

Media Revolution on 14th Street: Immigration, Vaudeville and the Nascence of Electronic Media in New York City at the Turn of the 20th Century

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Abstract

The foundation of the entertainment industry came through the birth of vaudeville on 14th Street in New York City beginning in the 1880s. Created largely by immigrants and their children, vaudeville dominated show business in the United States during a five decade period from the 1880s to the 1930s. Through the integration of immigrant performers, entrepreneurs and cultural forms, vaudeville created a synthesis that was much needed during a time of mass immigration and cultural chaos. With the rapid evolution of electronic media during the 20 century – music publishing, sound recording, radio, motion pictures and television – vaudeville extended its multi-cultural influence by becoming the dominant model for a growing entertainment industry.

Key words

Vaudeville. Tin Pan Alley. Immigration.

One of the least explored of the many probes launched by Marshall McLuhan in his book *Understanding Media* is the notion of hybrid energy. In a chapter devoted entirely to this insight, McLuhan (1964, p. 48) observed that “The crossings or hybridizations of the media release great new force and energy as by fission or fusion”. For McLuhan, media include not only the electronic devices that immediately come to mind when we employ the term but all the varied ways – oral and literate as well as electronic – that human beings use to communicate. In an environment consisting of multiple ethnicities and multiple modes of communication, the media Geiger counter goes haywire and our senses are assaulted from all directions. The Petrie dish that we call Manhattan, an island of only 23 square miles in size, has historically been an environment where various cultures cling, clash and clang together, forming new and unexpected hybrids all the time. In my paper, I wish to launch a mini-probe of my own, one that explores the hybridization of immigrant culture in New York City at the turn of the 20th century through the

medium of vaudeville and its impact upon the rise of electronic media which were being born at precisely the same moment.

In probing the importance of this historic hybridization, I will be emphasizing three points:

Vaudeville, with its simple variety show format of short, disconnected, inoffensive, rapidly changing acts, was able to provide a medium flexible and open enough to synthesize the organizational abilities of immigrant entrepreneurs, the talents of performers of diverse ethnicities, and the scattered tastes of a large, disparate audience. Through the hybridization of aspects borrowed from Irish concert saloons, Yiddish and Italian theater, and other immigrant cultures, vaudeville provided a population, diverse in every way imaginable, with a common language, a common space, and a common culture;

A powerful meta-message that comes through very prominently in vaudeville is that of ethnic tolerance and mutual respect. While there was, to be sure, a great deal of ethnic stereotyping in the songs, skits and broad humor of vaudeville, in its totality vaudeville essentially exhibited a very effective and practical form of multi-culturalism at a time when it was most needed;

Vaudeville became, in the words of the historian Robert Snyder (2006, p. 406), “the foundation for modern American show business”. Coming when it did and where it did, vaudeville was able to successfully hybrid its basic format with the media revolution being born all around it in New York City. Music publishing, sound recording, radio, motion pictures and eventually television, all borrowed and benefitted immensely from the example that was vaudeville.

Vaudeville As Synthesis

In discussing my first point, vaudeville as a synthesis of divergent immigrant cultures, it is necessary to reflect for a moment on immigration in New York City at that point in time. In the forty year period between the years 1880 and 1920, 17 million of the more than 23 million who came to the US did so through the port of New York, most of these through the immigration facility at Ellis Island which first opened its doors on January 1, 1892. Beyond the challenges of adopting to a foreign land, immigration also required that these cultures, essentially oral in their traditions, orientation and outlook, integrate very rapidly into a city and a way of life that stood at the precipice of the electronic age. Whereas earlier immigrant groups gravitated mostly towards agricultural work, the immigrants who arrived during this four decade span – mostly East European Jews and Italian Catholics – largely remained in New York, taking up urban professions within an economy that was booming.

In the 1890s – peak years of immigration and vaudeville, 80% of the population in New York was either foreign born or the children of immigrants. Glaab and Brown (1967, p. 139) report that

in 1890, New York (including the still legally separate municipality of Brooklyn) contained more foreign born residents than any city in the world. The city had half as many Italians as Naples, as many Germans as Hamburg, twice as many Irish as Dublin, and two and half times the number of Jews in Warsaw.

