Samuel E. Backer

The Informational Economy of Vaudeville and the Business of American Entertainment

In the early twentieth century, vaudeville was the most popular theatrical form in the United States. Operating before the rise of mechanically reproduced entertainment, its centralized booking offices moved tens of thousands of performers across hundreds of stages to an audience of millions. Designed to gather and analyze data about both audiences and performers, these offices created a complex informational economy that defined the genre—an internal market that sought to transform culture into a commodity. By reconstructing the concrete details of these business practices, it is possible to develop a new understanding of both the success of the vaudeville industry and its influence on the evolution of American mass culture.

Keywords: entertainment, vaudeville, mass culture, history of capitalism, theater, Hollywood

During the first decades of the twentieth century, vaudeville was the most popular theatrical form in the United States, bringing cheap, accessible, and respectable entertainment to an enormous national market.[1] Dominated by a handful of powerful syndicates, the tightly centralized industry compiled information about performers and customers, data that flowed from local theaters to corporate headquarters in

I want to thank Angus Burgin and François Furstenberg for their incisive analysis, careful reading, and supportive advice throughout the process of researching and writing this article. The guidance and suggestions of Walter Friedman—along with generous and clarifying feedback from two anonymous reviewers—greatly strengthened the piece over several drafts. Thanks to all of you. Finally, I wish to express my deep gratitude to the many members of the Atlantic History and Modern American History seminars—as well as a host of other colleagues at Johns Hopkins—for providing time, community, and attention that greatly benefited this work.

1 Charles Stein, ed., *American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries* (New York, 1984), xi; David Monod, *Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment* (Chapel Hill, 2020), 3.

Business History Review 95 (Autumn 2021): 423–446. doi:10.1017/S0007680521000489
 ISSN 0007-6805; 2044-768X (Web).

New York and Chicago, where it was sorted and analyzed before being returned to the public through decisions about booking.[2] A means to organize both business and culture across a far-flung network in the years before the rise of mechanically reproducible performance, this informational economy enabled a genre-defining process of negotiation between artists, managers, and audiences. Anchoring an analysis of vaudeville's social and aesthetic impact in the concrete details of the firms that created it not only expands our understanding of the form and its role in American culture; it also points towards the broader utility of the tools developed by business history for the examination of a wide array of entertainment industries.

In 1914, the Western Vaudeville Managers' Association (WVMA) published a promotional yearbook intended to serve as "a compendium of information" about the operations of vaudeville in the western, midwestern, and southwestern United States.[3] The organization, often referred to as a "syndicate" in the contemporary press, initially emerged as a booking partnership that united the interests of a handful of prominent theater owners.[4] Seventeen years later, it stood as a powerful middleman between traveling performers and local managers throughout the country. While owners of commercial amusements had long attempted to "give the people what they want," such associations developed an unprecedented set of tools with which to do so.[5] Using a sophisticated apparatus of on-the-ground reportage, historical pricing records, and finely honed managerial experience, the WVMA's Chicago offices gathered and analyzed real-time information from

2 A brief taxonomy of vaudeville organizations is useful here. I use "circuit" to refer to a series of theaters owned, booked, or managed together. A syndicate was a large (multi-firm) organization that united several circuits for the purposes of booking and management over a larger scale. Theatrical syndicates were usually organized around booking offices, corporations that remained technically—albeit not structurally or financially—distinct from the circuits and theaters that worked through them. While the individual theaters and circuits that comprised the major syndicates were ostensibly independent, many fell under the direct or indirect control of the most powerful companies within these broader organizations. Monod, *Vaudeville*, 166–67; Samuel K. Hodgdon Testimony, 5 Feb. 1919, RG 122, Records of the Federal Trade Commission, Docket Section, Docketed Case Files 1915–43 (hereafter FTC Records), docket 128, box 70, p. 511–512, National Archives at College Park, MD (hereafter NACP).

3 *Vaudeville Year Book, 1914*, Vaudeville Yearbook Co., n.d., TS 10.23.6.2, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

4 "A Vaudeville Combine," *Indianapolis Journal*, 26 Jan. 1900; *New York Clipper*, 24 June 1897.

5 "Jack Haverly," Chicago Times, 16 March, 1879, Haverly's United Mastodon Minstrels. Playbills, 1876–1893 and undated. Houghton Library, Harvard College Library. https://id.lib.harvard.edu/ead/d/264bbbae-94c0-4ee9-9380-e08598254bca/catalog. Accessed September 03, 2021.

hundreds of communities before booking artists into venues across a vast swathe of the continent in response.[6]

Vaudeville presented audiences with a fast-paced succession of individual performances, each of which typically lasted between fifteen and twenty-five minutes—an evening's bill could include anything from the short plays, popular songs, and snappy dance numbers that dominated most lineups to more unusual fare such as a Hebrew juggler-magician or carefully trained roosters promoted as "Chanticleer cyclists."[7] Not only did such acts, which typically toured independently, have to be successfully routed to theaters, but each week's lineup needed to be carefully balanced, gradually increasing in quality and excitement before climaxing in a satisfying headliner.[8] The WVMA—along with the United Booking Office (UBO), its East Coast counterpart—organized such performances at an enormous scale, ushering tens of thousands of vaudevillians between hundreds of stages to a daily audience of millions, creating and distributing bills with machine-like precision.[9] It was the largest entertainment system the world had ever seen, held together by railroad and telegraph and ordered by form and filing cabinet.[10]

In their search for mass popularity, vaudeville's syndicates attempted to provide "something for everyone," drawing together a heterogenous audience that crossed the lines of class, ethnicity, and gender.[11] Analysis of these efforts has typically followed two interlocking

6 "Vaudeville in Combine," *Oshkosh Northwestern*, 12 Oct. 1905; "Means Good Shows Here," *Palladium Item* (Wayne, Indiana), 27 Jan. 1907. Arthur Frank Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big Time and Its Performers* (New York, 2006), 151–69.

