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John Mullen

► To cite this version:

John Mullen. Musicians, Singers and Other Artistes as Workers in the British Music Hall 1900-1918. Rosemary Golding. The Music Profession in Britain 1780-1920: New Perspectives on Status and Identity, 2018. hal-02480377

HAL Id: hal-02480377

<https://normandie-univ.hal.science/hal-02480377>

Submitted on 16 Feb 2020

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Musicians, Singers and Other Artistes as Workers in the British Music Hall 1900-1918

John Mullen, University of Rouen, France, Research team ERIAC

The music hall in Britain has an image as old-time, classless entertainment, as commemorated in the long-running television show, *The Good Old Days*. The material reality was of course quite different. The thousands of touring artistes, the powerful theatre chains, struggling lyricists and in-house musicians inhabited a world where professional organization and conflict with employers was not absent. In this chapter, I will look at the development of music hall working conditions and union organization from 1900 to 1920, concentrating on three key moments: the turn of the century, the great London strike of 1907, and the years of the First World War.

Music hall was at the centre of musical entertainment in Britain at the turn of the 20th century. It is true that musical comedy was still in its heyday, that blackface minstrel shows (though they had declined in number) still had some success, and that gramophone records were gradually picking up sales among the wealthier classes; but the cheapest, most popular, genre was the music hall. Around a million tickets a week were sold in London alone. The front page of local newspapers around the country advertised the week's programme at the local hall; shifts of factory workers would organize for one or two of them to go to the show on Monday to see how good the week's offerings were and report back to their workmates.

Two main dynamics have been identified in the late Victorian popular music industry. Firstly, the concentration of capital, which meant the increasing domination of large companies, (music publishers and chains of variety theatres in particular), and the development of a national market for entertainment, based on touring acts. Its corollary was, as in every sector of the economy, a more precise division of labour and a professionalization of many aspects of work which had previously been more informally organized. Growing numbers of artistes and musicians would be pushed by this new impersonal structure of management to turn to formal collective organization in defence of working conditions, and to industrial action, as we shall see below.

Secondly, the sector was irrigated by the continuing obsession across society with “respectability”, and the fear of “vulgarity” strongly influenced the content and structure of the entertainment, as well as ensuring a seemingly endless debate about the exact demands of respectability and moral uprightness. The declaration in the *Edinburgh Evening News* in July 1900 by a Mr Wilson, complaining

I have listened to scores of songs sung, some of them by men earning huge salaries, which as regards their character could not be sung before any respectable and decent household ... To what does it all add up? To the glorification of vice¹

is entirely typical.

The year 1900 arrived as each of these two processes was well-advanced, but not yet exhausted.

The consolidation of a national industry

A survey of the industry in 1900 shows that there was a tremendous amount of money being made. The music halls (or “variety theatres”), now several hundred in number, were growing in size and in capitalization. The logic of major investment was gradually replacing that of the self-made music hall proprietor who retained the common touch.² As Peter Bailey notes:

Combinations of houses ... produced the largest operation of its kind with the formation of Moss Stoll Empires in 1900 with a capitalization approaching £2 million, and 40 outlets nationally, subject to centralized management and nationally integrated programming. Something like a third to a half of all remaining halls were under some form of syndicate control, many of them booking their artists through Moss Stoll.³

¹ *Edinburgh Evening News*, 3 July 1900.

² Peter Bailey, ‘A Community of Friends’ in Peter Bailey (ed.), *Music-hall, the Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1986), 34.

³ Peter Bailey, ‘Kipling’s Bully Pulpit: Patriotism, Performance and Publicity in the Victorian Music Hall’ in *Kipling Society Journal*, 85:341, 2011, p.28.

The theatre chains had many advantages: they could sign up top stars for an entire season, thus preventing competitors from using the big names in their advertising; they could by-pass theatrical agents and negotiate directly with the performers; and they could buy from foreign networks a monopoly of touring artistes from those networks. They were prepared to pay key stars high salaries. The singer Marie Lloyd, in 1900, earned 40 pounds a week, 40 times the UK average wage.⁴

Rising professionalization

The industry was ever more professional, and theatres were tightly run businesses. One important aspect of the intensification of labour and of venue use was the adoption of the “two houses a night” system, which transformed the lives of both touring performers and house orchestras. The days when the music hall evening lasted many hours and patrons drifted in and out over the course of the show were almost over.⁵ Sadler’s Wells Theatre in Islington used this new system, for example.⁶ In May 1900 the Bedford theatre was taken over by new management and the “two shows a night” system was announced⁷ while in September the same year, the Battersea Palace reopened on the same basis.⁸ The Tivoli theatre company chain opened a new theatre the same year in Birmingham, to add to their establishments in Leeds, Hull and Jarrow. All were worked “on the up to date plan of two performances an evening”.⁹

Inside the theatres, as the equipment became more sophisticated (revolving stages, or huge water tanks for synchronized swimming numbers) the division of labour was changing, with the invention of a series of new roles such as that of stage manager. Larger groups of workers found themselves subject to modern management methods.

Firstly, the musicians: every music hall, cinema or opera house employed a house orchestra. Wages were not high, and working conditions could be hard for musicians playing up to four shows a day in addition to rehearsals for upcoming

⁴ Midge Gillies, *Marie Lloyd, the One and Only* (London, Gollancz, 1999), 89.

⁵ Bailey describes a show lasting five and a half hours, in 1885; *op. cit.*, 42.

⁶ *The Era*, 13 October 1900.

⁷ *The Era*, 12 May 1900.

⁸ *The Era*, 25 August 1900.

⁹ *The Era*, 10 November 1900

programmes, in a smoky auditorium. Damp in the halls contributed to tuberculosis, a frequent cause of death.¹⁰

The very first musicians' unions in Britain had appeared in the 1870s, with the foundation of the Manchester Musical Artists' Protective Association, which soon opened a London branch.¹¹ These organizations only survived for a few years. Others followed, hybrids between friendly associations and trade unions, and often criticized by those musicians whose view of respectability led them to refuse to look at their position as artists from the point of view of the defence of working conditions. In the 1890s, a more stable trade union was established, the Amalgamated Musicians Union. The cost of joining was lowered, from seven and a half shillings a year in 1890 to two and a half in 1898, a sign of the desire to recruit all grades of musician. In 1894, the AMU was affiliated to the national confederation of unions, the Trades Union Congress.

