CONSPIRACIES OF MEANING:
MUSIC-HALL AND THE KNOWINGNESS
OF POPULAR CULTURE*

Knowingness might be defined as what everybody knows, but
some know better than others. At once complicit and discriminat-
ory, this popular mode of expression was frequently noted by
middle-class commentators as a distinctive — and objectionable —
feature of comic performance in nineteenth-century British
music-halls. This essay argues that a more specific and articulated
account of the phenomenon can contribute to a more satisfactory
explanation of how music-hall engaged with its public. Treating
knowingness as discourse and practice enables us to get inside
the dynamics of this influential modern cultural form. It suggests
too how spoken (and unspoken) language functioned as a prime
resource in the "mobile infinity of tactics" that constituted every-
day life.¹

I

British music-hall or variety emerged in the 1830s and 1840s and
grew rapidly to dominate the commercialized popular culture of
the late nineteenth century. From the 1890s its primacy was
challenged by other musical and dramatic forms and by the
successive rise of the phonograph, film, radio and, more termin-
ally, television. Even so its influence continued to be considerable.
The music-hall industry was killed off (though not till the 1950s),
but as a style of comic entertainment it made a successful piece-


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This paper was originally a more vulgar, performance-oriented piece entitled "Did
Foucault and Althusser Ever Play the London Palladium?", but has been revised in
the interests of academic probity. I thank several audiences for their encouraging
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and Joseph Donatelli.
meal transition to the new media, and found continuing expression in something close to its original setting in the working-men's club circuit, as also in the more contrived revivalism of "Olde Tyme" music-hall. The term itself is still standard in cultural commentary, and together with suet puddings and red pillar-boxes might be added to Orwell's list of the definitive components of the English national culture.²

As such, music-hall has generated a huge literature in its celebration, and only recently has this been supplemented by more critical accounts.³ Since popular culture has found its way on to the scholarly agenda, social historians have been concerned to assess the role of the halls in the cultural formation of class and the politics of modern leisure, and scholars in music history, literature, theatre and cultural studies are subjecting music-hall to closer scrutiny as genre and text. Though newer work has begun to look at the wider range of its operation as industry and cultural form, scholarship continues to concentrate primarily on music-hall's most distinctive idiom, that of the comic song and its singer.

Here, a major exercise has been the more precise inventory of content — "What they sang about", as the subtitle of one of the first retrospective surveys of the territory put it.⁴ The identification of principal motifs — booze, romantic adventure, marriage and mothers-in-law, dear old pals and seaside holidays, and so on — demonstrates a recurrent emphasis on the domestic and the everyday that supports the most broadly agreed reading of music-hall song as a naturalistic mode that both documents and confirms a common way of life. The great popularity of the songs

⁴Christopher Pulling, They Were Singing, and What They Sang About (London, 1952). In similar though more perceptive vein, see Colin MacInnes, Sweet Saturday Night (London, 1967).
is said to come from the audience’s recognition and identification with the routine yet piquant exploits of a comic realism that validates the shared experience of a typically urbanized, class-bound world seen from below.\(^5\)

Discussion of music-hall song is inseparable from that of its singers, for the distinctive style of the genre crystallized around individual performers and their acts. Given the apparent verisimilitude of music-hall’s representations of common life, the appeal of the great stars has often been interpreted in terms of their ability to convey this to their audience in a singularly direct and authentic manner. Thus T. S. Eliot explained Marie Lloyd’s success by her “capacity for expressing the soul of the people”\(^6\).

Today’s scholars resist such idealization, but are still prone to the temptations of “essentialism” or the acid test of a putative authenticity, preferring, for example, Gus Elen over Albert Chevalier, the sardonic over the sentimental, in the two performers’ depictions of the costermonger in the 1890s. In more radical fashion, the Tyneside favourite, Joe Wilson, has been stripped of credentials as an authentic popular hero, for his songs and life-history are said to disclose a self-seeking moralizer distanced from the real working class by his bourgeois ideology.\(^7\)

The demythologizing of Joe Wilson is part of the larger preoccupation with music-hall’s role in advancing or retarding the collective interests of its public as a subordinate class in a capitalist society. Is this culture “of” or “for” the people? Is music-hall song generated from within or supplied from without, and with what consequences? The general verdict is pessimistic. G. W.


Ross's *Sam Hall*, a revamped traditional ballad sung in the 1840s as the defiant valediction of a chimney-sweep about to hang, is taken as exemplifying a combative prelapsarian class politics (though we may doubt that he really sang "Fuck you all").

Thereafter, commercialized production in the hands of mostly *petit bourgeois* hacks, writing for professional performers increasingly bent on *embourgeoisement*, feeds the music-hall audience with songs drained of any radical or oppositional content. In their highly selective realism, the conflict lines of class were elided and the site of its most direct struggles, the workplace, ignored. In the most influential account of this dilution of class consciousness, Gareth Stedman Jones identifies a new flight into escapism in the celebration of the small pleasures of plebeian life — "A little bit of what you fancy does you good", as Marie Lloyd sang. Thus from the 1880s music-hall songs come to denote what he labels a "culture of consolation" that compensates for political and social impotence, a chronic disability wryly acknowledged in the Chaplinesque "little man" routines of the other great contemporary star of music-hall's "golden age", Dan Leno.

In this first flush of scholarly attention there is much that is helpful, but the "culture of consolation" tag has achieved the finality of an epitaph, summing up a prevailing note of political disappointment that not only obituarizes a whole culture but abruptly foreshortens further critical enquiry. The growing understanding of the complexity of popular cultural forms suggests the likelihood of other explanations for the capture of one of the world's first mass-entertainment audiences besides those of market dominance and the play-back of consoling representations of a common way of life. The test of authenticity is a

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dubious one where its criteria are formally political, exclusively class-specific and framed from outside, rather than in terms of the specific determinants of situation and experience that typify this particular milieu.\textsuperscript{10} Music-hall was both more and less than a class mode of expression and has yet to be fully understood in terms of its participants' measures of significance and what its meaning was for them. For this we need to reanimate those features of music-hall still hobbled in cliché — its “live” form, the “sheer talent” of its performers, and their “magnetic hold” on audiences. Work on style and performance has advanced markedly, but the text has still too rarely been made to leave the page, and the actual dynamics of engagement in the stage form remain understudied.\textsuperscript{11}

Though based on an extensive sampling of sources, the essay that follows is still largely speculative and impressionistic. It offers brief accounts of performance style and audience interaction, and relates the articulation of knowingness as popular discourse to the history of music-hall development and its circumstantial fit with broader social changes.

II

The solo singer in the pub concert-rooms and cheap theatres that were the proto-music-halls of the 1830s to the 1850s necessarily adopted a robust vocal and physical style.\textsuperscript{12} The performer had


\textsuperscript{12} There is no systematic history of performance styles in the halls. The editor's introduction and several contributions to Bratton (ed.), \textit{Music Hall}, make the best point of departure. For treatments of the later stand-up comic and his continuities (cont. on p. 143)
to capture the attention of a large and increasingly anonymous crowd otherwise engaged in the rival attractions of eating, drinking, conversing, gazing, posing, lounging, flirting and promenading. The most effective technique was a cross between singing and shouting accompanied by various forms of stage business and a high degree of physicality, from "winks and gesticulations", to "the jerk (of the body) at the beginning of each line, in true street style". Extravagant or eccentric stage dress often completed the boldness of effect needed to commandeer audience attention in this milieu. Performance was thus heavily accented or presentational, in the sense that it was projected right out at the audience. Though this was in contrast with a more stolid traditional or "folk" style where the song was left to tell its own story, yet it had its own lengthy historical antecedents. As the contemporary comment suggests, pub-based performances from this era drew on the well-practised techniques of the street ballad singer, whose craft of some centuries persisted among the hawkers or chaunters still contesting the hubbub of the modern street in their assertive appeals to a less than captive audience.