7 For a sense of the types of acts that tended to predominate in vaudeville, see the numerical breakdown of New Haven performances in Kathryn J. Oberdeck, *The Evangelist and the Impresario: Religion, Entertainment, and Cultural Politics in America, 1884–1914* (Baltimore, 1999), 341–49; "Kope the Komedy Klub Konjurer," n.d., box 2, folder 50, Emerson Vaudeville Collection, New York Public Library, New York; *The Sun* (Pittsburg, KS), 14 Mar. 1916.

8 For a discussion of the creation of a vaudeville bill, see John DiMeglio, *Vaudeville U.S.A.* (Bowling Green, KY, 1973), 29–37.

9 Exhibit 4, 77, FTC Records, docket 128, box 73, NACP; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, xvii.

10 As a loose point of comparison, as of 2019 the American movie industry sold approximately 3.4 million daily tickets, while the population size has roughly tripled in the intervening years. "700 Theaters Merged in Vaudeville Circuit," *New York Times*, 27 Jan. 1928, 14; "Domestic Movie Theatrical Market Summary 1995 to 2021," The Numbers, accessed 17 Apr. 2021, https://www.the-numbers.com/market/.

11 The same was not true for race. While not all vaudeville theaters were segregated, most were, with Black patrons frequently restricted to the upper balconies. Although Black performers provided vaudeville with many of its greatest talents, these artists were forced to work around (and often within) the ugly traditions of blackface minstrelsy—traditions actively embraced by many of the top white stars. Edward Albee, "Twenty Years of Vaudeville," in Stein, *American Vaudeville*, 214; Robert. W. Snyder, *Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York, 1989), 82–103. For the form's immigrant-heavy

paths: on the one hand, focusing on the power of the businessmen who owned the dominant syndicates, while on the other, exploring the boundary-pushing artistry of the performers who brought them to life.[12] The tension between these groups is understood as driving the creation of a distinctive vaudeville aesthetic, dispensing with plot and logic in favor of speed, novelty, and spectacle.[13] The WVMA yearbook points in another direction, however, drawing attention to the importance of the long-overlooked cohort of middle managers whose activity defined the functioning of this vast system.

The managers' association "has succeeded," explains the yearbook's anonymous author,

> by applying the soundest business principles to the amusement industry. The uninitiated attribute the growth and prosperity of W.V.M.A playhouses solely to the supreme quality of bookings. But there are other elements—plain, hard business reasons—at the root of the W.V.M.A success. . . . It has the men whose experience and acumen make theater-conducting a business of highest profits. They have grown up with the business, they have shouldered the grinding, uphill tasks that have resulted in established success for American Vaudeville. . . . [T]hey have ideas, but not theories; their judgement stands the test.[14]

The workings of the association were not art, beholden to the vagaries of subjective assessment, but science, constructed with precision and control. "Their judgement secures smoothness of operation and that shading of contrast which makes every spectator an 'enthusiastic

audiences, such racialized performances helped to support their still-developing relationship to American Whiteness. M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill, 1999), 23–54; Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 42–81; David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York, 1993), 19–62; Michael Rogin, *Blackface White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, 1998), 3–70. On the groundbreaking artistry of these Black performers, see Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham, 2006); David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895–1910* (New York, 1997).

12 For examples of the first approach, see Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Marketing of Amusement, 1895–1915* (London, 2004), 21–82; and Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*. For examples of the second, see Kibler, *Rank Ladies*; and Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*.

13 Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York, 1994), 62–63; Albert F. McLean, *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington, KY, 1965), 91–105; Monod, *Vaudeville*, esp. 119–47; Nicholas Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies: Popular Musicians and Mass Entertainment in American Culture, 1870–1920* (Chicago, 2017).

14 *Vaudeville Yearbook*, 9.

booster' for the week's bill. . . . Once an act is booked over W.V.M.A. time, it is a stable business quantity."[15]

During this period, vaudeville's magnates embraced a narrative of top-down control for reasons of both ego and economy.[16] Operating in a genre that had long hovered on the boundary of respectability, these businessmen found it useful to portray themselves to the broader public as discipline-minded reformers involved in every detail of their theaters' operations.[17] In the face of this, the attention that the yearbook lavishes on the knowledge and skill of the employees who staffed the vaudeville booking offices reflects the importance of the work occurring in such spaces. It was not simply that the industry was too vast to be effectively overseen by a limited group of executives. Rather, the organizational forms that they had established were intended to distribute decision making throughout the managerial hierarchy.[18]

Hubs of data creation and exchange organized around up-to-date principles of corporate management, booking offices were designed to meet the intense demands of a nationalizing entertainment industry.[19] Vaudeville's adoption of a rationalized office bureaucracy placed it on the leading edge of a broader set of developments remaking business in this period, setting it apart from the approaches adopted by contemporary entertainment forms. While centralized booking and management offices also existed for circuses, lyceum agencies, Chautauquas, and the "legitimate theater," the sheer number of independent acts employed by the major vaudeville syndicates required the development

15 *Vaudeville Yearbook*, 11.