These trade unions had some considerable influence: in August 1900, the London Trades Council¹² announced that they would oppose the granting of entertainment licences to employers who were not fair employers in the view of the musicians' union and of the theatrical employees' unions.¹³

What then of the artistes? Whether singers, instrumentalists or acrobats, from an economic point of view, they were in a contradictory position. On the one hand, one might classify them as independent artisans, who negotiated individually with their customers (theatres or occasionally record companies), and were in direct competition with others to get bookings or top billing. However, the average artiste was very much dependent on his or her employment, and was often most concerned with earning enough to live on, travelling from one cheap boarding house to another, and with that tiny but real chance of making it to stardom.

The artistes had not yet formed a trade union, though there existed various forms of associations for mutual benefit. The biggest of these was the Music Hall Artistes Railway Association. Since artistes were more or less permanently on tour, the negotiation of special fares, in particular for their sometimes impressive

¹⁰ See www.musiciansunion.org.uk

¹¹ Angèle David-Guillou, 'L'organisation des musiciens dans la Grande-Bretagne du XIXe siècle : vers une nouvelle définition de la profession' in *Le Mouvement Social*, /243 (2013/2), 9-18.

¹² A council of representatives from London branches of unions from all sectors of the economy.

¹³ *The Era*, 11 August 1900.

amounts of musical equipment and other luggage, was not without importance. The organization regularly recruited new members and by December 1900 boasted a list of 5,196.¹⁴ This association was to gradually extend its activities to become a proto-trade union, not without vigorous polemics between pro- and anti- trade union members.

Continuance of pre-industrial processes and habits

At the same time as the powerful processes forming a national industry, there remained a good number of customs inherited from the informal, locally based, traditions of earlier music hall; the music hall remained, to a large extent, “a socially intensive industry”.¹⁵ Though a few lyricists and composers were salaried workers for the large publishing companies, for example, many songs were still bought directly from the writers by singers, in pubs or at the stage door, and this was an atmosphere which included many informal links and exchanging of favours. In the catalogue of influential songs put together by Michael Kilgarriff one finds a very large number of composers and lyricists who wrote only one or two successful songs, which were no doubt sold informally.¹⁶

Another continuance of older traditions was the “benefits” system. If less central than it had been in the 1880s, it was very much alive, acting as a nexus of a gift economy.¹⁷ These benefits were specific shows where the profits were not taken by the owners in the usual way. They could be organized for charitable purposes, a vital necessity in a country which lacked even minimal welfare provisions for most. The Music Hall Benevolent Fund, for example, a charity set up to help widows and orphans of performers, would often hold benefit shows, and in April 1900, a benefit was organized to raise funds for victims of the fire at the Grand Theatre.¹⁸

Other benefit shows were given, occasionally or annually, as a sort of “bonus” to add to the salary of particular employees, generally theatre managers. In April 1900, Mr Fred Law took his annual benefit at the Standard, and Mr Joe Lawrence,

¹⁴ *The Era*, 1 December 1900.

¹⁵ Bailey, *op. cit.*, 41.

¹⁶ Kilgarriff, Michael, *Sing Us One of the Old Songs – a Guide to Popular Song 1860 – 1920* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Peter Bailey ‘A Community of friends’, 41.

¹⁸ *The Era*, 14 April 1900.

stage manager at the Empire took his first complimentary benefit, when “the house was packed at double prices”.¹⁹ Indeed, prices were often raised at these benefit shows, and they would be the occasion to return favours accumulated in the complex daily routine of show business. The same month George Sanderson, acting manager of the Belfast Empire, was accorded his first annual benefit under the patronage of the Lord Mayor of Belfast.²⁰ Benefits could also be held for popular stars, allowing people (in particular other stars) to show their appreciation. In February 1900, Marie Lloyd was accorded a complimentary benefit.²¹

Annual works’ outings for the permanent staff of a music hall, both musicians and stage hands, another aspect of the old paternalistic atmosphere, flourished. During the year 1900, *The Era* reported briefly on many of them. The staff of the Palace theatre went for a day out in Folkestone, while in September the staff of the People’s Palace in Dundee were also treated to a day at the seaside.²² These practices survived despite the hardnosed financial calculations which were now central to the industry.

The music hall strike of 1907

The year of 1907 would mark a turning point where the modern habits of trade unionism and industrial conflict would take decisively more space in the negotiating of pay and working conditions, and the paternalistic or gift-economy aspects of the music hall would be pushed into the margins.

In this year, an unexpected strike broke out in the London music halls. Stars and lesser known artistes, stage hands and orchestra musicians stayed out for over three weeks. The strikers received strong support from the trade union and labour movement, and the conflict made the front pages of the newspapers day after day. How could such an event take place among a group of people who were, according to one commentator, “Staunch individualists for whom a ‘red nose’ was infinitely preferable to *The Red Flag*”?²³

¹⁹ *The Era*, 14 April 1900.

²⁰ *The Era*, 21 April 1900.

²¹ *The Era*, 17 February 1900.

²² *The Era*, 15 September 1900.

²³ Honri, Peter, *Music Hall Warriors: A History of the Variety Artistes Federation* (London, Greenwich Exchange, 1997), V.

As we have explained above, by 1907 the music hall was very much an industry. It was dominated by chains of variety theatres such as those of Stoll, Moss and Gibbons, and by song publishing companies such as Francis and Day. The theatre conglomerates had been floated on the stock exchange and profits were high. The strikers of 1907 claimed that Mr Stoll made personally £35 000 a year from his theatres.²⁴

The political context of the strike was constituted by the Liberal government elected in 1906, which included 29 Labour MPs. This government was to pass a number of welfare laws (instituting the first Old Age Pensions in the UK in 1908 and the first unemployment insurance in 1911). From the point of view of working class experience, this is the period described by Robert Tressell in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*²⁵ and by Robert Roberts in *The Classic Slum*.²⁶

The trade union context was marked by the overturning in 1906 of the Taff Vale decision, a change which allowed unions, once again, to organize strikes without being legally liable for the loss of business suffered by employers. At this time, unemployment was falling, prices were falling too, and trade union membership followed a gradual upward trend. The great strikes of the match girls (1888), and the gas workers and dockers (1889) were still remembered, and the leaders of these strikes – Tom Mann, Will Thorne or Ben Tillett, remained very much in the public eye.