Relatively new to popular song performance and one of the more distinctive marks of the emerging music-hall mode was the growing practice of appearing "in character". By this convention, the singer impersonated the (increasingly first person) subject of the song more fully by assuming his or her typical dress and manner. Though the concern for the broad effect was still there, this was realism of a more convincing materiality than that offered in the "true to life" claims of the street ballad singer, while marking a further departure from traditional folk style. There is a considerable correspondence here with the closely observed

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\(^{14}\) The street ballad was despised in older scholarship, which privileged a less vulgarized folk tradition. For a reconstruction of the form, its context and performance, see Natascha Wurzbach, *The Rise of the English Street Ballad, 1550-1650* (Cambridge, 1990), esp. pp. 39-104, 241. Wurzbach suggests that the street ballad was incorporated and/or displaced by the new commercialized entertainments and media of the eighteenth century. For street seller performers in the music-hall era, see Vicinus, *Industrial Muse*, pp. 20-1.
comic naturalism pioneered on the theatrical stage in the first half of the century. To a degree, the music-hall followed the theatre, whose writings and stagings became yet more markedly naturalistic from the middle years of the century with the domesticated settings of the box set.\textsuperscript{15} But music-hall naturalism rarely extended to the stage set and was almost exclusively vested in the individual performer. There was, moreover, a distinct divergence from the legitimate stage in the practice of direct address with which it was twinned.

Whatever the increasing degree of artifice, professional room-singers insistently broke through the fictions of their impersonations with an ad lib gagging commentary between verses known as "patter" or the "spoken". Mostly extemporized, this direct address of the audience (also practised in the crossover routines of the low comedian in the theatre) represented a further assimilation of English street style and the typical exchanges of life in the street, those of the "cad" or horse omnibus conductor touting for custom, of the butcher or mountebank shouting his wares, or the ritual contests of abuse known as "flytings" that still survived in the North. An ancient feature of popular culture, the direct address of the early music-hall is a more complex and engaging operation than yet generally allowed.\textsuperscript{16} In breaking role, the performer becomes most obviously accessible to the audience as himself or herself. Yet far from destroying the song character to whom the performer returns, the characterization may be strengthened through the revelation of the self that is invested in the role. This is a more privileged implication in the act of performance than that of the theatre, where the audience is privy to the performance as auditor/spectator who overhears the action or looks through the "fourth wall" of the conventional stage set. In the music-hall, the shifts in and out of role and self, artifice and autobiography, allowed the audience to see, as it were, the joins in the performance. In the hands of the inept this was no doubt disastrous, but properly executed it secured a distinctive relationship with the audience by initiating them into the mysteries of the performer’s craft and giving

\textsuperscript{15} On theatre, see Raymond Williams, "Social Environment and Theatrical Environment: The Case of English Naturalism", in his Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays (London, 1980), pp. 125-47.

\textsuperscript{16} Most helpful here is Davison, Contemporary Drama, ch. 2. See also Wurzbach, English Street Ballad, ch. 3.
them a consequent sense of select inclusion. The content of a song or act was of course also important, but its resonance with an audience was inseparable from the manner of its performance, whose language, in the broadest sense, signalled a common yet inside knowledge of what was really going on. It was this particular province of language use and meaning that we comprehend as discourse, that contemporary commentators termed "knowing".

It was through knowingness that the skilled performer mobilized the latent collective identity of an audience. The basic appeal of music-hall is said to lie in its affirmation of a newly urbanized people settling into a common way of life, yet awareness of this shared experience had to be activated anew at every performance among the so many and various aggregations that were the specific audiences within this extensive public. Indeed, to use the term "audience" in this context begs the question, for it presupposes a degree of focused attention that could rarely have been the case in a large city hall whose volatile assembly might be better designated as a crowd, out of which the performer had to construct an audience. Even in those halls with a particularly stable and socially homogeneous attendance, the acknowledgment of a

17 Though Foucault has made the concept an academic commonplace, he provides no single definition. His passing identification of "'illicit' discourse, that is, discourses of infraction" comes closest to what I have in mind here: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York, 1980), p. 18. I note, however, with others, that Foucault and his followers have been almost exclusively concerned with discourse in the practice of professional or specialist knowledges, neglecting those subjected to such practices and the potential of discourse theory for the study of popular culture and everyday life. Gareth Stedman Jones, "The 'Cockney' and the Nation, 1780-1988", in David Feldman and Gareth Stedman Jones (eds.), *Metropolis London: Histories and Representations since 1800* (London, 1989), pp. 272-324, is one turn in this latter direction, but the most important work of this kind is Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840-1914* (Cambridge, 1991). Joyce's extensive analysis of the role of language and representation in popular identities coincides at points with the argument of this essay, though our different focus in terms of evidence and place throws up somewhat conflicting readings of urban mentality.

common ground had to be summoned up or signified beyond the obvious givens of place, occasion, appearance and a core constituency of habitués. Althusser's concept of "interpellation" is suggestive here as the form of ideological address or hailing that recruits individuals into a particular subject-role or identity. In some such way, the performer's knowingness activates the corporate subjectivity of the crowd, and calls an audience into place. In music-hall this was a rapidly shifting exercise that cast its audience variously or sectionally as men, women, husbands, lodgers, costers, swells, citizens, working men, Britons, and so on, but arguably the underlying subject position that informed them all was that of those "in the know".

At the same time, this interpellation is not just the calling into position of a particular subjectivity, but is more in the nature of a transaction or co-production. Where a performance takes, the crowd/audience registers recognition and identification, certainly, but it also asserts its own collective authorship/authority in the performance. This response is obviously not just conjured out of nowhere. As with any audience, there may be a considerable predisposition to give attention, according to previous acquaintance with the performer, word-of-mouth endorsement or the bait of publicity, yet these predispositions still have to be exploited. In this, however, the music-hall performer could count on the active engagement of an audience well practised not only in being hailed but in hailing back, for the language of the street and market-place that informed the exchanges with the audience was very much one of give as well as take. Consumers were used to answering back, for more generally the negotiations of buyer and seller were still relatively unconstrained by the fixed practice of modern retailing; indeed, in one of the more typical transactions

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19 On audiences, see Dagmar Höher, "The Composition of Music Hall Audiences, 1850-1900", in Bailey (ed.), Music Hall, pp. 73-92.
20 Suggestive here is reception and reader response theory, though this is mostly applied to literary texts with little regard for social context. For relevant applications, see Marco De Marinis, "Dramaturgy of the Spectator", Drama Rev., xxi (1987), pp. 100-14; Marvin Carlson, "Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance", in Thomas Postlethwait and Bruce A. McConachie (eds.), Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance (Iowa City, 1989), pp. 82-98. Susan Bennett, Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception (London, 1990), is a useful general text.
of working-class life, that of the pawnshop, it was the customers
who made most of the patter.\textsuperscript{21}