The pace of the change rendered by mass immigration — even by today’s standards — is almost incomprehensible. Figures from the census, for example, reveal that less than 14,000 people born in Italy lived in New York City in 1880 but by 1890, just ten years later, that number had quadrupled and, by 1920, nearly 400,000 residents in New York City had been born in Italy (GRONEMAN; REIMERS, 1995, p. 584). Between 1880 and 1910 close to a million and a half Jews, mostly from Eastern Europe, immigrated to New York City so that by the first decade of the 20th century one out of four inhabitants of New York was Jewish (ANGEL; GUROCK, 1995, p. 620-622).

The various ethnic enclaves formed by immigrants soon produced neighborhood theaters, newspapers, dance halls, saloons, synagogues, churches, secular and religious festivals which preserved and extended old country traditions, while softening the trauma of immigration and upheaval. The cultural life of Irish working men, for example, found expression in numerous ways but among the most popular were rough and rowdy bars known as “concert saloons.” These concert saloons were particularly important for the development of vaudeville a few decades later for they provided a model to emulate even if that model was to be substantially reconfigured to appeal to a wider audience. Burrows and Wallace (1999, p. 1140) point out that the staples of the variety shows in Irish saloons

were its songs and comic sketches. Skits were often ribald and physical, geared to the male and working class audience. Performers set their topical gags and routines in the city’s saloons, sidewalks, and shipyards. The most popular bits were ethnically oriented, with performers mimicking New York’s diverse population...

By the end of the century, the immigration of Jews from Eastern and Central Europe contributed to the birth of a vibrant cultural life as well. In 1892, the Bowery witnessed the first productions of Yiddish theater in the United States. Nahma Sandrow (1995, p. 1282) writes that “a Yiddish theater district developed in Manhattan on and around the Bowery and later on 2nd Avenue [and that] by 1914 a typical season was marked by the residence of some 14 companies in the metropolitan area...” Burrows and Wallace (1999, p. 1138) add that

Yiddish melodrama provided glamorous diversion and emotional communion for tenement dwellers and a sense of empowerment for the political impotent: Ghetto audiences cheered historical spectacles of Jewish heroism, oohed and aahed at tableaux of ancient kings and prophets, shouted denunciation of villains, howled with laughter at tomfoolery and clownishness, demanded popular songs be repeated, and often kept performances running till midnight.

Another huge stream of immigration during this same period, Italian, also set up its own cultural institutions. Numerous Italian theaters and repertory companies sprang up in and around Little

Italy doing plays in Italian and in dialect, including European classics, translation of American plays, operas and a series of original productions. One prominent example comes in the work of Giovanni De Rosalia, a Sicilian actor who immigrated to New York in 1903, created a popular character called “Nofrio” and entertained Italian-American audiences with skits such as “Nofrio al Telefono” that poked fun at an immigrant trying to use a telephone for the first time.

The various ethnic forms of entertainment created by Irish, Jewish and Italian immigrants were an important training ground in performance and entrepreneurship that would eventually be translated for a wider audience as vaudeville. At the same time, this immigration – ethnically diverse, linguistically diverse, culturally diverse – necessitated the creation of a common ground where the promise of *e pluribus unum* could actually be realized. Without such a common ground to foster interaction and understanding, the result could easily have degenerated into tribalism and inter-ethnic conflict. Vaudeville, I wish to suggest, played a pivotal role in the creation of a *lingua franca* and, even more importantly, a *cultura franca* that helped in the integration of immigrants and their children into what was the most multi-ethnic island on the face of the earth.

Vaudeville As Tolerance

In turning to my second point, I wish to emphasize that vaudeville taught multi-culturalism not by

preaching it but by being it. Founded in 1881 by an Italian American who based his experiment upon the aforementioned Irish concert saloons he had performed in as a singer/songwriter, clown and acrobat. Antonio Pastor, better known as Tony Pastor, was born in 1837 in Greenwich Village, the son of an Italian immigrant barber and fruit vendor. His experience as a young man performing in Irish saloons allowed Pastor to acquire, in the words of Irish musician and historian Mick Moloney (2002, p. 30), “a prodigious repertoire of Irish songs”. But this vast repertoire of Irish songs absorbed by Pastor was less important than the example of the Irish saloons in which he performed for Pastor was destined to be more of an entrepreneur than a performer. “From 1865 to 1875,” writes historian Robert Snyder (2000, p. 17), “Pastor staged and starred in variety shows at 201 Bowery... [where] he cleaned up his acts somewhat so they would appeal to more than the traditional male saloon crowds”. His success in so doing encouraged Pastor that a lucrative market was awaiting a more refined form of variety show, one in which there would be no cursing, no sexual innuendo, and one where rowdy crowds would be carefully restrained. He re-christened variety as vaudeville, giving it a French and therefore a more refined connotation, that would be marketed to women as well as to men, and to the respectable middle class as well as to immigrants and the working class. It was clear from the very outset what Pastor was up to. Historians Burrows and Wallace (1999, p. 1145) note that