Working conditions

The artistes, as I mentioned above, normally played in several theatres the same week, and moved regularly from town to town. Maitland quotes the example of

Whit Cunliffe, a popular tenor, [who] appeared [in 1906] in one week at the Chelsea Palace at 7 10 pm and 9 45 pm; at the Euston at 7 45 pm and 10 40 pm, and at the Oxford at 8 50 pm²⁷

²⁴ *The Performer*, 31 January 1907.

²⁵ Robert Tressell, *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2012) (first published 1914).

²⁶ Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum, Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990) (first published 1971).

²⁷ Maitland, Sarah, *Vesta Tilley* (London, Virago, 1985), 18;

If the stars commanded a good salary, most artistes had a much more modest standard of living. A *Daily Telegraph* reader refers to the situation of her husband:

It is the performer of four pounds a week I would like to speak of. Before he starts his week's engagements he has in all probability to come on a journey from say Manchester or Liverpool ... The railway fare and carriage of luggage can cost from one pound to 38 shillings. Until just lately he also had to tip various people.²⁸

Orchestra musicians were employed by a single theatre, and earned low wages. The 1904 Board of Trade figures on working class family expenditure²⁹ show that a family with an income of 30 shillings a week spent 12.5% of its income on bread alone, and another 12.5% to buy a small amount of meat. Thirty shillings a week being, precisely, the wage demand for orchestra musicians during the 1907 strike, it is easy to see that these musicians do not belong to the privileged classes. The skilled electricians put forward the same wage claim of thirty shillings a week, labourers asking for 27 shillings and sixpence a week, and hourly hired labourers for tenpence an hour.

Music hall trade unions

A series of trade unions made up the alliance which ran the strike. The Variety Artistes Federation³⁰ had been founded in 1906 by delegates from three existing organizations. Firstly, there was the Music Hall Artistes Railway Association. A sharp internal conflict in 1903 had opposed those who favoured a trade union type approach and others, with the "anti-union" faction winning a temporary victory.

The second founding organization, the Select Order of Water Rats [!] had been formed in 1890. This was very much an elitist body, initially limited to fifteen members. Its members wore a special uniform and carried out rather eccentric, quasi-masonic rituals.

Finally, there was an organization which had been founded in 1889, with an equally eccentric name, the Ancient Order of Terriers. It resembled more a mutual

²⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 24 January 1907.

²⁹ Quoted Roberts, op.cit., 102.

³⁰ This may be the only trade union history book containing a foreword written by a serving prime minister. John Major, whose parents were music hall artistes, agree to write the foreword of Peter Honri's book.

aid organization than a modern trade union. The Terriers offered health insurance and death grants to their members, as well as insurance for props, and legal advice pertaining to artistes' contracts.³¹

In 1906, delegates from the Water Rats, the Terriers and the Railway Association, then, decided to form the Variety Artistes Federation. From the beginning, a straightforward trade unionist approach was envisaged. One of the delegates, Wal Pink, expressed the opinion that it was the industrialization of music hall which had led to the need for a union:

He recalled the old days when a bargain could be struck face-to-face, with a handshake! The growth of the combines had killed that, with artistes increasingly seen as a collection of names to be shuffled around by "booking managers".³²

The demand for such a union was clear – 2,406 artistes joined in the first six months³³, and a year later membership reached 4,487. A weekly magazine was established, *The Performer*, with its front-page slogan: "The greatest enemy to freedom is not the tyrant but the contented slave".

Union discipline was established over the following months. Well before 1907, some members, referred to as "traitors and blacklegs" were expelled or suspended from membership for having accepted contracts not in accordance with minimum union-agreed working conditions. A national coverage of delegates and meetings was also set up. On the 10th January 1907, two weeks before the outbreak of the strike, *The Performer* contained 53 separate reports of local union meetings that week. The union added to its services in that year by proposing low-interest loans to members in difficulty, and also by setting up a system of death levy stamps to pay death grants to surviving family of deceased members.³⁴

At the very beginning, strike action was not permitted by the statutes of the VAF but this situation changed almost at once. From the beginning of the 1907 strike, the union journal boasted that:

³¹ We see here two common elements in the history of trade unions - the development of unions from mutual help organizations, and the involvement of rituals and rites in the earliest trade union type organizations.

³² Honri, op. cit., 22.

³³ Including, incidentally, Kitty and Tom Major, parents of the future prime minister.

³⁴ *The Performer*, 15 August 1907.

artistes may now be looked upon as a body of men and women who are not afraid to fight shoulder to shoulder against the modern foes of liberty and justice.³⁵

Fighting “for liberty and justice” was seen, in this context, as a move towards respectability, which was a concept sufficiently malleable to be used for very diverse, and even contradictory, purposes.

The Musicians Union, as we saw above, had been established in 1893. Six months later there were a thousand members and the first successful campaigns against wage cuts in a music hall in Croydon were carried out. The union also offered death grants, as well as insurance policies for musical instruments.

The third union in the 1907 alliance, the “National Association of Theatrical Employees”, was founded after a strike in London in 1890. It was initially called the “United Kingdom Theatrical and Music Hall Operatives Union”; it joined the Trades Union Congress in 1902 and changed its name in 1904.

Causes of the strike

It is the artistes’ union which was at the origin of the strike initiative. Their objectives were threefold. Firstly, they aimed at securing payment for all additional matinees. At this time, it was not unusual for theatres to move from two to three shows a day, without the extra matinee giving rise to an increase in pay for artistes or musicians. In the worst cases, theatres moved from twelve to twenty shows a week without additional payment.

Secondly, the union hoped to limit the use of “barring clauses” in performers’ contracts. These clauses aimed at ensuring the “rarity” of the “product” by not permitting the artiste to play in a rival music hall. A typical clause might ban an artiste from appearing at a music hall less than ten miles from the hall in question, for one year after the end of the contract.

Finally, the strikers demanded the banning of last-minute changes in halls or in timetables. Such questions were of great concern to many artistes who had to perform in several different theatres during the same week.

³⁵ *The Performer*, 31 January 1907

The union moved to the offensive in 1906, proposing to employers that banning clauses should not exceed 5 miles and 6 months (1 mile and 3 months in London). This demand was followed by a strike in Brixton, after which it was clear that further conflict was on the horizon. The alliance of three trade unions was then established to coordinate the campaign. The musicians, generally employed on long-term contracts in a single music hall were not concerned by the barring clauses, but shared the same demands as the touring artistes –singers, instrumentalists or others - concerning additional payment for matinees, and they also demanded increases in their wages.