Yet the language of such exchanges was likely to be more
compact and elliptical as the pattern of encounter in a period of
accelerated urbanization grew more fleeting and discontinuous.
Symptomatic of this was the rise of the catch-phrase, pronounced
by one commentator in 1841 as a typical manifestation of the
“popular follies of great cities” and “the madness of crowds”:
“every street corner”, he declared, “was noisy with it, every
wall was chalked with it”\textsuperscript{22}. Catch-phrases were generated by the
songs and dialogue of the popular theatre, and the pub concert-
room or singing saloon was soon caught up in their circulation.
Thus a song from the late 1830s which tells of a concert-room
romance, \textit{Don't Tell My Mother, She Don't Know I'm Out!} (see
Plate),\textsuperscript{23} would have played off or may have directly inspired the
contemporary shouted enquiry “Does your mother know you're
out?” Unlike the folk proverb, the catch-phrase often floats free
from more obvious referents and depends for its meaning on an
extra-textual knowledge.\textsuperscript{24} As such, it was prime material for the
more allusive and abbreviated social dialect from which the comic
song was constructed. Also significant for this new formation was
a marked shift in structure from the narrative to the situational.
The more leisurely story-line of the ballad gives way to an epis-
odic emphasis which exploits some social predicament in a quick
succession of scenes or actions whose common import is punched
home in a tag-line or chorus. The new mode of comic song works
therefore less as a story than as an accumulation of short jokes

\textsuperscript{21} Fred Willis, \textit{London General} (London, 1953), pp. 141-2. Political meetings were
also characterized by a good deal of active audience response: see, e.g., Paul A.
Pickering, “Class without Words: Symbolic Communication in the Chartist
Movement”, \textit{Past and Present}, no. 112 (Aug. 1986), pp. 150-1. We are dealing with
a still vigorously oral culture whose psychodynamics remain close to those of primary
oral societies, particularly in its agonistic tone: see Walter J. Ong, \textit{Orality and
Literacy: The Technologising of the Word} (London, 1982), pp. 43-5. On the persistent drama
of the markets, see Andrew Davies, \textit{Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture
in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939} (Buckingham, 1992), pp. 130-8.

\textsuperscript{22} Charles Mackay, \textit{Memoirs of Extraordinary Popular Delusions} (London, 1841; repr.

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{London Singer's Mag.} [1838-9?], p. 161. There are no dates for the individual
(monthly?) issues, but their continuous publication is some index to the growth of
concert-room activity.

\textsuperscript{24} Cf. James Obelkevich, “Proverbs”, in Burke and Porter (eds.), \textit{Social History of
Language}, pp. 43-72.
with a reiterated punch-line, which in turn might be recycled as a catch-phrase. Like the catch-phrase, the music-hall dealt in a new form of vocal shorthand, whose language operated like a cue or flash charge that needed the knowledge that was knowingness to complete its circuitry. When the circuit worked, as contemporary accounts show, the song went off like a rocket.  

An example comes in a report in the improving press from 1856 of songs sung "in character" at a "low house of amusement":

It is to these flash songs that we take violent objection. By name, they are often the same as we see in music-seller's windows and on our own drawing-room tables; but they are garbled and interpolated here in a manner to defy description. They are sung, or rather roared, with a vehemence that is stunning, and accompanied with spoken passages of the most outrageous character. At the end of every verse the audience takes up the chorus with a zest and vigour which speaks volumes — they sing, they roar, they yell, they scream, they get on their legs and waving dirty hands and ragged hats bellow again till their voices crack. When the song is ended, and the singer withdraws, they encore him with a peal that seems enough to bring the rotting roof on their heads, as with frantic shouts, shrieks and catcalls they drag him back again so that they may gloat once more over the delectable morsel.

Even with allowance for journalistic exaggeration, the emotional temper of the occasion is clearly a long way removed from most Olde Tyme music-hall singsongs. There is the vigorous delivery complete with "outrageous" interpolations, while the reworking of drawing-room songs provides a good example of the cultural appropriation typical of the music-hall repertoire. There is another form of appropriation in evidence as well, though that is too inadequate a term to describe what is going on here: in the chorus singing (a feature characteristic of a night out at the halls) the passage suggests the more highly charged sense of a possessive "claiming", both of the song and the singer, that goes well beyond

25 The image, both apposite and irresistible, is borrowed from Bennett, "Music in the Halls", p. 20, and his analysis of the propulsion imparted by the rhythmic interaction of words and music. Sir Richard Terry also noted the development of a more concentrated song-form, with a distinctive "snap" that "knocked the audience every verse", though he places this in the 1880s: R. Terry, "Old Music Halls", John O'London Weekly, 6 Dec. 1924. See also Vic Gammon's work on early music-hall repertoire, principally that of Sam Cowell: V. Gammon, "Not Appreciated in Worthing?": Class Expression and Popular Song Texts in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain", Popular Music, iv (1984), pp. 5-24; Bratton, Victorian Popular Ballad, pp. 200-1.

Don't tell my Mother—she don't know I'm out .................................................. 161
Just like Love .......................................................... 163
I'm out beguiled, thee .................................................. 1b
Forgotten face .......................................................... 1b
John Hubbard ............................................................ 1b
Sweet Charlotte .......................................................... 163

Oh, dash those tear-drops ................................................. 1b
Rose that blooms for ever .............................................. 1b
Spring time of childhood ............................................... 1b
Ben Bowspirit ............................................................. 1b
We've crowned our Queen .............................................. 1b
The last farewell ........................................................... 1b
Ye shall walk in sunlight ............................................... 163

Mungo worry much glad ............................................... 1b
Oh, Nanny ................................................................. 1b
Riot to you ................................................................. 166
Give me wine—rosy wine .............................................. 1b
Look at Home ................................................................. 1b
Love's Review ............................................................... 167
All to astonish the Bowers ............................................. 1b

DON'T TELL MY MOTHER, SHE DON'T KNOW I'M OUT!

An Original Comic Song, written by Mr. C. Rice, set to music by Mrs. Cramer, and Miss Rogers, at the London Concerts.

Tune—L'Isle, and be friends.
Kind friends, with your leave, I'll some secrets relate,
I'm going to enter the conjugal state;
My sweetheart's a footman—one Timothy Trout,
But don't tell my mother, she don't know I'm out:
She don't, &c.

At a concert one night, I fell in with my beau,
He offered his arm, and I couldn't say no,
He swore that he loved me, would not live without
I'd let him come home, when my mother was out!
When, &c.

I told him he might, if he quietly came,
Each night, as at first, he attends me the same;

"Don't Tell My Mother, She Don't Know I'm Out!"
(By permission of the British Library)
the conventional reading of audience recognition and identification.27

Further telling evidence of this performative relationship of singer and audience is provided in Henry Mayhew’s mid-century account of a London penny gaff. Mayhew observed a crush of some two hundred juveniles respond to the “comic singer”:

putting on a ‘knowing look’, [he] sang a song, the whole point of which consisted in the mere utterance of some filthy word at the end of each stanza. Nothing, however, could have been more successful. The lads stamped their feet with delight; the girls screamed with enjoyment. Once or twice a young shrill laugh would anticipate the fun — as if the words were well-known — or the boys would forestall the point by shouting it out before the proper time. When the song was ended the house was in a delirium of applause . . . There were three or four of these songs sung in the course of the evening, each one being encored, and then changed. One written about ‘Pine-apple rock’, was the grand treat of the night, and offered greater scope to the rhyming powers of the author than any of the others. In this, not a single chance had been missed; ingenuity had been exerted to its utmost lest an obscene thought should be passed by, and it was absolutely awful to behold the relish with which the young ones jumped to the hideous meaning of the words.28

Ingenuity indeed, for after “cock”, one muses, what else can there be, unless the rhyme fell elsewhere? Yet the scene grips the reader, as the singer gripped his audience. Here the shared knowledge that is knowingness is that of sexuality, in whose delights the young audience seem so precociously well-schooled that the singer’s “knowing look” concentrates their attention instantly. There is immediate closure with the audience, some of whom run ahead of the singer to detonate the rhymes that cue the crowd in their response, and the suggestion is that the words of the songs are recomposed at their prompting. Above all, there is the potent sense of collusion. Sometimes lyrics themselves could suggest this, as in the confidential appeal of Don’t Tell My Mother, She Don’t Know I’m Out! (in however declamatory a voice this had to be made). In Mayhew’s account, the whole exchange is

27 For similarly proprietary sentiment in a theatre audience, see Douglas Reid, “Popular Theatre in Victorian Birmingham”, in David Bradby, Louis James and Bernard Sharratt (eds.), Performance and Politics in Popular Drama (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 87-8 n. 53. The feeling is also manifest in the audience response to Frank Randle, the great Northern favourite of the 1930s and beyond, celebrated as the carbuncular eponymous hero of Jeff Nuttall, King Twist (London, 1978). For a similar phenomenon among rock fans today, see Frith on “owning” in “Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music”, p. 143.

animated by a sense of complicit mischief that contributes considerably to his own acute discomfiture.