Pastor launched an ad campaign, aimed at wives, sisters, and sweethearts, announcing the birth of 'clean variety.' He barred liquor, banned prostitutes and sheared the entertainment itself of excessive vulgarity... Variety was associated with drink, sex, and the working class; 'vaudeville' had French associations and suggested respectability and 'class'.

Located within the same building that housed the Democratic Party at Tammany Hall and in the heart of an area already evolving as an entertainment hub, Pastor's selection of the corner of 14th Street and 3rd Avenue for the establishment of vaudeville does itself represent a media crossroads. A few blocks to the south and to the east were the immigrant neighborhoods which provided not only the template and talent for vaudeville but also many of the entrepreneurs who would cultivate it and make it thrive. From the area a few blocks to the north and to the west, Pastor's theater would draw on respectable members of the middle class, white, Anglo, Saxon and Protestant, who would have to rub elbows with various ethnicities, working class and foreign, and develop an appreciation for their talents, genius, and showmanship.

The importance of a variety show pitched to such a wide audience should not be underestimated. If it is true that we are socialized through interaction with others, it follows quite naturally that it makes a huge difference who those others are. If we are confined to ethnic enclaves bounded by language, custom, class and fear of the

outsider, the opportunities to interact positively with someone beyond those walls are very limited indeed. Vaudeville, by creating a multi-cultural other both on stage and in the audience, made it possible — not necessarily inevitable but possible — to integrate aspects of the other into one's own personality and outlook.

Vaudeville as The Foundation of American Show Business

The third and final point I wish to address in this probe is that the hybridization of vaudeville and immigration was central to a media revolution that formed the foundation of American show business. The tremendous success of Pastor's experiment on 14th Street convinced others to clean-up their own variety shows and re-package them as vaudeville. Then, with the rapid appearance of new media, fleet footed entrepreneurs found other ways to tie their fortunes to the expanding vaudeville bandwagon.

The first to arrive on the scene was music publishing. With sound recording in its infancy and broadcast radio yet to be born, songwriters and song publishers soon caught on that vaudeville was the most effective way of promoting their compositions and the lucrative sale of sheet music. Eager to connect with vaudeville, songwriters and music publishers set up shop either on 14th Street or nearby in order to be in close approximation to vaudeville. Known as Tin Pan Alley for the cacophony of dissonant sounds

produced by so many pianos banging out melodies in different rhythms, keys, and tempos, the industry poured out short, catchy tunes that audiences still emersed in orality could identify with and easily learn to sing along with.

This cross-fertilization of vaudeville with music publishing was a marriage made in heaven: music publishers and songwriters had a traveling stage from which to sell their wares and vaudeville had access to a music business dedicated to the production of catchy crowd pleasing tunes. An army of song pluggers – musicians who worked in saloons, restaurants, music shops and on the streets – were hired or bribed to promote the songs of a particular publisher or songwriter. Izzy Baline, for example, began his career as a song plugger for the Harry Von Tilzer music publishing company located on 28th Street. Baline had been born in Russia in 1888 and immigrated to the United States when his father, a cantor, fled the Cossacks in 1892. As a song plugger in a Chinatown restaurant, the young Izzy realized that the real money was not in plugging but in composition. In 1907, Izzy Baline changed his name to Irving Berlin and published his first song, *Marie from Sunny Italy* trying to cash in on his multi-ethnic audience. Berlin, however, is better remembered for such songs as *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (1911), *God Bless America* (1917), *There's No Business Like Show Business* (1946), and of course, *White Christmas* (1942).