16 Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville*, 43–63.

17 Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 81–84; Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 23–33.

18 Discussing the system, manager Daniel Hennessey argued that it was capable of functioning without a single individual making decisions for the whole. "There is not," he explained, "anyone in absolute charge of the booking aside from the fact that the managers have the right to reject anything that might be booked for them." Daniel K. Hennessey Testimony, 27 March, 1919, FTC Records, docket 128, box 72, p. 914, NACP.

19 Timothy D. Connors, "American Vaudeville Managers: Their Influence and Organization" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1981). Marlis Schweitzer discusses the importance of new office technology to theatrical management in *Transatlantic Broadway: The Infrastructural Politics of Global Performance* (London, 2015). On the meaning of office layout as "part of a larger process of social construction," see Oliver Zunz, *Making America Corporate, 1870–1920* (Chicago, 1990), 104–24. Regarding the specific technologies of offices in this period, I rely on two essays by JoAnne Yates—"Business Use of Information and Technology during the Industrial Age," in *A Nation Transformed by Information: How Information Has Shaped the United States from Colonial Times to the Present*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler and James W. Cortada (New York, 2000), 107–137; and "Evolving Information Use in Firms, 1850–1920: Ideology and Information Techniques and Technologies," in *Information Acumen: The Understanding and Use of Knowledge in Modern Business* (London, 1994), 26–50—as well as Richard K. Popp, "Information, Industrialization, and the Business of Press Clippings, 1880–1925," *Journal of American History* 101, no. 2 (2014): 427–53; and Ken Liparto, "Mediating Reputation: Credit Reporting Systems in American History," *Business History Review* 87, no. 4 (2013): 655–77.

of a particularly flexible system built to enable the flow of information.[20]

In part a means of circulating performers while ensuring quality and respectability, and tactically a tool for depressing salaries and reducing competition, vaudeville's booking system came to play a far broader role.[21] By gathering and storing data about artists in order to facilitate assessments of their value, these offices created an internal marketplace that shifted authority away from managerial preference and toward the constantly evolving tastes of the industry's customers. Built to register and collate the opinions of both audiences and bookers, they mediated a back-and-forth conversation between centralized authority and local desires.[22] By closely examining the structure of the informational economy at the heart of vaudeville, it is possible to develop a new understanding of how—and why—the form was able to exert such a pronounced influence on American society during the early twentieth century.

Sustained scholarly interest in vaudeville first emerged during the 1980s, as a generation of social and labor historians began to examine questions of working-class culture.[23] These early studies described the genre as a commercial form breaching the previously insular world of immigrant community.[24] The late 1990s and early 2000s saw research into the discourses and contexts that structured vaudeville performance, with influential accounts exploring how artists' displays of gender, sexuality, and race undercut the sanitized rhetoric of the syndicate owners.[25] More recent work has begun to expand our understanding of

20 On booking in lyceums, see Joe Kember, "The Lecture-Brokers: The Role of Impresarios and Agencies in the Global Anglophone Circuit for Lantern Lecturing, 1850–1920," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 17, no. 3–4 (2019): 279–303; and Angela G. Ray, *The Lyceum and Public Culture in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Ann Arbor, 2005). On Circuit Chautauquas, see Charlotte M. Canning, *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance* (Iowa City, 2005), esp. 1–20. The best text on the business of circuses remains Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill, 2002). On the legitimate theater, see Schweitzer, *Transatlantic Broadway*, esp. 69–102.

21 Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 95–100; "Vaudeville Trust a Reality," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 July 1897.

22 Snyder, *Voice of the City*, xv.

23 Only a handful of earlier works attempt to examine vaudeville as a general phenomenon. The most important are McLean, *American Vaudeville as Ritual*, and DiMeglio, *Vaudeville U.S.A.*

24 See Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (New York, 1983), 171–221; Snyder, *Voice of the City*; and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-Of-The-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1987), 142–45.

25 Kibler, *Rank Ladies*; Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville*; Oberdeck, *Evangelist*; Chude-Sokei, *Last "Darky"*; Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*.

the business history of the form.[26] The crucial role that centralized management played in the evolution of vaudeville from a set of scattered theaters into a fully fledged "corporate entertainment industry" is a common thread among all of this literature.[27] However, despite gesturing toward the importance of the topic, historians have yet to examine the broader implications of the business practices used to structure the genre.