Claiming and collusion provide a sharper sense of the specific operation and intensity of recognition in music-hall, yet "naming the parts doesn't show us what makes the gun go off".29 While these and other responses can be discerned separately, in performance, as the above accounts suggest, they are telescoped or superimposed upon each other, fusing together dramatically in the case of the successful act. It is knowingness that ignites this effect by pulling the crowd inside a closed yet allusive frame of reference, and implicating them in a select conspiracy of meaning that animates them as a specific audience. This flattering sense of membership is the more so since music-hall performance suggested that such privileged status was not so much conferred as earned by the audience's own well-tested cultural and social competence.30

A few words here about the history of the word "knowing" itself. The term is first noted in racing talk of the eighteenth century, when a "knowing one" was supposedly privy to secrets of the turf or other sporting matters. By the turn of the century the term also denoted up-to-date knowledge of what was smart and stylish.31 Twenty years later, the theatre comedian John Liston was being critically commended for his "knowing style" in his naturalistic playing of cockney characters. Here it seems to identify a certain quality of conceit, whose accurate rendering gave Hazlitt as much cause for his exasperation with the original in the street as it did for his admiration at its portrayal on the

30 While "competence" is routinely used in semiotics and literary theory to denote the reader's knowledge of a particular genre and its conventions, what I have in mind here is the additional, more dynamic sense of the living out of this knowledge. John Fiske identifies both a cultural competence and a social competence — "how people are likely to act, feel or react within such conventions" — which together make for what he terms the "producery" activity of the modern consumer: J. Fiske, Understanding Popular Culture (London, 1989), p. 148. See too the suggestive essay by Bernard Sharratt, "The Politics of the Popular? From Melodrama to Television", in Bradby, James and Sharratt (eds.), Performance and Politics, pp. 275-95. His identification of the "expertise" of popular life has, I realize, been subterraneously prompting me to this reading of knowingness for several years; what he terms the "intimacy" of popular response has strong affinities with what I describe above as "claiming".
31 O.E.D., 2nd edn, t.v. "knowing (3)".
stage. To Hazlitt, the knowingness of the cockney was the delu-
sion of someone who, on the contrary, really knew nothing: “He
is . . . a great man only in proxy . . . surcharged with a sort of
second-hand, vapid, tingling, troublesome self-importance”. 32
This sense of something both absurd yet troubling was to be
repeated down the century by middle-class witnesses confronted
with the phenomenon of the comic singer and his audience.
Inverted commas became welded to the term, in a defensive
distancing of its contemptible presumptions. What most dis-
quieted Mayhew and other witnesses was plainly its rogue sexual-
ity, yet while sexuality continued to constitute much of the
insider’s knowledge that was knowingness, other competencies
fell within its discourse.
For all its often brashly confident tone, knowingness spoke to
the need for a new wariness in the more uncertain negotiations of
everyday urban living. Songs from the late 1830s alert the audience
to the petty corruptions of the police and tradespeople, the tricks
of con men and prostitutes and the increasing difficulty of reading
strangers in the flux of big-city life. Alertness to the unknown
other had no doubt always been part of the urban sensibility
(Elizabethan literature on cozening is one example) but in the
second quarter of the nineteenth century there were more people
who had to learn this, and there was more of it to be learned. In
locating the formation of a new urban popular culture in these
years, Louis James finds its most articulate expression in a mass
of cheap literature which set out to comprehend this new life of
the towns, to understand how it all worked, “claiming omnisci-
ence” from a stance of “knowing intimacy”. 33 But if urban world-

33 Louis James, Fiction for the Working Man, 1830-1850 (Harmondsworth, 1974),
p. 20-1. Such periodicals were most numerous in London, but there were equivalents
in most big provincial cities of the period. For a new wariness towards the city and
its representation in literature, see Deborah Epstein Nord, “The City as Theater:
From Georgian to Early Victorian London”, Victorian Studies, xxxi (1987-8),
p. 159-88; and for Mayhew’s treatment of street people as an imaginative metaphor
for a new cosmopolitan sensibility of mobility and alertness, see Richard Maxwell,
“Henry Mayhew and the Life of the Streets”, Jl Brit. Studies, xvii, pt 2 (Spring
1978), pp. 87-105.
While the population of London nearly doubled between 1821 and 1851, the rate
of increase in cities in the North and Midlands was higher still. While I acknowledge
the preponderance of London sources used here, this and other evidence supports
the contention that knowingness was a general urban phenomenon of the period and
not, as might be objected, specifically and only metropolitan or cockney, though
undoubtedly there would have been different regional inflections. For a work that

(cont. on p. 153)
liness now aspired to the encyclopaedic it had at the same time to be much more finely tuned, exercised not only as a matter of an extensive literary curiosity, but as a matter of more compacted, anonymous and fleeting everyday negotiations. To a critical degree, the world that had to be known had both expanded and contracted. Getting by in this milieu required a new set of responses, recorded here in Hazlitt's contemptuous but revealing picture of the cockney: "He sees everything near, superficial, little, in hasty succession. The world turns round, and his head with it, like a roundabout at a fair . . . His senses keep him alive; and he knows, inquires and cares for nothing further".  

What Hazlitt condemned as ignorance, music-hall applauded as a necessary form of self-protection and, in its knowing recognition of this, a cause for self-congratulation of the kind that further irritated Hazlitt in the cockney. Laughter helped dissipate unease at the inherent hazards of city life, but knowingness completed its rout. If the repertoire of Sam Cowell, a leading singer of the period, did indeed depict a world "overwhelmingly peopled by fools", it is almost certain that the manner of his performance reassured his audience that they weren't among them. Performers, we may surmise, were applauded not just for their naturalistic re-creation of a shared world but for their authority in the actual business of living in that world, an authority perhaps most potently demonstrated in songs of its many fallible inhabitants. This persona may have been more a matter of image than of substance, and certainly there were some notorious casualties among professionals themselves, yet Mayhew remarked on the obvious and particular intelligence of one tributary source of concert-room talent, the street performer. "By intelligence", he noted, "I mean that quickness of perception which is commonly called 'cunning', a readiness of expression, and a familiarity (more or less) with the topics of the day — the latter picked up probably in public houses". A cognate of "knowing", "cunning" raises associations of the "cunning man (or woman)", the local wizard-

(n. 33 cont.)

departs substantially from the metrocentric bias of most music-hall studies, see Kift (formerly Höher; see n. 19 above), Arbeiterkultur im gesellschaftlichen Konflikt.