In mid-January 1907, the Alliance communicated to employers a charter, which they asked employers to sign. This charter included the following conditions

- All additional matinee performances should be paid at one twelfth of the weekly wage.
- No timetables should be changed after the Monday of any given week.
- Managers should pledge that union members would not be discriminated against.
- Conflicts should be referred to arbitration. (Arbitration procedures had become common over the previous twenty years in other industries).
- All stage hands should receive at least the minimum wage set down by their union.

Some theatre managers agreed to sign the charter, but two of the most influential, Oswald Stoll and Walter Gibbons, refused; once the strike had begun, they succeeded in uniting almost all the music hall managers behind them.

The events of the strike

A number of writers on industrial relations have expressed regret that whereas strike causation has been widely studied, strike process has been somewhat

neglected.³⁶ It is important to look in some detail at the actions and tactics of employers and strikers.

Strike action was taken by a large majority of artistes and musicians at the halls involved from the 21st of January to the 13th of February. Strikers included big names of the Edwardian music hall scene: Fred Pollard, Tom Davis, Constance Moscow, Ernest Ball, the Sisters Tinsley, Little Tich, Marie Lloyd and Gus Elen, and the presence of the stars ensured that the strike enjoyed massive press coverage from the first day.

The employers took an uncompromising stance. Mr. Howell, the manager of the Tivoli hall in London was quoted as saying:

We can but pity the many misguided artists and others who are being thrown out of employment, perhaps permanently.³⁷

The run-up to the strike and its first few days saw a wave of people joining the unions involved. Three thousand new members brought the total of the three unions to fifteen thousand. Picket lines were set up in front of theatres, and on the 28th January, two thousand strikers attended a mass meeting. At this meeting, the union leaders announced their intention to organize parallel music hall shows run by the union, to rival those involving strike-breakers. A large theatre – the Scala – was booked for the following Thursday for a special gala show, which would in fact take place a week after.

On the 5th February, no sign of the end of the conflict was in sight, and informal talks took place between some of the stars, including Marie Lloyd, and representatives of the employers. The union representatives were not invited to take part. The employers expressed their desire to limit negotiations to questions concerning the artistes, and not to discuss musicians or other employees' demands. The stars taking part in these discussions were strongly criticized by the union leadership, and as a result one of them left the VAF.

On the 7th, a number of union-organized shows took place, while the press was expressing the opinion that the end was in sight. In particular, the *Daily Telegraph*

³⁶ For example, Michael Kelly, 'A study of white-collar unions in dispute', *Industrial Relations Journal* 14/4, 1983.

³⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, 23 January 1907.

insisted that if the stars were satisfied, the strike would collapse, since all the other employees were relatively easy to replace. The same paper noted however that the employers were willing to make major concessions in order to end the strike. This is no doubt why a compromise solution was proposed on the 9th by employers. The trade unions refused to accept the proposal, noting particularly that they found the salaries proposed for musicians to be too low, and that the employers had not pledged that all strikers would be re-employed. In this context, a mass meeting of artistes on the 10th voted to continue the strike. It would not be for long: on the 13th the two sides of the conflict accepted the idea of binding arbitration, and in one of the theatres involved in the strike a special “Peace Night” show “with all your favourite stars” was announced.

The arbitrator agreed upon was Lord Askwith, appointed by the Board of Trade and no stranger to the role, having intervened in a series of major strikes in previous years. He quickly announced an interim award, to be applied immediately while plans were established for hearings of all involved in the conflict. Three months later, after many hours of hearings, the arbitrator gave his decision, which reflected the new balance of forces revealed by the strike, and was widely considered as a victory for the strikers. The major concessions made by the employers were the following:

- All supplementary shows would henceforth be paid.
- Turn timings would be fixed each Friday for the following week and could not be changed afterwards.
- Barring clauses would be limited in scope.
- The arbitrator’s decision would remain in force for five years before a new consultation was arranged.

“No mean victory for the federation ... the arbitrator has awarded us fully seventy five percent of our demands” boasted *The Performer* of the 20th of June. A dissenting minority within the artistes’ union suggested that signing a five-year agreement was an important concession on the union side, and would make it more difficult to build on their newly found militancy to make further gains in the years to come.

The arbitrator ruled on minimum wages for theatre employees. Daymen were to receive 27 shillings and 6 pence a week, electricians 30 shillings, stage hands tenpence ha'penny an hour. Musicians would also receive a minimum of 30 shillings, with the exception of drummers who would receive 28 shillings. The ruling, as it stood, applied only to London theatres, but negotiations were to be set up in the different regions on the basis of the arbitration award.

Strikers' actions and tactics

The strikers came to use, during the conflict, many standard trade union tactics, and the building of collective consciousness and confidence was at the centre of strategy. Every Sunday, mass meetings aimed to reinforce the unity of a workforce spread around among many theatres. The collection of money also had to be organized, since most strikers had no other means of subsistence. It was decided that artistes working in the provinces should contribute 5% of their salary each week to the strike fund, in order to provide strike pay to artistes, musicians and stage hands. The union claimed to have received £5,000 on the first day from these provisions. Collection of money from the public was also organized. On the 27th January for example, 140 meetings of support were held across Britain, the aim being to collect £12,000.³⁸ The extreme popularity of the music hall stars involved in the strike helped fundraising. Popular heroine Marie Lloyd made a public call for contributions.

Strikers organized picket lines in front of all the theatres involved, each team of pickets under the responsibility of a "picket captain". Union sources speak of 2,500 pickets in all. On the picket lines, stars sang parodies of their own songs, adapting the words to speak of the conflict. Others sang adaptations of children's songs:

Twinkle twinkle brilliant star

Oh I wonder where you are

With the VAF so bright

You will not show here tonight ³⁹

³⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 28 January 1907.

³⁹ Quoted *Daily Telegraph* 26 January 1907.

Placards asked the music-hall-going public:

Whom will you support - your popular favourites or the managers of the music hall trust? ... Support no hall that does not enable artists musicians and stage employees to obtain a living wage under fair working conditions as laid down by the British trades council.⁴⁰

Finally, a million leaflets were distributed around the theatres and in shopping streets.