This historiographical oversight reflects a gap in research on entertainment in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Decades of work has argued convincingly for the central importance of the era's burgeoning forms of commercial performance.[28] During the 1870s, '80s, and '90s, theaters and concert halls served as vital anchors for the emergence of female-oriented spaces of consumption in American cities.[29] Expanding alongside department stores, they embodied new forms of public respectability that paved the way for the mass middle class of the twentieth century.[30] During the same years, traveling shows were early and efficient adopters of pictorial

26 Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990* (New York, 2000), 95–121; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*; Michelle R. Scott, "These Ladies Do Business with a Capital B: The Griffin Sisters as Black Businesswomen in Early Vaudeville," *Journal of African American History* 101, no. 4 (2016): 469–503; Alan Gevinson, "The Origins of Vaudeville: Aesthetic Power, Disquietude, and Cosmopolitanism in the Quest for an American Music Hall (Pt. 1)" (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2007); Gillian M. Rodger, *Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 2010); Monod, *Vaudeville*.

27 Snyder, *Voice of the City*, 105.

28 This extensive literature includes Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture* (Chicago, 1984); William R. Taylor, ed., *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World* (Baltimore, 1991); Nasaw, *Going Out*; Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Joel Dinnerstein, *Swingin' the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars* (Boston, 2003); Jayne Brown, *Babylon Girls*: *Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, 2008); David Gilbert, *The Product of Our Souls: Ragtime, Race, and the Birth of the Manhattan Musical Marketplace* (Chapel Hill, 2015); Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audio-Politics of a World Musical Revolution* (New York, 2015); Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the '20s* (New York, 1996).

29 Butsch, *American Audiences*, 66–80; Marlis Schweitzer, *When Broadway Was the Runway: Theater, Fashion, and American Culture* (Philadelphia, 2009); Michael Newberry, "Polite Gaiety: Cultural Hierarchy and Musical Comedy, 1893–1904," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 4, no. 4 (2005): 381–407; David LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830* (Bowling Green, KY, 2006), 73–176; William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1993).

30 Linda L. Tyler, "'Commerce and Poetry Hand in Hand': Music in American Department Stores, 1880–1930," *Journal of the Musicological Society* 45, no. 1 (1992): 75–120; Butsch, *American Audiences*, 66–139; Schweitzer, *Broadway*, 12–95; Holly George, *Show Town: Theater and Culture in the Pacific Northwest* (Norman, OK, 2016); Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 86–168.

promotion and brand identity, helping to set the terms for the more general expansion of advertising.[31] Dancehalls, theaters, and amusement parks became emblematic of the fast-paced, consumption-centered lifestyle of the progressive city.[32] Inclusive, cheap, and cross-class, such spaces played a crucial role in the commercial unification of a widely dispersed and heterogenous population during the early decades of the century.[33]

Despite successfully establishing the influence of these cultural forms, relatively few scholars have explored how the businesses that produced them worked.[34] As a result, we still lack an accurate grasp of the dynamics—the interactions between profit motive, corporate organization, technological possibility, aesthetic invention, and social structure—that shaped the development of mass entertainment in the United States. This oversight is particularly striking given the rise in recent years of the "new history of capitalism," a subdiscipline that has sought to return attention to the structures and cultures of economic life.[35] Although the fusion of social analysis and business history that

31 This dynamic is epitomized by the rise and fall of the patent medicine empires of the 1890s, another important topic that has yet to receive adequate attention. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York, 1994); Ann Anderson, *Snake Oil, Hustlers and Hambones: The American Medicine Show* (New York, 2000); Pamela Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore, 2001).

32 Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 88–139; Ashby, *With Amusement for All*, 132–42.

33 Nasaw, *Going Out*; Randy D. McBee, *Dancehall Days: Intimacy and Leisure among Working-Class Immigrants in the United States* (New York, 2000); McLean, *American Vaudeville as Ritual*.

34 Notable exceptions include Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage, 1800–1914* (New York, 2000); Rodger, *Champagne Charlie*; Rachel Lockwood Miller, "Capital Entertainment: Stage Work and the Origins of the Creative Economy, 1843–1912" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2018); David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); and Michael Schwartz, *Broadway and Corporate Capitalism: The Rise of the Professional-Managerial Class, 1900–1920* (New York, 2009). More work on the concrete activities of the entertainment industry is available for both earlier and later periods, including Thomas Bogar, *Thomas Hamblin and the Bowery Theatre: The New York Reign of "Blood and Thunder" Melodrama* (New York, 2017); and Laurence Senelick, *The Age and Stage of George L. Fox, 1825–1877* (Iowa City, 1999). Hollywood has its own extensive bibliography; see, for example, Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York, 1988); Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London, 2005); and Ronny Regev, *Working in Hollywood: How The Studio System Turned Creativity into Labor* (Chapel Hill, 2018).

35 This approach is (or at least ought to be) a double move, reshaping our idea of the economy by exploring, as Rosanne Currarino puts it, "the economic as an endogenous force" that functions within rather than beyond human society. Currarino, "Toward a History of Cultural Economy," *Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 4 (2012): 565. See also Nan Enstad, "The 'Sonorous Summons' of the New History of Capitalism, Or, What Are We Talking about When We Talk about Economy?," *Modern American History* 2, no. 1 (2019): 83–95; Seth Rockman, "What Makes the History of Capitalism Newsworthy?," *Journal of the Early Republic* 34, no. 3 (2014): 439–66; Seth Rockman and Sven Beckert, "Introduction," in *Slav-*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007680521000489 Published online by Cambridge University Press

drives much of the work associated with this turn has reshaped scholarship on a number of subjects, the study of entertainment has, for the most part, remained exempt.[36]