34 As quoted in Davis, John Liston, p. 25.
35 Gammon, "Not Appreciated in Worthing?", p. 23.
cum-counsellor of the traditional rural community, suggesting not only that this role could in part have been displaced on to the comic singer, but that, in a more atomized modernizing world, every urbanite who would cope must learn to be his or her own "cunning man". Another related and suggestive usage is the Northern dialect term of "canny", bestowed typically in celebration of the "canny lad", among whose many attributes lay a shrewd resourcefulness in reading situations and escaping the meshes of authority. One cannot presume too much from such associations, but the case can be made that the knowingness of early music-hall was a largely new idiom, encoded from the dramatically transformed social realities of a critical era in modern urbanization.

Yet while knowingness was undoubtedly effective in the collective interpellation of its audience, its broader functional value is questionable, for in the nature of its address its lessons are never spelled out. Like the joke with its similarly complicit engagement, its particular expressive bloom withers with explanation. What exactly is there to be known in knowingness? Its properties are at once self-evident and arcane. More than with the joke, a better analogy might lie with the confidence trick (against which music-hall song offered so many warnings). Through a confident and confiding manner, the performer repeats its flattery of privileged implication, his or her credentials too winning to scrutinize further. But if, by this analogy, the audience are the knowing victims of the performer's benign manipulations, who or what — apart from mother — completes the classic triad of the confidence trick, as the ultimate victim whom the other two parties conspire to defraud?

Parents, spouses and the law

are, as many songs suggest, there to be outwitted. In a broader sense, however, knowingness as popular discourse works to destabilize the various official knowledges that sought to order common life through their languages of improvement and respectability and the intensifying grid of regulative social disciplines that marked the period. These official languages are represented in various allusions in the songs and their performance, but are also acknowledged in more overt form in the mock sermons and lectures that were juxtaposed with the other comic acts.\footnote{Compare the burlesque legalism that flourished in traditional artisan culture: Robert Darnton, \textit{The Great Cat Massacre} (New York, 1985), p. 85.}

Knowingness then is not a direct refutation of these languages, to which it remains inescapably subordinate in the larger systems of society; it is rather a countervailing dialogue that sets experience against prescription, and lays claim to an independent competence in the business and enjoyment of living. There is a strong element of self-deception at work here that may have been both acknowledged and compounded by music-hall’s love of parody and mock self-deprecation, yet knowingness emerges as a distinctive if slippery form of comic pragmatism. In typical knowing style it proclaimed its utility in the masthead of the \textit{Singer’s Penny Magazine} (1835–6), which parodied that Whiggish engine of improvement, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, by advertising itself as the organ of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Mirth.\footnote{Published in 1835 and 1836, the \textit{Singer’s Penny Magazine} was an antecedent, via the \textit{British Pocket Vocalist}, of the \textit{London Singer’s Magazine} (see n. 23 above).}

III

From the 1860s music-hall took on the full apparatus of commercialized production together with more elaborate amenities and greatly expanded premises. By the 1880s the big proprietors were laying claim to a greater social and aesthetic respectability by advertising their halls as “theatres of variety”, and the industry entered the period of its maximum prosperity and influence that peaked just before the Great War.\footnote{In North America, however, where similar developments took place, usage was different, for it was “variety” which signified the unimproved original now superseded by a would-be more refined “vaudeville” theatre: see Robert Snyder, \textit{The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York} (New York, 1989).} While the move out of the
pub concert-room produced a great flowering of songs and artists, it also brought new constraints on performance. These were dictated in part by the rationalization of operations in an increasingly complex institution, but there was also pressure from outside from middle-class moral reformers for whom the comic song and its singers were at best "a public nuisance" and at worst "the despair of civilization". Sensitive to the threat to their licences and to their heavy investments, managers moved defensively to censor singers and songs, yet the essential circuitry of music-hall's performative relationship remained intact, more deeply encoded in the resilient discourse of knowingness. Broader social changes brought shifts in the constituency of both the knowing and the known, but knowingness continued its ironic counterpoint to the language of respectability, even as the latter became more firmly installed in the formal practice of music-hall as both business and profession.

From its beginnings music-hall had been embattled with reform critics, but the particularly hostile attacks on the comic singer in the late 1870s led to a significant increase in in-house controls on performance. In 1879, the foundation year of the Social Purity Association, the Middlesex bench petitioned the Home Secretary for legislation to eliminate indecency from the music-hall stage. Though no such legislation was forthcoming, the shock to the industry translated into the new house rules of the 1880s. These proscribed vulgarity in general, listing official figures and institutions that were to be specifically protected from improper allusion, while audiences were invited to report breaches that escaped the manager's notice. In some cases, performance material had to be submitted in advance for vetting. It was, however, the unscripted exchanges across the footlights that caused the most anxiety. Some contracts forbade the performer's direct address of the audience, and audiences themselves were policed by uniformed officials whose duties included the discouragement of chorus singing. Together with limits set on the number of encores, such measures were meant to maintain the tighter timetabling of acts necessitated by the multiple engagements of artists across

44 A review of the controversies of this climacteric from the London proprietors' perspective is given in Regulation of the Music Halls (London, 1883); for the contested imposition of the new controls, see Peter Bailey, "Customs, Capital and Culture", in Robert Storch (ed.), Popular Culture and Custom in Nineteenth Century England (London, 1982), pp. 180-208.
the city, twice-nightly performances and the matching of show
times with suburban bus and train schedules, yet they were also
aimed at reducing the volatile spontaneity of the music-hall
experience and its threat to propriety. Impromptu engagement
with the customers seemed yet more diminished as halls grew
larger and production more theatricalized, for the artist was put
further beyond the reach of the audience, a separation signalled
most dramatically by the end of the century with the growing
practice of darkening the auditorium.

It seems clear, however, that, for all the disciplining and distan-
cing of artists and audience, the live connection between the two
persisted, and it was in this period that a mature or classic style
of comic singing achieved its sharpest and most efficient defini-
tion.45 Though the bulk of the audience became stabilized in fixed
seating facing the front and drinking was gradually confined to
foyer bars, the audience was still restless by today's standards:
"It was", said Arthur Roberts, "all uproar, whether they liked
you or not".46 Yet while some performers still relied on the
shouting style and its forceful accessories of dress and manner,
this was now done as much to establish a certain type of character
— the naturalistic rendering of the boys on a spree — as to
commandeer attention, and in general stage presence became less
aggressive. Comic technique was still often strongly accented yet
more conversational in tone and pace, while performance overall
became more economical. Alfred "The Great" Vance did his
share of emphatic body play and robust vocalizing with his "Slap-
Bang" song-hits of the late 1860s, but by the 1880s he was noted
for a more ingratiating style of address: "he treats his hearers as
old familiar friends, and takes them into his confidence, a process
that they like immensely".47

A summation of the style in its heyday comes from an appraisal
of Wilkie Bard in 1911 which commended him highly for "The
rigid spareness and economy of his method — a thing of sugges-
tion, of hints and half spoken confidences, rather than of complete
statement". Bard, the review continued, "has attuned himself to
the new middle-class respectability without losing any of his

45 For a strong element of interaction in a closely allied form, see Lois Rutherford,
"'Harmless Nonsense': The Comic Sketch and the Development of Music Hall
47 Era, 31 Jan. 1885.
artistic range and freedom". The prime device lay in the "things of suggestion", and as controls tightened and actual time on stage contracted it was the compressed code of the *double entendre* and the innuendo that signalled complicity with an audience, investing language, tone and gesture with oblique but knowing conspiracies of meaning.