The Performer published, in its edition of the 7th of February the names of fifteen artistes expelled from the union for strikebreaking. A hundred or so names of non-unionists who were not respecting the picket lines were also published. Some divisions appeared within the union: a group of artistes circulated an appeal to end the strike. But solidarity was available from other sections of the labour movement. Southwark Trades Council, for example, held two open-air meetings with speakers from a series of manual workers' unions and from the Independent Labour Party. The Hammersmith tram drivers' union expressed its support too, while the Fabian Society passed a motion which

wishes them all success in their struggle against capitalist tyranny, and urges all other sections of the brain-working proletariat to follow their example in organizing themselves for their own defence.⁴¹

A group of Labour members of parliament, including Will Thorne, Ramsay MacDonald, J R Clynes and Keir Hardie sent a telegram of support. And Ben Tillett himself, leader of the great dockers strike of 1889, spoke at the strikers' mass meeting. "The organized Trade Union movement of this country is behind you to a man", he declared.⁴² International solidarity was expressed in telegrams from the White Rats of America and from the German branch of the International Artists Organisation.

Employer tactics

⁴⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 23 January 1907.

⁴¹ Quoted *Daily Telegraph*, 26 January 1907.

⁴² *The Performer*, 7 February 1907.

On the employers' side too, the strike took on many of the standard characteristics of a class conflict. The employers all pulled together and agreed, firstly to refuse any separate truce agreement, and secondly to "lend" each other non-striking musicians and stage hands. "In short, the managers have decided to stand or fall together" commented the *Daily Telegraph*.⁴³ Some managers, such as a Mr. McNaughten (who managed a dozen or so theatres), who had initially signed the union's charter, withdrew their signature once the conflict was underway in order to stand alongside the other employers.

Attempts to intimidate or bribe potential strikers were also used. Higher fees were offered to performers who agreed to break ranks and go on stage during the strike. In the provinces, employers asked 'their' artistes, with some success, to sign a declaration "I do not believe in strikes". According to the *Daily Telegraph*, two thirds signed.⁴⁴ Some managers attempted to replace musicians with strike-breakers brought in from abroad: one agent claimed he could provide a hundred Hungarian musicians at three days' notice.

The police and the courts were also used against strikers. The police were very much in evidence in front of the theatres to ensure that strike-breakers could go to work. The courts granted injunctions to some employers, forbidding artistes under contract from appearing in union-sponsored shows.⁴⁵ Ninety of the strikers were taken to court for breach of contract.⁴⁶

The characteristics of this strike were, then, closer than one might expect to those of a classic industrial conflict, and the result of the strike was tied up with the perspectives for the labour movement in general. The strike's success no doubt encouraged the development of trade unionism in other sectors. Lord Askwith, the arbitrator, gave his view on this:

From the Labour point of view, the serious aspect of the dispute was the notorious and advertised success of a strike in obtaining recognition, order, and a vast improvement in conditions. For years trade union after trade union had been struggling for these results, but their efforts had excited no popular interest ... then this

⁴³ *Daily Telegraph* 31 January 1907

⁴⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, 2 February 1907.

⁴⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 28 January 1907.

⁴⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 30 January 1907.

unexpected strike caused a thrill of interest. Every phase was reported in the newspapers. The reports were followed by the whole of Great Britain with more interest than those of an international football match.⁴⁷

In the entertainment sector, the most immediate effect was the founding, later the same year, of a trade union for bioscope operators (the ancestors of cinema projectionists). These operators frequently earned only 15 or 18 shillings a week.⁴⁸

The strike of 1907 was therefore a strike like other strikes, even if it is true that the heterogeneity of the workplaces and the situations of the different workers meant that the music hall “community” did not have the coherence of “classic” manual working class communities of the time.

The First World War

Let us now jump forward a number of years to the outbreak of the First World War. All social organizations: political parties, churches, trade unions and charities were thrown into turmoil and transformed in the fire of total war. In this third section, then, we shall look at the music hall artistes’ trade union, its priorities and actions in wartime.⁴⁹

By the beginning of the war, the Variety Artistes’ Foundation counted around 2,600 members; an editorial suggests that this was more than half the number of artistes in the country eligible to be members. As in many unions, numbers increased during the war and at the end of 1918, the VAF had 3,900 members, which was 700 more than the previous year.⁵⁰ Another sign of the dynamism of the union were the annual elections. In January 1915, for example, there were 86 candidates for the 36 places on the national committee.⁵¹

In 1914, members paid a £1 entrance fee on joining, in addition to weekly subs, but this fee could be paid in up to eight instalments if required: we see that care

⁴⁷ George Askwith, *Industrial problems and disputes* (London, John Murray, 1920), 128.

⁴⁸ *The Performer*, 21 March 1907.

⁴⁹ For a broad panorama of the popular music industry in the First World War see John Mullen, *‘The Show Must Go On!’ Popular Song in Britain during the First World War* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2015).

⁵⁰ *The Performer*, 19 December 1918.

⁵¹ *The Performer*, 21 January 1915.

was taken to attract poorer artistes.⁵² A third of the members were singers, and many others instrumentalists. Many earned just enough to scrape by, and were frequently unemployed. If they were working in London, they would still often play at three or four theatres during any given day; and on tour, they stayed in specialized lodging houses, offering “three to a room, for thirty five pence, which that included a morning cup of tea and fish and chips at night.”⁵³ They would be working by now in quite big theatres, 1,000 to 3,000 seats. The Paisley Hippodrome (opened in 1906) had 1,400 seats, the Empire in Preston (1911) and the New Hippodrome in Folkestone had 3,000 each.

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.⁵⁴ 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 revolution in variety which had started just before the war – the rise of the revue – was changing artistes’ lives. Instead of an evening entertainment made up of individual turns, ever 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 Performer lists the titles of 87 revues on tour in the UK.⁵⁵

These changes meant that artistes were ever more prone to use collectivist tactics to improve their situation. Union discipline was essential, and the dispensing of legal advice and provision of legal representation was also an important service. In 1915, 77 legal cases for members were supported, and there were 52 the

⁵² *The Performer*, 21 January 1915.

⁵³ James Harding, *George Robey and the Music Hall* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1990), 27. At the time there were 240 pennies, or twenty shillings, in a pound.

⁵⁴ *The Encore*, 24 May 1917.