But if the economy and culture are genuinely understood as interdependent objects of analysis, then culture must have an economy just as much as economy has a culture.[37] In fact, closely examining the business of entertainment offers scholars the chance to anchor difficult questions of continuity and change in the granular details of practice and profit. Such research foregrounds the ways in which the products of this industry acted simultaneously as marketable goods and semiotically dense expressive forms, calling attention to the intricate processes of commoditization that enabled their creation and sale.[38] In doing so, this approach necessarily demands attentiveness to the longue durée dynamics, shifting performance structures, and intergenre interactions central to the evolution of American entertainment.[39]

Vaudeville first developed out of "variety," an older and less reputable form that thrived in the wake of the Civil War.[40] During the 1870s and '80s, enterprising managers and theater owners began to reshape the genre's cultural associations, gesturing toward middle-class respectability in an attempt to broaden its potential audience.[41] Buoyed by the success of these efforts, entrepreneurs expanded from individual houses to regional circuits, establishing booking offices to better satisfy their need for a continual stream of performers.[42] Using the leverage

ery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development, ed. Beckert and Rockman (Philadelphia, 2016), 1–29.

36 The list of innovative works within the history of capitalism is far too extensive to be recounted here. For scholarship more specifically focused on using related approaches to explore the history of entertainment, see Suisman, *Selling Sounds*; Alex Sayf Cummings, *Democracy of Sound: Music Piracy and the Remaking of American Copyright in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2013); Timothy Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* (Chicago, 2012); Regev, *Working in Hollywood*; and Davis, *Economics of the British Stage*.

37 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York, 1977), esp. 61–62.

38 Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, U.K., 1988); Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York, 1982), 72–87; Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 1–17.

39 This is particularly important given both the limits of and the myriad interconnections between specific genres and industries. See, for example, Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill, 2000); and Kyle Barnett, *Record Cultures: The Transformation of the U.S. Recording Industry* (Ann Arbor, 2020).

40 Gender was the key to this class orientation. While variety featured a wide array of performance styles, it was best known for the sexualized female singers and dancers who attracted its primarily working-class male audiences. Butsch, *American Audiences*, 95–107; Rodger, *Champagne Charlie*, esp. 149–57.

41 Armond Fields, *Tony Pastor: The Father of Vaudeville* (New York, 2007); Butsch, *American Audiences*, 108–20; Snyder, *Voice of the City*, 17–21.

42 These circuits were often formed not in major markets like New York or Philadelphia but in smaller, more peripheral areas that relied on the promise of a series of bookings to attract

Figure 1. The Chicago booking offices of the WVMA. (Source: *Vaudeville Yearbook, 1914*, TS 10.23.6.2, Houghton Library, Harvard University.)

provided by the ability to connect artists and playhouses, managers such as New England's B. F. Keith and the Chicago-based Kohl & Castle started to exert influence over the broader industry. By the early twentieth century, impresarios such as Keith, who increasingly ruled the eastern UBO, and Martin Beck, who led both the Pacific Coast Orpheum chain and the WVMA, dominated the genre, unifying scores of formerly independent circuits through their control over booking.[43]

From this imposing position, the businessmen at the head of these syndicates profited both from the theaters they owned directly and from the fees, information, and preferential treatment they wrung

talent. Alfred L. Bernheim, *The Business of the Theatre: An Economic History of the American Theatre, 1750–1932* (New York, 1964), 33–45; "A Vaudeville Circuit," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 July 1897; "Thirteen Theatres," *Morning News* (Wilmington, DE), 23 Mar. 1888; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 58–62; Miller, "Capital Entertainment," 165–171.

43 While both men directly owned limited chains of their own theaters, their true power emerged from their leadership within these regional systems. Kathryn J. Oberdeck, "Contested Cultures of American Refinement: Theatrical Manager Sylvester Poli, His Audiences, and the Vaudeville Industry, 1890–1920," *Radical History Review* 1996, no. 66 (1996): 67–75; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 117–21; Alfred L. Bernheim "The Facts of Vaudeville," in Stein, *American Vaudeville*, 124–30; "Majestic List Partly Ready," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 5 September, 1906; untitled, *Jackson (MI) Daily News*, 7 Nov 1909; Anthony Slide, "Kohl and Castle," in *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Jackson, FL, 2004); "Colonial to Add a Vaudeville Act," *Daily Gate City* (Keokuk, IA), 8 May 1910.

from supposedly independent booking offices.[44] Within a system virtually defined by conflicts of interest, rents were extracted from a bewildering array of interactions. Vaudeville performers were charged a fee by their agents for obtaining them bookings (agents would frequently be asked to pay part of this fee to the syndicate) and another fee by the agencies for being booked.[45] Theaters likewise paid the syndicate for the right to contract with performers through their offices.[46] If artists or theater owners balked at this, or otherwise attempted to go against the business interests ruling this system, they would quickly find themselves on the infamous "blacklist," cut off from further bookings.[47] Over the years, this powerful weapon was used against upstart managers attempting to open theaters that challenged syndicate territory and performers fighting to unionize for better pay and working conditions. Ultimately, it landed syndicate officials before the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for an investigation into their potentially monopolistic restraint of trade—a series of hearings that produced an invaluable record of the internal workings of the vaudeville system.[48]

Regardless of whether an artist worked through the eastern (UBO) or western (WVMA) syndicate, the process of booking was essentially the same. Unless they were either foolish or particularly desperate, performers would begin their journey onto the vaudeville stage by obtaining the services of an agent.[49] It was possible to contact either theater owners or their booking representatives directly, but the chances for success

44 Robert Grau, *Businessman in the Amusement World* (New York, 1910), 1; Oberdeck, "Contested Cultures," 60–65; Snyder, *Voice of the City*, 33–35, 64–81; "Vaudeville Alliance a Fact," *Chicago Tribune*, 24 May 1900; *New York Clipper*, 24 June 1897; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 170–71.