With the arrival of broadcast radio in the 1920s, many performers who had cut their teeth in

vaudeville made the transition from stage to electronic frequency waves. Daniel Czitrom (1982, p. 83) notes that “variety shows, especially when hosted by comedians, became the first important style of network radio. Relying heavily on the vaudeville format, these shows remained very popular throughout the decade...”. As the Great Depression deepened and the fortunes of vaudeville were slammed particularly hard, there was a great migration of vaudevillians to radio “including leading comedians like Ed Wynn [Isaiah Edwin Leopold, the son of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe], Eddie Cantor [Edward Israel Iskowitz, the son of Russian Jews], Fred Allen [John Florence Sullivan], Burns [Naftaly Birnbaum, the son of Jewish immigrants from Romania] and Allen [Grace Ethel Cecile Rosalie Allen who began in vaudeville with her three sisters billed as ‘The Four Colleen’], Jack Benny [Benjamin Kubelsky, the son of Lithuanian and Polish Jews], Jack Pearl [Jack Perlman], and the Marx Brothers [Julius, Leonard and Adolph, the sons of French and German Jews]” (BARNOUW, 1990, p. 72).

Another new medium to hybrid with vaudeville was the motion pictures. Before the movies moved west, the embryo of a new entertainment medium not dominated by Edison but by Jewish immigrants was taking shape on 14th Street. The example of Adolph Zukor is particularly interesting. Zukor, who would go on to form Paramount Pictures, immigrated to the United States from a small village in Hungary in 1889 at

the age of sixteen. His initial success was not in motion pictures however, but as a furrier where he learned the importance of fashion and the fickledness of public taste. Fascinated by the nascence of motion pictures, Zukor opened an arcade on 14th Street in 1903 called Automatic Vaudeville which was filled with coin operated amusements including a row of very profitable kinetoscope machines. The phenomenal success of these kinetoscope machines at the Automatic Vaudeville arcade – Gabler (1988, p. 18) quotes more than \$100,000 in their first year of operation – encouraged Zukor to open his first theater in a vacant store adjacent to the 14th Street arcade. As he expanded, Zukor teamed up with an Irish-American vaudeville producer named William Brady. Both shared the opinion that the movies were going to be big and that with daring and good instincts they could cash in on it. They began by showing short travelogues in a railroad car which proved so successful that they were inspired to expand to other cities as well. The novelty of showing travelogues on a stationary train, however, quickly wore off and their business initiative crashed as suddenly as it had begun. Zukor, undeterred by this setback, bounced Brady from the business and was able to turn it around by adapting Tony Pastor’s vaudeville strategy to motion pictures, that is, by creating a medium that would attract the middle class as well as the working class. Neal Gabler (1988, p. 24) writes that Zukor

came to realize that the movies only seemed like novelties because they have been treated like novelties. He sensed that their potential was much greater...Permanence would come only by attracting the middle-class as well as the working-class audience, and one could attract the middle-class audience only by exhibiting longer and better films – by, in a sense, imitating the middle-class forms of the novel and legitimate theater.

In other words, Zukor was expanding the medium beyond a working class and immigrant audience biased towards orality in favor of one biased towards literate media. With the establishment of the talkies in the late 1920s and early 1930s, it soon became evident that a song interpolated within a Hollywood motion picture could enhance the film’s box office receipts, the sale of sheet music and records, and the listenership of the radio stations that played the tune. The motion picture studios, suddenly seeing the opportunity before them, bought out the backlogs of Tin Pan Alley for they appreciated the money making potential of song and dance within cinema.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, Jack Benny, Burns and Allen, Eddie Cantor and many others who had started out in vaudeville and then migrated to more lucrative careers on radio and in the movies, were taking up residence on TV. Milton Berle’s *Texaco Star Theater* was performed before a live audience and, like much of early television, had the shtick and the spontaneous interactive feel of vaudeville. His weekly antics earned him the title of “Mr. Television” and the pet name “Uncle Milty.”

But perhaps the most faithful translation of vaudeville into the living room was created by the stoic old Irishman Ed Sullivan. Week after week on Sunday night at 8 o'clock, *The Ed Sullivan Show* adhered religiously to the simple variety format of vaudeville: keep it clean, short, changing, and, above all, non-controversial. The vaudeville strategy – if you don't like this act, just wait a minute and you might like the next – held a diverse audience of families sharply divided by generation, region, religion, class and ethnicity glued to their seats for 23 years.

But television, it would seem, was vaudeville's last gasp. With the media revolution and the social upheavals of the 1960s, vaudeville's broad appeal and non-controversial approach to entertainment could no longer endure. America was done with corn and ready to confront controversy. Moreover, new forms of media appealed to a more personal and individualized audience that had little patience with variety and the likes of the other. Ed Sullivan tried for a while to adapt but the truth was that the really big shoe was over. Vaudeville was dead as a door nail but not before it had set the media revolution in motion and formed the face, taste and style of American entertainment.

