

## Chapter 1 : Sources and Links

*A new edition of the long out-of-print classic chronicle of the rise and fall of vaudeville in America, from the early minstrel shows and showboats to the emergence (and decline) of Broadway's Palace Theater as the Mecca of the entertainment industry.*

Etymology[ edit ] The origin of this term is obscure, but is often explained as being derived from the French expression *voix de ville* "voice of the city". A second speculation is that it comes from the 15th-century songs on satire by poet Olivier Basselin , "Vaux de Vire". Some, however, preferred the earlier term "variety" to what manager Tony Pastor called its "sissy and Frenchified" successor. Thus, vaudeville was marketed as "variety" well into the 20th century. The form gradually evolved from the concert saloon and variety hall into its mature form throughout the s and s. This more gentle form was known as "Polite Vaudeville". Certainly, variety theatre existed before in Europe and elsewhere. In the US, as early as the first decades of the 19th century, theatregoers could enjoy a performance consisting of Shakespeare plays, acrobatics, singing, dancing, and comedy. Vaudeville was characterized by traveling companies touring through cities and towns. In the s, the minstrel show , another type of variety performance, and "the first emanation of a pervasive and purely American mass culture", grew to enormous popularity and formed what Nick Tosches called "the heart of 19th-century show business". In the early s, impresario Tony Pastor, a circus ringmaster turned theatre manager, capitalized on middle class sensibilities and spending power when he began to feature "polite" variety programs in several of his New York City theatres. The bill illustrates the typical pattern of opening the show with a "dumb" act to allow patrons to find their seats, placing strong acts in second and penultimate positions, and leaving the weakest act for the end, to clear the house. As well, note that in this bill, as in many vaudeville shows, acts often associated with "lowbrow" or popular entertainment acrobats, a trained mule shared a stage with acts more usually regarded as "highbrow" or classical entertainment opera vocalists, classical musicians. They carry special scenery which is very artistic and their costumes are original and neat. Their voices are good and blend exceedingly well. The act goes big with the audience. Smith and Jenny St. This is her second week. On account of the very pretty picture that she makes she goes as strong as she did last week. The very best of them all. The greatest acrobatic act extant. He goes like a cyclone. It is a case of continuous laughter from his entrance to his exit. Keith took the next step, starting in Boston , where he built an empire of theatres and brought vaudeville to the US and Canada. Albee , adoptive grandfather of the Pulitzer Prize -winning playwright Edward Albee , managed the chain to its greatest success. They enabled a chain of allied vaudeville houses that remedied the chaos of the single-theatre booking system by contracting acts for regional and national tours. These could easily be lengthened from a few weeks to two years. Acts that violated this ethos e. In spite of such threats, performers routinely flouted this censorship, often to the delight of the very audience members whose sensibilities were supposedly endangered. He eventually instituted a set of guidelines to be an audience member at his show, and these were reinforced by the ushers working in the theatre. He went to extreme measures to maintain this level of modesty. Keith even went as far as posting warnings backstage such as this: Keith is in authority. If actors chose to ignore these orders or quit, they would get "a black mark" on their name and would never again be allowed to work on the Keith Circuit. Thus, actors learned to follow the instructions given them by B. Keith for fear of losing their careers forever. It incorporated in and brought together 45 vaudeville theatres in 36 cities throughout the US and Canada and a large interest in two vaudeville circuits. Another major circuit was that of Alexander Pantages. In his heyday, Pantages owned more than 30 vaudeville theatres and controlled, through management contracts, perhaps 60 more in both the US and Canada. At its height, vaudeville played across multiple strata of economic class and auditorium size. On the vaudeville circuit, it was said that if an act would succeed in Peoria, Illinois , it would work anywhere. The question "Will it play in Peoria? The three most common levels were the "small time" lower-paying contracts for more frequent performances in rougher, often converted theatres , the "medium time" moderate wages for two performances each day in purpose-built theatres , and the "big time" possible remuneration of several thousand dollars per week in large, urban theatres largely patronized by the middle