45 Taken as a whole, performers frequently paid 10 percent or more of their salaries back to the companies they worked for. As a bemused lawyer for the Federal Trade Commission explained, "the employee employs the employer to get the employer to employ the employee." Pat Casey Testimony, 3 February 1919, FTC Records, docket 128, box 72, p. 182, NACP.

46 Henry D. Wallen Testimony, 14 March 2019, FTC Records, docket 128, box 72, p. 835, NACP.

47 Kerry Segrave, *Actors Organize: A History of Union Formation Efforts in America, 1880–1919,* (London, 2008); Sean P. Holmes, *Weavers of Dreams Unite! Actors' Unionism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago, 2013); Edward Fay Testimony, 9 February, 1919, FTC Records, docket 128, box 72, p. 633, NACP.

48 This investigation was instigated by White Rats, an unsuccessful vaudeville union. For further details about the trade commission lawsuit, see Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 233–36. On the precise accusations made against the syndicate owners, see "Brief of the Attorneys of the Federal Trade Commission," 25 Sept. 1914, FTC Records, docket 128, box 71, NACP.

49 Despite ostensibly working on behalf of artists, these agents were widely understood to be on the side of (and indeed, indirectly employed by) the syndicates. Required to obtain a "franchise" to book through the major offices, most agents relied on their continued connection to the syndicates for their livelihood. Limiting the number of available franchises allowed the syndicates to control these agents, many of whom gradually developed small firms representing numerous performers. Casey Testimony, 88–89; Harry Weber Testimony, 27 March 1919, FTC Records, docket 128, box 72, p. 1067–1070, NACP; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 158.

with this method were limited. Poorly connected artists crowded the exterior waiting rooms of the booking agencies, desperately passing their cards to the office boys who worked the front desk, begging for time to make their case.[50] Agents, armed with long-standing industry connections and close personal relationships to booking managers, were a far surer path and represented a significant majority of all acts employed by the primary vaudeville organizations.[51]

The interconnected East and West Coast syndicates maintained bureaus in the "principal cities" of the theater industry: Boston, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco.[52] Of these, Chicago and New York had the largest, extensive, multi-floor offices that brought together the activity of numerous semi-independent circuits.[53] Over time, however, Chicago ceded its position to Manhattan, with the Orpheum and Keith offices completing an in-all-but-name fusion that finalized East Coast dominance in 1913.[54] Despite this change, the offices themselves seem to have undergone remarkably little modification over their years of operation, with the basic mechanics of the business established in 1900 maintained for decades. "Hardly a piece of paper has changed since the office was opened," explained UBO booking official Daniel Hennessey in 1919. "The same forms and system [are used] exactly. The only difference is in the method of filing."[55]

Arranged "like a banking house," the booking floor was made up of a series of desks or small rooms, each manned by a booking representative for a theater or circuit of theaters whose task was to put together diverse, balanced bills for their venues.[56] While in early years, many local owners either came in themselves or sent direct representatives, over time the professional staff of the booking agency took over much of this work, blurring the line between the interests of the syndicate and the supposedly independent circuits and theaters that comprised it.[57] Throughout the day, the office was a buzz of information; actors lined up along the outer grillwork, attempting to contact those inside, while elite agents

50 Hennessey Testimony, 984–85.

51 Casey Testimony, 88–89; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 158.

52 The WVMA also seems to have opened short-lived "branch offices" in a handful of geographically important towns and cities. Casey Testimony, 46; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 1 Jan. 1911; "To Open Branch Booking Office," *Topeka Daily Capital*, 13 Nov. 1908.

53 "Complete Organization Commencing," *Variety*, 7 Oct. 1910; Casey Testimony, 173.

54 "To Retire From Active Management" *The Chat* (Brooklyn, NY), 2 May 1912.

55 Hennessey Testimony, 909.

56 Hodgdon Testimony, 522–523.

57 The terminology of the booking office is often confusing. For the sake of clarity, I use "artist's agent" to refer to the performer's representative and "booking representative" or "booking manager" to indicate someone working for a circuit, theater, or the booking agency and attempting to procure talent for theaters. Hodgdon Testimony, 520.

connected to the syndicates walked directly onto the floor to negotiate with booking representatives or office managers.[58] Meanwhile, these booking representatives kept up their own conversations—they "visited each other at their desks," trading news and working to pull together the acts they needed for future bills.[59] Skilled white-collar workers, bookers were responsible for a set territory encompassing a number of theaters. Each was supported by a staff of lower-level employees who would handle correspondence and deal with individual houses.[60]

Once a booking representative and an artist's agent agreed on the terms of date and price, the representative made out a "booking slip" stating the terms of the deal. This slip was then taken to a "time clock and stamped," locking in the details and preventing any other manager from attempting to steal the slot or double-book the performer.[61] Once on the books, the agreement was filed away, and a clerical manager with power of attorney for the theater drew up the contracts. After being signed by the artist, these contracts—designed by the agency and standard across their bookings—were printed in triplicate.[62] One went to the theater, one went to the artist, and one remained on hand to serve as a record.