4 Conclusion

The area around Union Square on 14th Street in New York City has long been the scene of social protest and political conflict. As early

as the 1860s, Irish immigrants gathered there to protest British imperialism and to rally for Irish nationhood. In the 1870s, there were mass protests of the unemployed and, in 1882, the first Labor Day demonstration was successfully organized and assembled. In the years preceding World War I, anarchists, Wobblies, and socialists staged their rallies at this intersection; in 1927, sullen crowds gathered in silent witness on the night of the Sacco and Vanzetti execution in Boston while soldiers with machine guns on rooftops kept a close watch on the street below. Throughout the 1930s, Communists, Socialists and labor unions regularly assembled to protest police brutality, to demonstrate their solidarity on May Day and to demand labor reforms that we take for granted today.

But the irony of the story is that the revolution which eventually came to 14th Street was not a political one but a media one. Created largely by immigrants and their children, vaudeville was able to synthesize ethnic diversity into a form of entertainment that taught tolerance through its inherent character as a multi-cultural medium designed for a multi-cultural audience. Certainly it wasn't a medium of social protest or of deep artistic merit, nor did the important reforms demanded on the streets and in the ethnic press achieve the slightest mention. In fact, vaudeville censored them. But vaudeville, in its own way, did something much greater and much more revolutionary. In a nation of nations, not of blood but of immigration, vaudeville created a

commonality. The medium is the message and the rub here is that diversity is not a problem but a land of opportunity for those willing to work with it and through it.

Vaudeville was tailor made to fit the chaotic communication environment created by mass migration. The Irish and Italians, Jews and Germans, Poles and Slavs, Russians, Greeks and others who immigrated to America during this period had nothing in common other than being strangers in a strange land that desperately needed their labor but really didn't want them here. They were not a folk and could never be a folk but a lingua franca and a cultura franca was needed to unite them less the diversity degenerate into unending tribal conflict. Vaudeville — simple, silly and flexible — allowed this diversity to share a medium both as performers and as an audience.

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La Revolución de los Medios de Comunicación en 14 Street: Inmigración, Vaudeville y el Nacimiento de los Medios de Comunicación Electrónicos en la Ciudad de Nueva York a Principios del Siglo XX

Resumen

La fundación de la industria del entretenimiento llegó a través del nacimiento del vaudeville en 14 Street, Nueva York, a principios de 1881. Creado principalmente por familias que emigraron a Nueva York, el vaudeville dominó la industria del entretenimiento hasta la década del 30. La importancia del vaudeville radica en que creó una síntesis cultural en una época de inmigración masiva. Al mismo tiempo, abrió un espacio cultural dentro del sistema norteamericano basado en ideas y perspectivas musicales, humorísticas y artísticas que no derivaban de la cultura inglesa sino de las culturas de otros países europeos, principalmente irlandesa, italiana y judía. Con la rápida evolución de la comunicación masiva durante el siglo XX – la publicación de la música popular, la grabación del sonido, la radio, el cine y la televisión –, el vaudeville extendió su influencia y su carácter multicultural, y llegó a ser el modelo principal de la industria del entretenimiento en los Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave

Vaudeville. Cultura popular. Inmigración.

Revolução midiática na Rua 14: Imigração, Vaudeville e o Nascimento das Mídias Eletrônicas na cidade de Nova York na virada do século XX

Resumo

O alicerce da indústria do entretenimento foi lançado pelo nascimento do vaudeville na Rua 14 na cidade de Nova York no início dos anos 1880. Criado, em grande medida, por imigrantes e seus filhos, o vaudeville dominou o show business nos Estados Unidos durante cinco décadas, dos anos 1880 aos anos 1930. Por meio da integração de artistas, empresários e formas culturais imigrantes, o vaudeville criou uma síntese que foi muito necessária em uma época de imigração em massa e caos cultural. Com a rápida evolução das mídias eletrônicas durante o século XX – publicação musical, gravação sonora, rádio, cinema e televisão – o vaudeville ampliou sua influência multicultural ao tornar-se o modelo dominante para uma indústria do entretenimento em expansão.

Palavras-chave

Vaudeville. Tin Pan Alley. Imigração.

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