⁵⁵ *The Performer*, 4 July 1918

following year.⁵⁶ Although negotiation for artistes' salaries was individual, the union supplied pro forma contracts, was involved in negotiations with employers concerning national minima, and supported strike action when it came about. But the union retained important aspects of a friendly society. A key example was the organization of death levies which we mentioned above. 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 member's family. In 1915, the death levy was sixpence. That is to say, the family received around £300 as a death grant – this represented a year's wages for most artistes. In 1915, there were 19 death levies to pay, in 1916, 20.⁵⁷ The amount given to the widow(er) or family varied, but the VAF would hand over immediately 25 pounds on proof of death - enough to pay for a burial in keeping with the demands of respectability.

The VAF was 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, for example) and in the winter would visit sick or retired artistes and give them free coal.⁵⁸

Finally, the association had some characteristics of a professional organization, defending the music hall sector, without distinguishing between artistes, employees and managers – in their campaign against the imposition of early closing for variety theatres, for instance.

The Performer and its wartime priorities

The union journal included debate and opinion on all aspects of show business, but it was also used by members for down-to-earth needs such as getting bookings: members advertised in the journal with a list of vacant dates on their schedules. There were advertisements for hampers to transport props, and for agents for hire. An important section was the list of digs, a weekly necessity for the thousands of touring artistes. The lodgings boasted “cooking and cleanliness a speciality” or “a piano in each room”. Some were proud to announce “lavatory

⁵⁶ *The Performer*, 1 February 1917

⁵⁷ *The Performer*, 22 November 1917.

⁵⁸ *The Performer*, 7 January 1915.

in house” or that they are situated just “one minute from [the music] halls. A few could go as far as “electric light” or would promise “trains met with lorry on receipt of wire”.⁵⁹

Like many other milieux, the music hall professionals declared patriotic support for the war as soon as it had begun. Contrary to myth, it was more a matter of consensual patriotism than jingoism, and was coloured by the excellent relations with the many German artistes which had held sway in the pre-war period. The first editorial of the war is worth quoting at length:

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”.⁶⁰

This “pragmatic” attitude to the war is maintained over the following years. The editorials of the union newspaper do not try to persuade members to join the army, although the paper shows itself proud of those who choose to do so. It refers favourably to an attempt to put together a battalion made up only of men from the music hall industry.⁶¹ All VAF members who become soldiers were kept “in benefit” for the duration of the war, 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”.⁶² Members of the union frequently appeared in benefit shows to raise money for army charities, and the union organized in 1915 a massive collection of cigarettes to send out to soldiers, under the appellation “Smokes for the trenches”.⁶³ Another patriotic symbol was the

⁵⁹ *The Performer*, July 3 1913.

⁶⁰ *The Performer*, 6 August 1914.

⁶¹ *The Performer*, 4 February 1915

⁶² *The Performer*, 13 April 1916

⁶³ *The Performer* 16 September 1915

decision, taken in 1916, to oppose all hiring of “enemy aliens” in theatres for the duration of the war and for the three years following the end of the war.⁶⁴

When, in the same year, the country was embroiled in a heated debate on the introduction of conscription, the newspaper attempted to remain neutral:

With [sic] 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?⁶⁵

The main priority throughout the war was recruiting new members to the unions. In 1914, a “Gold Medal” award was instituted, given to the member who, in a given year, recruited the largest number of newcomers.⁶⁶ A specific campaign was run to recruit workers in revue. Demands were put forward which would be of particular interest to these groups: the union demanded strict limits on unpaid rehearsals, and that no worker might be dismissed without notice, for example.⁶⁷ In September 1917 the union defended a chorus dancer who was injured while doing an unpaid rehearsal and who Moss Empires, the theatre chain, refused to insure since she was “not yet under contract”.⁶⁸

Special meetings were held, in London, Glasgow, Hull, Newcastle and Belfast for members working in revues.⁶⁹ A new rule was introduced 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.

The journal spent a good deal of space on issues of what was seen as artiste professionalism, which was often linked to a conception of what it meant to be a “respectable” entertainer. Humorous articles and cartoons urged members to renew regularly the content of their turns, and, above all, to avoid vulgarity on stage. A number of editorials during the war spoke of this need to eliminate vulgarity, or (at times) claimed that it had been largely eliminated, in response to attacks from groups such as the National Vigilance Association. When, in 1916, one comedian wrote to the Performer denouncing moralism and defending a more

⁶⁴ *The Performer*, 3 February 1916.

⁶⁵ *The Performer*, 2 December 1916.

⁶⁶ *The Performer*, 23 July 1914.

⁶⁷ *The Performer*, 4 November 1915.

⁶⁸ *The Performer*, 6 September 1917.

⁶⁹ *The Performer*, 25 November 1916.

relaxed attitude to vulgarity,⁷⁰ an avalanche of letters was published disagreeing with him.⁷¹ In June 1916 the Editorial was entitled “vulgarity and the halls” and its attitude to the risqué comedian was quite clear: “where one fool would applaud his suggestive witticism, hundreds of decent people experience no feeling beyond that of disgust”.⁷² One gets a clear impression that this was a debate carried out with great emotivity, but, perhaps, little objective analysis.

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 encroachments of rationing in particular. So we see a protest at the imposition of early closing to save energy. This campaign does have a class aspect: the music hall was hit by the curfew whereas the night clubs for the upper classes were left alone.

Wages and working conditions were obviously a priority. At the start of the war a “Cooperative scheme” held sway 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 inside 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.

Several articles in *The Performer* dealt with health and safety issues, in particular damp and draughty dressing rooms,⁷³ but no doubt the two most important campaigns were against the Sunday opening of music halls, and against what became known as the “split week”. After a series of mass union meetings, it was decided in late 1914 that members accepting contracts for less than one week’s work would be disciplined.⁷⁴

Relations with other workers

⁷⁰ *The Performer*, 6 April 1916.

⁷¹ For a more general discussion of vulgarity and the music hall, see John Mullen, ‘Victorian Respectability, ‘anti-social behaviour’ and the Music Hall, 1880-1900’ in Sarah Pickard (ed.), *Anti-social Behaviour in Britain: Victorian and Contemporary Perspectives* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2014).

⁷² *The Performer*, 22 June 1916.

⁷³ *The Performer*, 26 September 1918.