While there was a long history of ambiguity and innuendo in popular culture, most typically of a sexual import, music-hall deployed such devices in ways that were not only new but afforded their audiences more complex gratifications than present accounts allow. Where older song forms had exploited the idioms of a particular trade or region, music-hall spoke across a more generalized demotic range, investing orthodox address with its second-level meaning. "There was", said one observer in the 1880s, "an unwritten language of vulgarity and obscenity known to music-hall audiences, in which vile things can be said that appear perfectly inoffensive in King’s English". In Glasgow in 1875 a committee of protest enlisted shorthand writers and artists to provide an accurate record of “immoral performances”, yet the impact of the offensive acts could not be inferred from the page alone, and witnesses were often bewildered by the audiences’ convulsions over apparently pointless exchanges. The knowing language of music-hall sexuality was that of standard English, or rather an open modern vernacular, with little recourse to the *grammatica jocosa* that Bakhtin talks of in traditional forms or the "out-and-out" bawdy that had distressed Mayhew in the mid-century. Music-hall did not, therefore, generate an anti-language in the accepted sense of the term, but rather a resignification of everyday language which knowingly corrupted its conventional referentiality and required a certain competency in its decoding.

50 *Glasgow Daily Herald*, 6 Mar. 1875; *Era*, 7 Mar. 1875. These records have not survived.
51 An anti-language is defined in terms of an invented vocabulary, often of a semi-technical and oppositional kind, that serves a particular minority group: see M. A. K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic* (London, 1978), pp. 164-82. Though music-hall had its own trade talk ("parlary"), and a keen appetite for slang, in general it was a powerful agent in the standardization of language that was accelerating everywhere in the late nineteenth century. This is not to ignore the considerable popularity of dialect acts in this period, but it can be argued they were as much a corollary of the main trend as a resistance to it. In music-hall, as in the onset of mass culture (cont. on p. 159)
At the same time, there was a particular eloquence in what was left unsaid. The incompleteness of the performer’s delivery left gaps for the audience; for their laughter, of course, but also for what that signalled of their ability to fill the gaps. An L.C.C. inspector’s report of 1908 noted that George Robey left his audience “to fill in the details and therefrom to draw their own inferences”. Not too demanding an exercise, it may be said, for in semiotic terms music-hall song is more a closed than an open text, a highly stylized and familiar genre playing within a limited horizon of audience expectations. But if we accept the claims of modern linguistic scholarship that it is the spaces more than the spoken that denote the norms of urban language use, then we may allow that the suspense and instability of the spaces generated in live performance on the halls provided a running opportunity, on both sides of the footlights, for the kind of tactical surprise that could simultaneously confirm and confound the generic pattern of expectations, and delight an audience with its own palpable sophistication.

The nature of such self-congratulation may be better appreciated by considering the conditions of popular discourse in other key cultural sites of the late nineteenth century. Arguably the regulations that sought to curtail popular expression in the music-halls were more severely employed in the spreading institutional regimes of the later modern factory, the big commercial office and the state school-room — all variously obliging their subordinate inmates to speak less or to do so in standardized forms that echoed the official idioms of their bureaucratic authority figures. Together with the contractions imposed by urbanization, these controls would have further reduced popular communication, while concentrating it into yet more cryptic and elliptical forms. If then, to borrow Bernstein’s formulation, the authentic popular


54 The plainest case is that of education: see David Vincent, Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750-1914 (Cambridge, 1989), ch. 3. Another powerfully restrictive regime in this respect was, of course, domestic service.
code became perforce more "restricted"; the conditions of its limitations may have made its meanings more highly charged and its sub rosa competencies more satisfying. By engaging and flattering these skills, music-hall performers could continue to reassure an audience that they were nobody's fool or — more pertinently in this era — no teacher's dunce, no head-clerk's cipher, no foreman's stooge.

As is well evidenced, music-hall delivery was, of course, far from being only "a thing of suggestion, of hints and half spoken confidences", for it could also be almost manically verbose. Significantly, the language in which it indulged its prolixities was often a parodic echo of the formal language of officialdom and elite culture. These knowing conceits were as much enamoured as mocking, expressing a qualified reach for the power that these codes represented, while ventilating the anxieties that their use entailed. But if, like the innuendo and ambiguity, this was in large part another defensive exercise, the appropriation of "proper" English was also a form of retaliation in kind against the linguistic oppressions of the period.

This creative misalliance between the vulgar and the pretentious not only nonplussed the outsider but aided the counter-attack of those singers who protested against the slurs on their profession. Arthur Roberts, whose allegedly indecent performance contributed to the loss of licence for Evans's music-hall in the annus immorialis of 1879, retaliated with The Highly Respectable Singer:

Good gracious, said I, then are songs nowadays
So shocking to hearer and reader?
So very much worse than your funny French plays
And your novels by modest Ouida?

Though performers were much concerned with establishing respectable professional status for their calling, their protestations were often disingenuous. Yet they still professed to be taken by

55 Basil Bernstein's comparison was with a more explicit, intellectualized or "elaborated" (middle-class) code, a controversial thesis most readily sampled in his essay "Social Class, Language and Socialisation", in P. P. Giglioli (ed.), Language and Social Context (Harmondsworth, 1972), pp. 211-34.


57 Sir Lewis Fergusson, Old Time Music Hall Comedians (Leicester, 1941), pp. 12-16; Roberts, Fifty Years of Spoof, pp. 54-6.
surprise by audiences who "manufactured" their own meaning from texts they represented as wholly innocent.\textsuperscript{58} Proprietors were similarly compromised between the conflicting pulls of official values and the popular aesthetic, some maintaining that it was the latter rather than the comic singer that was culpable in a business yielding to demand from an audience that "wants dirt".\textsuperscript{59} Certainly audiences did take over and rework material, and delighted in transgressions of official rectitude. The determinedly proper Victoria Coffee Music-Hall in London vetted all acts thoroughly before their appearance, but the popular voice still broke through:

Yet, in spite of all these precautions, let there come a change such as an encore verse, such as some slip or stoppage in the stage machinery, and out will come something, not in the programme and never heard or seen before, which will bring down a thunder of enjoyment from the audience, and at the same time fill the manager's box with sorrow and humiliation.\textsuperscript{60}

Audiences also continued to claim their traditional performing rights; even as their participatory role was threatened by the house regulations of the 1880s, the musical construction of the songs gave greater emphasis to the entry of the chorus and the further thunder of the crowd.\textsuperscript{61}

As in popular humour generally, sexuality was a pervasive motif of knowingness, yet it took on a particular inflection in music-hall from the presence of prostitutes in the audience, for they constituted a running subtext to the songs in a way that tested the competence of all who presumed to read the urban crowd with any sophistication. The reformers' attack on the halls in 1879 had been directed at the prostitute as much as the comic singer, the offence of one allegedly compounding that of the other. In this regard, too, house rules became tighter. Among London's bigger and more notable halls, the Oxford, for example, forbade soliciting and denied entry to any unescorted woman "unless respectably dressed".\textsuperscript{62} As prostitutes responded with ever more plausible impersonations of respectability, their identi-
fication became increasingly difficult, the more so since young middle-class women were making-up and dressing in a fashionable approximation of the *demi-monde*.\(^{63}\)

Whatever the protestations of proprietors to the contrary, prostitutes were thus enabled to continue their business in the halls, though they canvassed their services more circumspectly. Crucially here, verbal address duplicated the particular register of music-hall song, inflecting the mundane and unremarkable with sexual invitation. In a famous case in 1896, a middle-class reformer who protested at the renewal of the Oxford’s licence faltered in his accusation of prostitution: of the woman whose approach aroused his suspicions of soliciting, he could report only, but significantly, “‘It was not what she said, but the way in which she said it’”.\(^{64}\) Yet these hearings did demonstrate what the reformers failed to prove, that the presence of prostitutes in the audience added an extra sexual resonance to music-hall song and the exchange of meaning between performer and audience. Another witness objected in particular to Marie Lloyd’s song, *I Asked Johnny Jones, So I Know Now!* Dressed as a schoolgirl, Lloyd (a famously “knowing” star) nags her parents for enlightenment on a number of curious incidents of a sexual nature that defeat her immediate understanding, including her father being accosted. “‘What’s that for, eh?’”, she demands in the tag-line, getting satisfaction only from her canny schoolboy friend, Johnny Jones — “‘... so I know now’”. “During this song”, noted the witness, “the women looked more at the men”. In the same month, a critic from the respectable musical press testing the modern music-hall’s claim to improvement was distressed not only by the songs that continued to celebrate drink, but by

\(^{63}\) E. Lynn Linton, “The Girl of the Period”, in her *The Girl of the Period and Other Social Essays* (London, 1883), pp. 1-9 (first pubd in 1868 in the *Saturday Review*).