These offices offered artists' agents and booking managers a number of crucial informational resources. In addition to maintaining the association's books, which revealed the pay records and touring schedules of every performer who contracted through the firm, the offices also held a vast collection of manager's reports, sent from theaters affiliated with the syndicate and containing detailed reviews of almost every vaudeville act in the country.[63] Filled out by local managers employed by theater owners on the Monday of every week, these reviews carefully noted performers' behavior as well as the style and quality of their acts, while also tallying audience response and providing an overall judgment of the balance of the show and its fit with local expectations.[64]

Between the contracts and the reports, offices provided the tools necessary for the complex system that determined an artist's salary. Unlike performers in plays or revues, whose individual talents, no matter how noteworthy, were ultimately subsumed within the artistic

58 Casey Testimony, 88–89; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 158–61.
59 Hodgdon Testimony, 523.
60 Hodgdon Testimony, 520.
61 Hodgdon Testimony, 524.
62 Hennessey Testimony, 920.
63 Hodgdon Testimony, 536; "Mecca of the Two-a-Day," *New-York Tribune*, 16 Feb. 1913.
64 While press accounts suggest that this form of reportage was widespread, the only extant managers' reports come from theaters owned by B. F. Keith. For a description of these reports, and the unlikely story of their survival, see M. Alison Kibler, "The Keith/Albee Collection: The Vaudeville Industry, 1894–1935," *Books at Iowa*, no. 56 (1992): 7–24.

impact of the broader production, every vaudeville act not only stood alone but would be quickly replaced by another.[65] As a result, the logic of the system forced all of those operating within it towards a constant, commodifying process of comparison, with the cash value (per week) of an act serving as a stand-in for a far broader set of aesthetic and commercial concerns.

Within this system, the payment received by performers had a remarkable level of inertia. Rather than rising or falling with demand, it moved in a clear, step-by-step motion.[66] A $300 a week act was a $300 a week act, and unless something happened to render it either significantly more or less successful, it would stay that way.[67] Sudden changes in salary could occur when performers moved between circuits, playing a substantively different sized town or theater, but when they returned to the previous setting, their payment would typically resume without pause.[68] The same was not true, however, when considering variations in price within the same class of theater. Once an act had been given a raise by the booking agency, its essential identity changed. Formerly a $300 act, it was now (for instance) a $400 act and in the future would unwaveringly demand as much for its standard price.

This tendency toward price stability was accentuated by the expansive schedules that the vast size of the syndicates made possible.[69] Centralizing the once-scattered activities of arranging a tour within the confines of single space, the booking offices also compressed it within time. Successful vaudeville performers could receive bookings for dozens of consecutive weeks, all of which were drawn up and signed simultaneously. With a handful of representatives responsible for most or all of these theaters, what legally comprised dozens of individual contracts was actually conducted as a single negotiation, further pushing prices toward standardization across performances. Although this system of pricing may have been created by the practical requirements of the booking system, over time it came to assume a more complex

65 Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts*, 73–75.

66 Although Wertheim claims that "salaries often depended on supply and demand," evidence points against this being true in the immediate sense he describes (rather than, for instance, rising demand for vaudeville pushing up the salaries of stars over a period of years). Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 160.

67 Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 171–172.

68 For example, see the Madden and Fitzpatrick booking records, 22 May 1919, Exhibit 104, FTC Records, docket 128, box 72, NACP; and Beatrice Morgan and Company Contracts, Beatrice Burton Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library; Hennessey Testimony, 931.

69 Marian Spitzer, "The Mechanics of Vaudeville," in Stein, *American Vaudeville*, 167–69.

meaning, serving as a powerful tool for organizing and storing information about the cultural value of a performance.[70]

The importance of the information contained within an act's price can be seen in the steps taken to ensure that these prices could not be manipulated. Booking agencies feared such manipulation to the point that they suspected potential collusion between artists and theater managers to artificially raise a performer's salary, just to get this new price on the books and therefore in circulation among other theaters.[71] In order to prevent such occurrences, prior to drawing up contracts, the price that the artist's agent and the booking representative had agreed upon was checked by a clerical worker against the act's previous salary. If it was substantially higher, the contract was returned to the booking agent for explanation.[72] That such a system was necessary at all is remarkable; it reflects the extent to which the entirety of the booking acumen of the central offices was contained within this data point. If successfully manipulated, it would not be merely a one-time scam but a long-term coup, with the new valuation disseminated and validated by the functioning of the system.