⁷⁴ *The Performer* 2 July 1914

The pages of the union journal contain precious information about the relations with other workers in the theatres. Lord Askwith, in the framework of the arbitration set up after 1907, made an award which was to last the duration of the war. Wages increased and certain employees such as dressers who had been paid by tips only now have a minimum wage (6d a night). In 1918, the Editorial 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 was generally against tipping as not dignified, and would prefer a wage scale. This was the subject of discussions between the VAF and the National Association of Theatrical Employees.⁷⁵ On this issue, then, the union was playing its role in working towards standardizing payment, and not allowing it to depend on subjective criteria which could only prevent solidarity between workers.

The journal showed its support for various strikes of in-house musicians and of stage hands during the war. In particular, it applauded the Amalgamated Musicians Union on their long 1914 dispute with the Stoll theatre chain, and support was expressed for the stage hands on strike in August 1916, after all the union members in one hall had been dismissed.⁷⁶

The end of the war in November 1918 was, of course, greeted with relief. But union work had to go on, and sometimes with new concerns. An editorial in December 1918⁷⁷ expressed anxiety that the many amateur soldiers who had discovered a liking for entertainment while they were in the army, might be tempted to turn professional. The editorial warned such people that the profession was overcrowded.

Conclusions

This panorama of early twentieth century working conditions and conflicts allows us to be reminded of the situation of the average performer: a very long way from that of the stars, about whom one hears so much more. Singers, musicians and others were pushed to collective action both by the needs of their profession

⁷⁵ *The Performer*, June 6 1918.

⁷⁶ *The Performer*, 3 August 1916.

⁷⁷ *The Performer*, 5 December 1918.

(railway discounts, lobbying of governments) and by the modernized management methods which were on the rise as capital became more concentrated and the formation of a single national market was completed.

The main union we have looked at, the Variety Artistes' Federation, combined different collective activities aimed at improving the lives of artistes. As a type of friendly society, its death grants and rest homes provided much needed solidarity in these days when public services were scarce. Its work as a national negotiator, and the acceptance of union discipline by performers, helped maintain working conditions at an acceptable level. Strike action lost money for the employers, and pushed them to give concessions, and the threat of repeated – perhaps contagious - strike action led government to provide arbitration awards in the interests of industrial peace. At the same time, the union organization and its publications participated in some crucial projects of the British ruling class, for example by providing effective support for the war, and by promoting the powerful ideology of respectability and encouraging its flourishing among mass audiences.

Respectability was a multiform and ambiguous ideology, and it is unclear how strong its hold was on artistes as workers, despite their cooperation with some aspects of it, which were rooted in the repertoire. Undoubtedly, to be respectable could include respecting the established order and so avoiding conflict with employers; yet it also included the idea of respecting oneself, and as such was sometimes used by the union to bolster its attempts at defending working conditions. To insist on fair treatment could be presented as a way of moving away from the “lower classes” and towards the “respectable working class” who were somewhat better paid, and certainly better-organized.

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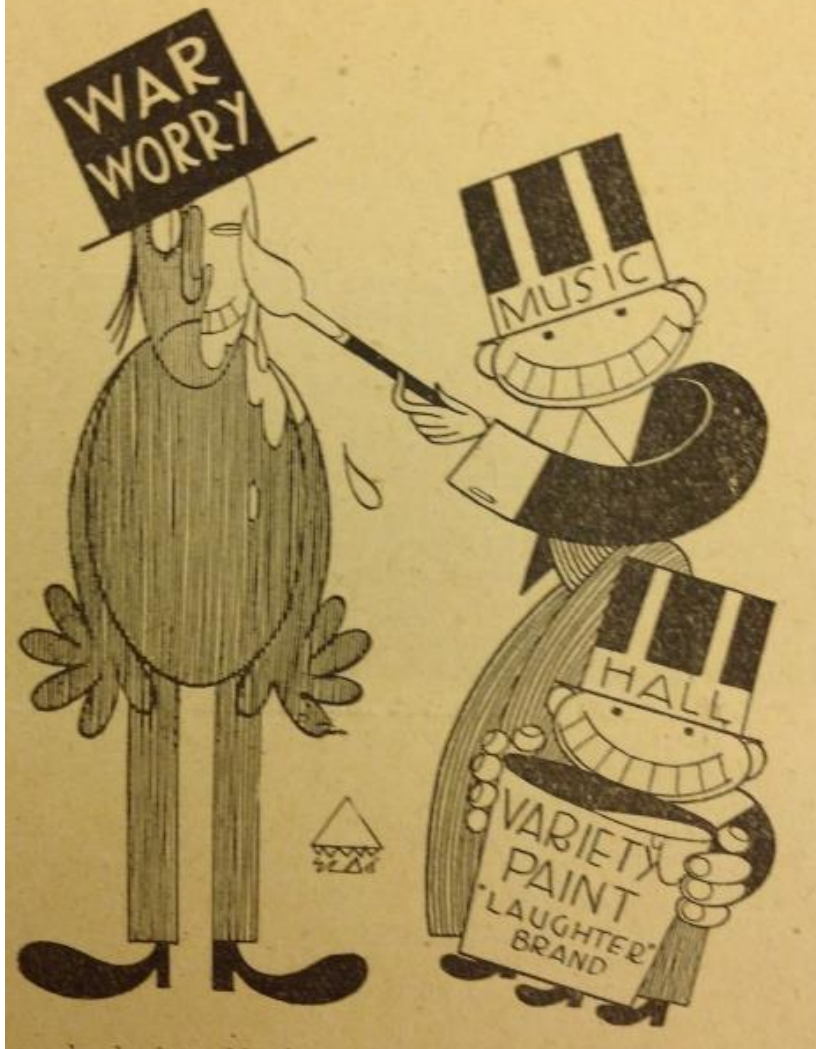
The Encore, A Music-hall and Theatrical Review, professional magazine of music hall artistes.

The Era, theatre review covering mostly prestigious theatre, but also variety.

The following cartoons were published in *The Performer* during the war years.

Brightening Things Up.