“objectionable songs . . . that advertise another trade . . . and also serve to foment the atmosphere”.

What obviously gave pleasure in the music-hall world was the rich joke that such proceedings afforded at the expense of society’s high moralism and its intrusive vigilantes. The mix of denial and connivance with which proprietors and police met the question of prostitutes’ admission to the halls suggests how their undoubted presence could be represented as both fact and fiction. Prostitutes were there and yet not there, at once conspicuous and invisible, according to a kind of worldly hypocrisy which acknowledged things as they inevitably (and profitably) were as well as things as they should be. It was this capacity to operate at the very interface of the Victorian double standard that was central to music-hall’s cultural and aesthetic strategy and gave knowingness its more than stylistic utility. At the Oxford hearings, the press reported constant laughter from the public gallery at the discomfiture of the reform critics as they failed in their charges of immorality, either in the songs or the traffic of prostitutes. The reform witnesses had read the codes correctly, but failed to translate them into a politically effective language in front of the licensing committee. Thus knowingness confounded knowledge, to the great delight of its initiates.

Which groups in particular could be said to be “in the know”? The most obvious aspirants were the numerous young people who remained a prominent element in the music-hall audience. Mayhew’s account suggests how greatly the sexual implications of knowingness were relished by a mixed crowd of working-class adolescents at the mid-century. These may have spoken to the direct experience of a generation credited with a considerable sexual precociousness; thereafter the likelihood is that the engagement of the young was more a function of the needs of ignorance than of affirmation. The tightening controls on the sexual socialization of the young of all classes through the late Victorian period and beyond increased the need to know or, crucially, to appear

65 Frank Merry, “Music Hall and its Music”, Music (Nov. 1896), pp. 385-6; I owe this reference to Kate McCrone. On the gleeful sexual literacy of middle-class males in reading cues that played off a sub rosa knowledge of pornography and prostitution in the West End, see the parallel findings of Tracy C. Davis, Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture (London, 1991), ch. 5.

66 For the changing pattern among the young, see John Gillis, For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present (Oxford, 1985), pp. 164, 268.
to know. This would have been particularly so for the increasing number of young clerks and shopmen whose actual sexual experience was likely to be minimal. Reluctant to resort to prostitutes, they salvaged their masculine pride by identifying with the assertive sexuality of the *lions comiques*, the brashly tumescent generation of comic singers whose swell songs took the halls by storm in the 1860s and 1870s.\(^{67}\) The sexuality of the swell song was more narcissistic than predatory, yet it was full of intimations of conquest that flattered the audience as knowing accomplices *after* the fact. Such flattery was all the more precious for individuals in a group that was as much a target for parody as for validation, for the young "gent" was as likely to be mocked for his sexual naïveté or incipient effeminacy as he was to be congratulated in assumptions of his fully initiated manhood. The need to be identified in the latter role must have been sharpened by the presence of the prostitute as a palpable reminder of the tests of conventional masculine sexuality.

Were women more or less knowing than men? Which ones were which, and in what ways? This is more difficult terrain. It was particularly noted of British women burlesque stars whose imports of *risqué* dance and comedy routines took New York by storm in the 1860s that they were "aware of their own awarishness".\(^{68}\) Among music-hall performers, Marie Lloyd certainly appeared to relish the suggestiveness of the situations she sang about, including her keenly observed imitation of soliciting techniques among Regent Street prostitutes,\(^{69}\) and other reporters besides Mayhew recorded a knowing response to this kind of material from women in the audience. "Do you think it is only the males who revel in this talk?", asked a Glasgow reform witness rhetorically.\(^{70}\) One prominent (and well-researched) type of music-hall song represented young working women as accomplished social actors with a knowing edge over their gentish

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\(^{67}\) The cross-cutting engagement of singer and audience in this context is analysed in Peter Bailey, "Champagne Charlie: Performance and Ideology in the Swell Song", in Bratton (ed.), *Music Hall*, pp. 49-69.


\(^{69}\) *Era*, 30 Apr. 1892.

\(^{70}\) *Glasgow Daily Herald*, 6 Mar. 1875. See also the observations on female response by the critic William Archer in his account of the knowingness ("aposoeopsis") of the allied genre of musical comedy: W. Archer, *The Theatrical 'World' for 1896* (London, 1897), pp. 298-305.
suitors. With the increase in public roles for women in the late century, the opportunities for sexual encounter multiplied. If, as the songs suggest, some women knowingly exploited these opportunities, their knowingness may also have functioned in scouting the risks of these ambiguous new freedoms. Knowingness for women may have signalled a defensive competence that gave a different ring to their laughter.

There were other concerns besides sex. For the bachelor subculture in the halls, knowingness also monitored standards of dress and style as a further test of masculine competence. The aspiration here was to nothing less than gentility, personified again by the lion comique. Contemporaries described the halls as “makeshift lounges” and “modern schools of manners”, where “an immense number of lads . . . learn how to become gentlemen, under the tuition of the Great Dunce, or some such celebrity”. Instruction was “by means of symbols” — the acting out of genteel behaviour through the striking of poses and the manipulation of the accessories of dress, whose implications were signalled in the music-hall shorthand of tone and gesture, including the knowing wink. The quasi-aristocratic self-assurance of a Champagne Charlie offered a compelling identity to members of a socially indeterminate group with little cultural capital of their own. Yet induction was far from easy, for while the real swells on stage might readily admit the novice into the mysteries of the freemasonry by “letting him into a thing or two”, they pilloried those who were manifestly inept in carrying off their new role, much to the delight of other sections of the audience. Thus knowingness fed publicly off its more fallible aspirants, marking out lines of inclusion and exclusion with some acerbity, perhaps justifying Beerbohm’s contention that people went to the halls to feel superior to someone.

Middle-class commentators continued to suspend knowingness in inverted commas as an indication both of contempt and unease.

“Knowingness”, objected one witness, was a pathetic form of self-conceit that left its subject in “suicidal ignorance of his utter meanness and insignificance”, yet such dismissals continued relentlessly as though the malaise could never be sufficiently purged.\(^{74}\) However pathetic the exercise, \textit{petit bourgeois} youth was clearly treading too closely on the heels of the true bourgeois, making a mockery of the apparatus of gentility and of the latter’s own aspirations to its exclusive status. At the same time, knowingness might appeal across the class divide to any youngster anxious to pass muster with more worldly seniors. A public school story from the 1890s tells how a new boy, Ashby minor, prepared himself for his school’s initiation rites by learning a comic song complete with appropriate actions — “one eyebrow must be raised and the opposite corner of the mouth turned down”, and so on. He is dumbfounded when his performance is greeted with embarrassed silence. Far from ingratiating himself, he has been guilty of showing off, of “putting on side”.\(^{75}\) The episode reminds us of the contrary emphasis in genteel discourse on restraint and understatement (different forms of gapping here),\(^{76}\) while suggesting how wide a currency the more stylized signals of knowingness had gained.\(^{77}\) Other evidence shows that it was not Ashby minor alone among his class who was enamoured of its distinctive mix of cheek and insouciance.