and upper-middle classes. As performers rose in renown and established regional and national followings, they worked their way into the less arduous working conditions and better pay of the big time. Featuring a bill stocked with inventive novelty acts, national celebrities, and acknowledged masters of vaudeville performance such as comedian and trick roper Will Rogers, the Palace provided what many vaudevillians considered the apotheosis of remarkable careers. A standard show bill would begin with a sketch, follow with a single individual male or female performer; next would be an alley oop or an acrobatic act; then another single, followed by yet another sketch such as a blackface comedy. The acts that followed these for the rest of the show would vary from musicals to jugglers to song-and-dance singles and end with a final extravaganza "either musical or drama" with the full company. These shows would feature such stars as ragtime and jazz pianist Eubie Blake, the famous and magical Harry Houdini, and child star Baby Rose Marie, adds Gilbert. Each entertainer would be on the road 42 weeks at a time while working a particular "Circuit" or an individual theatre chain of a major company. While the neighborhood character of vaudeville attendance had always promoted a tendency to tailor fare to specific audiences, mature vaudeville grew to feature houses and circuits specifically aimed at certain demographic groups. Black patrons, often segregated into the rear of the second gallery in white-oriented theatres, had their own smaller circuits, as did speakers of Italian and Yiddish. This foreign addition combined with comedy produced such acts as "minstrel shows of antebellum America" and Yiddish theatre. PBS adds that many of these ethnic families joined in on this entertainment business, and for them, this traveling lifestyle was simply a continuation of the adventures that brought them to America. Through these acts, they were able to assimilate themselves into their new home while also bringing bits of their own culture into this new world. Another slightly different aspect of Vaudeville was an increasing intrigue with the female figure. The previously mentioned ominous idea of "the blue envelopes" led to the phrase "blue" material, which described the provocative subject matter present in many Vaudeville acts of the time. But more than that, these historians think that Vaudeville marked a time in which the female body became its own "sexual spectacle" more than it ever had before. This sexual image began sprouting everywhere an American went: The more this image brought in the highest revenue, the more Vaudeville focused on acts involving women. Even acts that were as innocent as a sister act were higher sellers than a good brother act. It eventually came as a surprise to audience members when such beautiful women actually possessed talent in addition to their appealing looks. This element of surprise colored much of the reaction to the female entertainment of this time. It depicts a man in makeup portraying a black man who is pretending to be an Irishman dressed in a fine tuxedo. Making up a large portion of immigration to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, Irish Americans interacted with established Americans, with the Irish becoming subject to discrimination due to their ethnic physical and cultural characteristics. The ethnic stereotypes of Irish through their greenhorn depiction alluded to their newly arrived status as immigrant Americans, with the stereotype portrayed in avenues of entertainment. Already settled and being native English speakers, Irish Americans took hold of these advantages and began to assert their positions in the immigrant racial hierarchy based on skin tone and assimilation status, cementing job positions that were previously unavailable to them as recently arrived immigrants. The often hostile immigrant experience in their new country was now used for comic relief on the vaudeville stage, where stereotypes of different ethnic groups were perpetuated. New arrivals found their ethnic group status defined within the immigrant population and in their new country as a whole by the Irish on stage. Conflict between Irish and African Americans saw the promotion of black-face minstrelsy on the stage, purposefully used to place African Americans beneath the Irish in the racial and social urban hierarchy. As the Irish donned their ethnic costumes, groups such as the Chinese, Italians, Germans and Jews utilized ethnic caricatures to understand themselves as well as the Irish. The caricatures served as a method of understanding different groups and their societal positions within their cities. In addition to interpreting visual ethnic caricatures, the Irish American ideal of transitioning from the shanty [21] to the lace curtain [17] became a model of economic upward mobility for immigrant groups. Louis Post-Dispatch in April The continued growth of the lower-priced cinema in the early 1900s dealt the heaviest blow to vaudeville. Cinema was first regularly commercially presented in the US in vaudeville halls. Lured by greater salaries and less arduous working conditions, many performers and personalities, such as Al Jolson, W. In doing so, such

performers often exhausted in a few moments of screen time the novelty of an act that might have kept them on tour for several years. They left live performance before achieving the national celebrity of earlier vaudeville stars, and found fame in new venues. The line between live and filmed performances was blurred by the number of vaudeville entrepreneurs who made more or less successful forays into the movie business. For example, Alexander Pantages quickly realized the importance of motion pictures as a form of entertainment. He incorporated them in his shows as early as 1909. Later, he entered into partnership with the Famous Players-Lasky, a major Hollywood production company and an affiliate of Paramount Pictures. By the late 1920s, most vaudeville shows included a healthy selection of cinema. With the introduction of talking pictures in 1929, the burgeoning film studios removed what had remained the chief difference in favor of live theatrical performance: Historian John Kenrick wrote: Top vaudeville stars filmed their acts for one-time pay-offs, inadvertently helping to speed the death of vaudeville. After all, when "small time" theatres could offer "big time" performers on screen at a nickel a seat, who could ask audiences to pay higher amounts for less impressive live talent? The newly-formed RKO studios took over the famed Orpheum vaudeville circuit and swiftly turned it into a chain of full-time movie theatres. The half-century tradition of vaudeville was effectively wiped out within less than four years. Vaudeville also suffered due to the rise of broadcast radio following the greater availability of inexpensive receiver sets later in the decade. Even the hardiest in the vaudeville industry realized the form was in decline; the perceptive understood the condition to be terminal. The standardized film distribution and talking pictures of the 1930s confirmed the end of vaudeville. By 1935, the vast majority of formerly live theatres had been wired for sound, and none of the major studios were producing silent pictures. For a time, the most luxurious theatres continued to offer live entertainment, but most theatres were forced by the Great Depression to economize. Others argued that vaudeville had allowed its performances to become too familiar to its famously loyal, now seemingly fickle audiences. There was no abrupt end to vaudeville, though the form was clearly sagging by the late 1920s. Though talk of its resurrection was heard during the 1930s and later, the demise of the supporting apparatus of the circuits and the higher cost of live performance made any large-scale renewal of vaudeville unrealistic. Architecture[ edit ] The most striking examples of Gilded Age theatre architecture were commissioned by the big time vaudeville magnates and stood as monuments of their wealth and ambition. Examples of such architecture are the theatres built by impresario Alexander Pantages. Pantages often used architect B.

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