eight weeks without pay.

sep 6 1917 In September 1917 a girl while rehearsing unpaid was seriously injured and the theatre chain involved – Moss Empires - refused to pay compensation saying she hadn't been employed on a contract.

Special meetings were held, in London, Glasgow, Hull, Newcastle and Belfast for members working in revues. (25 Nov 1916)

A new rule was introduced so that any performer earning less than four pounds a week could join the vaf for an entrance fee of one shilling rather than the usual guinea.

Jan 13 1916 The VAF decided in 1916 to resume holding monthly meetings – Manchester Liverpool Glasgow Newcastle and Birmingham as well as in London

- Questions of artiste professionalism

The journal spent a good deal of space on issues of what was seen as artiste professionalism, as you can see in these two cartoons.

Slide cartoon old business and cartoon vulgarity

On the left the cartoon recommends that performers renew their turn regularly.

On the right the cartoon expresses concern about vulgarity, which is massively and regularly denounced in the paper.

A number of editorials during the war spoke of the need to eliminate vulgarity, or claimed that it had been largely eliminated, in response to attacks from groups such as the National Vigilance Association, though vulgarity itself is often not clearly defined.

(APRIL 6 1916) When in 1916, one comedian wrote to the Performer denouncing moralism and defending vulgarity, an avalanche of letters were published disagreeing with him. I have written of this elsewhere.

June 22 1916 In June 1916 the Editorial was entitled “vulgarity and the halls” and its attitude to the risqué comedian is quite clear:

“where one fool would applaud his suggestive witticism, hundreds of decent people experience no feeling beyond that of disgust

- Defending the music hall industry

Many pages of the journal in the war years concentrate on defending the music hall industry, employers and workers together, against excessive encroachments of rationing in particular.

Slide cartoon night club and cartoon problem leaves with peace sun

So here we can see a protest at the imposition of early closing to save energy.

The music hall is hit by the curfew whereas the night clubs for the upper classes are left alone. There is a class element then to this protest

- salaries and working conditions

Slide cartoon tinker tailor soldier spy and cartoon dressing rooms

Wages and working conditions were obviously a priority

At the start of the war a “Cooperative scheme” was set up for a few months;

Everyone was sure that income from music halls would collapse, and the union negotiated a pro-rata wage reduction in the hope of enabling everyone to survive the few months it was thought the war would last. This caused much debate in the union, partly because of management abuse of the system, and the scheme was abandoned when it became clear that ticket sales had rapidly recovered and were even booming.

In September 1918, the ^(26.09.18) editorial was on health and safety issues, in particular damp and draughty dressing rooms.

But no doubt the two most important campaigns were against Sunday opening of music halls, and against the split week. After a series of mass union meetings, it was decided that members accepting contracts for less than one week's work would be disciplined. ^(2 July 1914)

Relations with other workers in the theatres

Slide other workers (tips or award payments)

Askwith made an award for the duration of the war

Wages increased and certain employees such as dressers who were paid by tips only now have a minimum wage (6d a night) (*The Performer*, 21.09.1960)

In 1918 the Chairman's page carried a discussion of tips given by artistes to stage hands, and proposed they should be replaced by a fixed system for specific services (setting up or operating turn equipment etc) The union is generally against tipping as not dignified, and would prefer a scale. An agreement seems to be in progress about fixed charges for such help. This is the subject of discussion between the vaf and the national association of theatrical employees. (*The Performer*, June 6 1918)

In this issue then the union is playing its role of standardizing payment, and not allowing it to depend of subjective criteria which prevent workers' solidarity.

Also in the journal there were reports on strikes by other unions, esp amalgamated musicians union and their long 1914 dispute with the theatre chain

owned by Oswald Stoll. They also report sympathetically on attempts to get wage rises by the national union of theatrical employees.

August 3 1916 Strike in Golders green of stage hands, when all union members were sacked.

Expressed support in 1917 for the vaudeville strike in the united states.

Conclusions

I hope then that these cartoons and these comments have shown something of the nature of the trade unionism of variety performers during the war years.

Looking at this trade unionism allows us to be reminded of the situation of the average performer : a very long way from the situation of the stars who one hear much more about.

Its work as a friendly society helped hundreds who were in dire circumstances in this period long before the arrival of a welfare state. Its work as negotiator backed up with the threat of industrial action, and the acceptance of union discipline by performers, helped maintain working conditions at an acceptable level. At the same time its obsession with respectability, and its routine participation in the war drive were both elements which acted more in the interests of national elites than those of the music hall performers and their largely working class audiences.