Since its beginnings, music-hall promoters had bid for a more respectable middle-class public. By the 1890s, improved programmes and the industry’s colonization of the suburbs were achieving something of this aim. E. M. Forster took his mother and his aunt to a music-hall in 1896, providing an account of his visit for his school magazine — in Latin, a distinctly bourgeois form of knowingness.\(^{78}\) But the growing middle-class presence of these years was less a tribute to the new immaculacy of the halls than it was evidence of a dominant class learning how to

\(^{74}\) Ibid.; see also Anon., \textit{Life, Career and Adventures of a Gent ‘Or Any Other Man} (London, 1862); Stedman Jones, “‘Cockney’ and the Nation”, pp. 290–4, on the new “‘Arry-stockracy”.

\(^{75}\) Talbot Baines Reed, \textit{The Cock House at Fellsgarth} (London, n.d.), pp. 21–7, 34.


\(^{77}\) Ashby minor might have learned the formula from F. Anstey, \textit{Mr. Punch’s Model Music Hall} (London, 1890), though, for all its conventional mannerisms, this could be an elusive and highly nuanced mode.

enjoy being in conspiracy against itself. Middle- and upper-class males had long been a rogue element in the music-hall audience, as voyeurs and predators. The bourgeois man and wife who now took their reserved seats in the syndicated halls of the ("naughty") nineties were much less self-consciously transgressive in their pleasures, but were learning to savour the collusive but contained mischief of the performer's address, in whose exchanges they too could register the competencies of knowingness. By the turn of the century, music-hall's knowingness was fast becoming a second language for all classes, as music-hall itself became an agreeable national alter ego, a manageable low other, and the defenders of moral and cultural purity were drawn to other targets.\(^{79}\)

IV

Knowingness encoded a reworked popular knowledge in an urban world which, for all the continuing force of custom and often strong sense of community, was increasingly populous, extensive and unknowable. Unlike the discourses studied to date, it was not the conceptually articulated and literate knowledge of the professional or specialist, but the refinement of a strongly oral and pragmatic everyday consciousness. While the comic realism of music-hall song gave close attention to the routinized conduct of popular life, it also traded in its recurrent perplexities. The participatory style of performance and its implications of knowingness offered audiences a test of their competence in negotiating these perplexities in a language of their own triumphant devising — "the quick, clever tact by which one vulgar mind places himself \emph{en rapport} with a number of other vulgar minds", as one witness put it.\(^{80}\) In this way, knowingness projected a sense of identity and membership as the \emph{earned} return on experience, which engaged more than a

\(^{79}\) George Orwell, "The Art of Donald McGill", in his \emph{Collected Essays}, 3 vols. (London, 1968), ii, pp. 161-2. Nonetheless, music-hall humour of this period continued to evince considerable class tension: see Rutherford, "Harless Nonsense", p. 149. It would be interesting to plot the later course of knowingness and other comic modes in registering class distance even as they were shared with a middle-class audience, testing Hoggart's claim that "the consensus of critical laughter is a great British tradition": Richard Hoggart, "The Future of Television", \emph{Guardian}, 13 Sept. 1982.

simple generic literacy or the recognition in common of a particular way of life. Its potency lay in its capacity both to universalize and select out a popular *cognoscenti* in a fluid and variously collective drama of self-affirmation that punctured official knowledges and preserved an independent popular voice. Thus music-hall engaged its public in a more complex set of meanings than that proposed in the compensation model — the relish in knowingness suggests strongly that this was a culture of competence more than a culture of consolation.

Yet however authentic the satisfaction for its initiates, it would be quite wrong to triumphalize knowingness. Readings of present-day popular culture have begun to employ the term as a measure of resistance to hegemonic values in the negotiation of a “creative consumerism” which, with due allowance for historical specificity, suggests considerable continuity in its operation as a popular resource.  

Yet the counter-discourse of music-hall knowingness was limited to the infraction rather than the negation of the dominant power relationships and, as its echo of official idioms demonstrated, it was compromised between challenge and collaboration.  

(At times it comes close to Gramsci’s disabling “common sense”.)  

Nor is it very encouraging to assess its operational or street value, once we move beyond the commercial canniness of Hazlitt’s cockney, for this could be as much a form of ignorance as of knowledge. By its very presumptions, knowingness disallowed precise instruction, while in the volatile exchanges across the footlights its reassurances could be instantly betrayed, its privileged status collapsed. None the less, its code may have been useful for combatting the more extensive surveillance of employers, policemen, schoolteachers and other officials. In politics, too, the corrosive glee of knowingness may have fuelled the radical populist cause in such confrontations as the Queen

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Caroline and Tichborne affairs. But its complicit tone could also turn its cutting edge inside out, as in its co-option by the mass press and other self-styled friends of the people, generating what Hoggart later labelled “scepticism without tension” and the evasion of real issues. Also significantly, from the end of the nineteenth century knowingness and its characteristic interpellations were recruited for the confident, unproblematic voice of modern advertising. Again, however, the point is not just to register further disappointment, but to understand more fully how such disregarded strands of popular discourse work — for and against the interests of their bearers — in the structuring of social action and consciousness.

Not that knowingness is an exclusive province of the popular, for high discourse has an informal or performance element that signifies competence beyond the formal demonstration of its particular knowledges. This refinement of mutual implication seeks to confer an extra gloss of distinction on specialist fractions in the dominant culture, and on bourgeois life in general. The appropriate manner here is one of cultured allusion, of what Pierre Bourdieu notes as “analogies endlessly pointing to other...”


85 Hoggart, Uses of Literacy, ch. 9; and on press “ventriloquism”, Hall, “Deconstructing ‘the Popular’”, p. 232. In keeping with his more wholesome values, Hoggart is informing but judgemental on the latter-day knowingness he observes flourishing — festering? — amid “the doggy communion of the bars”: Hoggart, Uses of Literacy, pp. 235-6. This does, however, suggest something of its specifically male properties. The ultimate pathology of knowingness is wincingly caught in the Monty Python sketch, “Nudge, Nudge, Wink, Wink”: Graham Chapman et al., Monty Python’s Flying Circus: Just the Words, 2 vols. (London, 1990), i, pp. 40-1.


87 One such strand that has received passing historical attention is “camp”, the argot of the homosexual subculture. Derived from parlary, the theatre and showbiz slang (see n. 51 above), camp has obvious affinities with knowingness, and its similarly ambiguous inflections heavily colour more recent comic wit. See Jeffery Weeks, Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800 (London, 1981), p. 111; Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”, in her Against Interpretation (New York, 1966), pp. 275-92. At present, however, pioneering work on popular discourse tends to privilege more formalized modes, notably melodrama.
analogies” which never have to justify themselves by any explicit reference to first principles. As we nod sagely together at the mention of another heavyweight cultural critic we acknowledge our own variant of this higher knowingness, while I exit stage left with no more than the merest suggestion of the comic singer’s knowing wink.

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Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, 1984), also notes a “knowing silence” as a particular bourgeois bluff employed in playing the culture game (pp. 43, 52-4, 89). Discussion of the present paper by North American audiences has been directed at national rather than class or gender variations, with suggestions that knowingness is absent from some modern cultures.