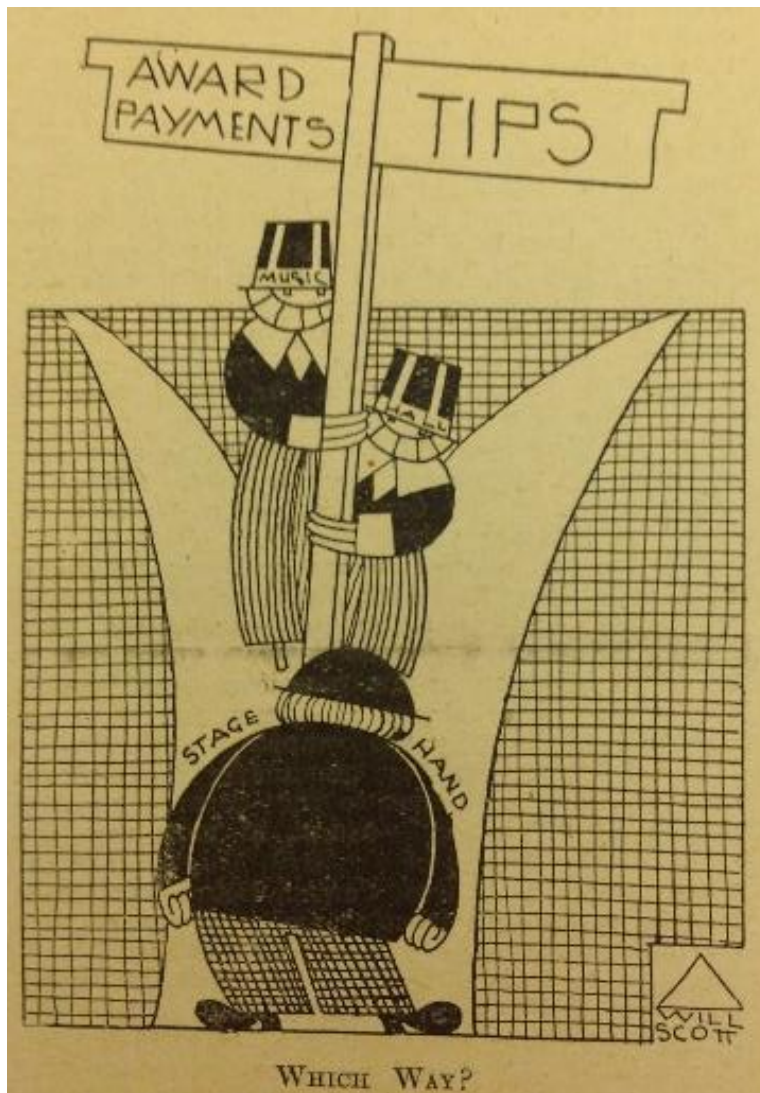
The kill-joys and croakers have been defeated, and now everyone agrees that amusements are essential to the national welfare. Our cartoon this



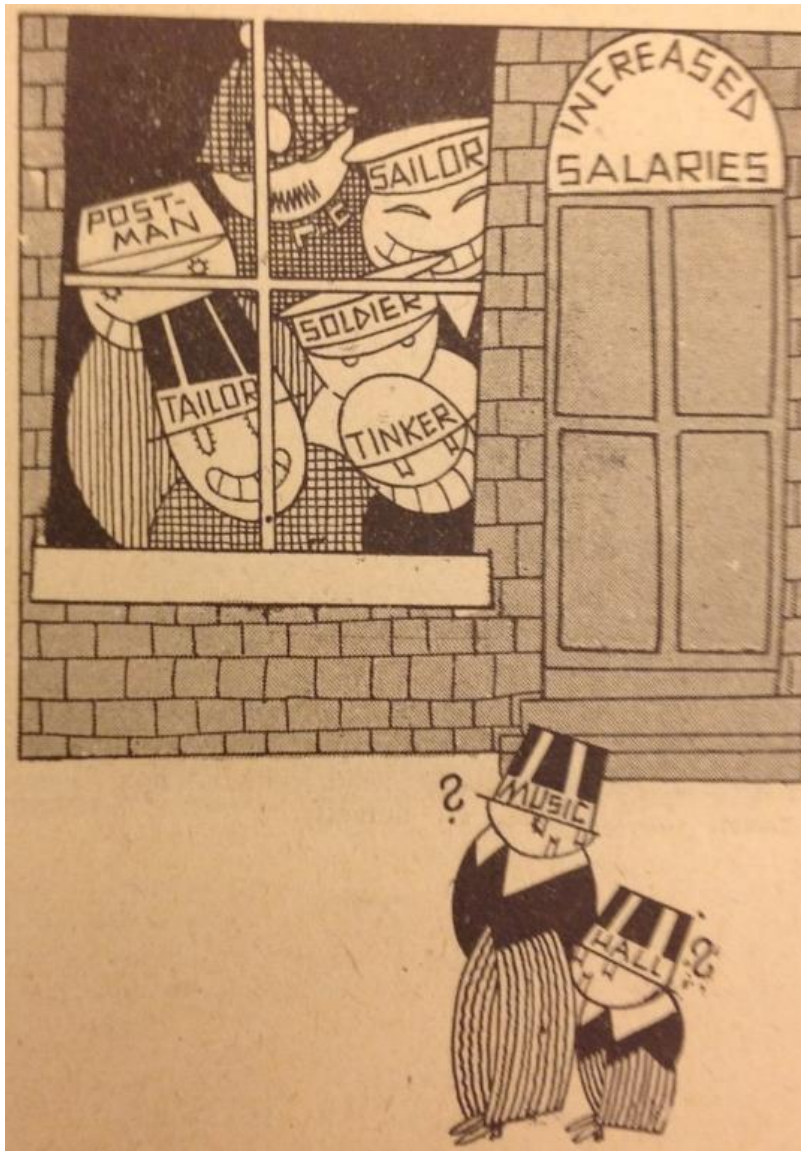
The role of the Music Hall in raising people's spirits amidst the dreadful stress of war is underlined in this cartoon.



This cartoon emphasizes the benefits of union membership.



The union tried to encourage equitable wages, and discourage the practice whereby certain stage hands relied exclusively on tips.



Wages across the economy rose during the war.

This cartoon complains that music hall wages lagged behind.

John Mullen is professor in British history at the University of Rouen in France. He has published research both on the history of British Trade Unionism and on the history of British popular music. His book *The Show Must Go On: Popular Song in Britain during the First World War* was published by Ashgate/Routledge in 2015. Other recent publications have included “Anti-Black Racism in British Popular Music 1880-1920”, as well as articles on Irish songs in Victorian and Edwardian music hall, and on the Notting Hill Carnival as it has reflected, over thirty years, questions of immigrant identity. He is presently working on an edited volume on popular song across the world during the First World War.