While artists, through their agents, proposed their desired salaries, the actual decisions about what they would be paid were made at meetings held by the booking managers who represented the various theaters and circuits comprising the syndicate. Armed with the ability to check past contracts, as well as to read several years of performance reviews and draw on their own firsthand experience of the artists in question, these managers gathered multiple times a week to set collective prices for the performers who were to play their houses.[73] While Hennessey, attempting to forestall accusations of monopolistic activity while testifying before the FTC in 1919, claimed that each manager would choose his own price, his descriptions of the meetings reflect the distinctly noncompetitive dynamics at play: "There is a certain act, for instance, conceded by everyone to be of a certain value. It gets so much. . . . That is agreed upon."[74] Pushing further, the examiner wondered whether the managers "try to come to some understanding as to what the values of the acts are, at this meeting?" "Yes," replied Hennessey, "what they

70 In recent years, a literature has developed to explore the feedback loops between informational systems and the processes they describe. See, for example, Daniel Bouk, *How Our Days Became Numbered: Risk and the Rise of the Statistical Individual* (Chicago, 2018); Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, MA, 2008); and Josh Lauer, *Creditworthy: A History of Consumer Surveillance and Financial Identity in America* (New York, 2017).

71 Hennessey Testimony, 930.

72 Hennessey Testimony, 928–29.

73 Hennessey Testimony, 924.

74 Hennessey Testimony, 922.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007680521000489 Published online by Cambridge University Press

should get."[75] Samuel K. Hodgdon, who ran small-time booking for the UBO, explained that "usually the artist has a price, and unless it has been established and played for some time, it is usually higher than the booking representative wants to pay."[76] While new acts were open to negotiation, established acts were booked at the price dictated by the activities of the system. This was the "correct" value of the act—a decision determined by the informational economy of vaudeville and encapsulating a wide set of historical evaluations about the performer.

This same understanding of what the price of an act meant is echoed in many of the surviving manager's reports from theaters in the East Coast Keith circuit. Put together in relation to the strict budget available for performers' salaries, a successful bill needed to present a wide enough variety of talent to appeal to the heterogeneous vaudeville audiences, not repeating, not offending, and not boring.[77] As a result, performers were not simply discussed in terms of their skill or success but analyzed by the ratio between their abilities and their cost. For example, on August 8, 1910, R. G. Larsen, the manager of Keith's theater in Boston, wrote that the Alexandroff Troupe, a group of Russian dancers who performed for ten minutes, was "hardly as good as some troupes of the same kind that we have had in years past, but filled the spot and is a fair value for the money."[78] Even more precisely, in 1916, Charles Lovenberg, the manager of Keith's theater in Providence, Rhode Island, complained that the comic duo Madison and Winchester "didn't do very well as a whole, got laughs in spots, and from the way they went with the audience, they are not worth the salary I am paying them which is [already] at a $50 cut. The act is worth $150."[79] Armed with such information, booking agents would be well situated to determine the "accurate" price of an act, whether overpriced or a potential bargain.

In addition to pricing culture, the informational economy of vaudeville also helped shape it. Among the most obvious of these mechanisms was the need for artists to have systemic legibility. Only acts that could be understood and categorized could be easily sorted, organized, and booked.[80] While booking representatives would sometimes have the opportunity to see a new act play at a specially designated "try-out" house, much of the time they were signing a contract on faith and

75 Hennessey Testimony, 933.
76 Hodgdon Testimony, 531.
77 Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts*, 63–64.
78 Manager's Report Book, 13 June 1910–20 Feb. 1911, 17, Keith/Albee Collection, University of Iowa Special Collections, University of Iowa (hereafter Keith/Albee Collection).
79 Manager's Report Book, 13 Nov. 1916–21 Jan. 1918, p. viii (1), Keith/Albee Collection.
80 Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts*, 63–64.

reputation alone. To make this possible, agents needed to be able to easily understand the artists they represented and explain them to the managers who booked them, "describing the act and making comparisons with other acts of similar nature or style."[81] This legibility was particularly important because of the need to avoid repeats within a single bill, an event that was understood to mean "death to one of the acts and injury to the show as a whole."[82] Even acts that were only superficially similar could "take the edge off" of each other's work, dulling the novelty necessary to please an audience.[83]

Because of these needs, regularized styles of description flowed throughout the industry—manager's reports are full of them, able to identify acts with only a few words. For example, of the seven acts that performed at the Hudson theater in Union Hill, New Jersey, on May 16, 1910, fully five were categorized by manager John. C. Peebles in this tight, descriptive vocabulary before he entered into a longer evaluation of their performance: the Jordan Trio was a "Novelty wire act"; McBride and Goodrich were "an old fashion song-and-dance team"; Gertrude Vandyck, the "Girl with Golden Voice," was "a novel singing act in 1"; the Five Columbians were a "novel dancing act"; while Lewis and Green were a "clever two-man act."[84]

This same process of categorization can also be seen in vaudeville artists' own self-descriptions, suggesting the extent to which the generic expectations baked into this shorthand helped to proscribe the types of performances that could be bought and sold through the booking agencies. A wide array of these descriptions is discussed in *Vaudeville: From the Honkey-Tonks to the Palace*, in which ex-performer Joe Laurie Jr. spends hundreds of pages exhaustively enumerating the basic classifications of vaudeville performers as they were understood within the industry. These include "dumb" acts (nonspeaking players such as jugglers, acrobats, top-wire and bicycle performers), song-and-dance men, comic sketches, solo female singers, group singers, two-man (straight man and comic), female and male impersonators, quick-change artists, mimics, magicians, Blackface acts, family comedy troupes, animal acts, monologists (the forerunners of stand-up comedians), "freaks," and male-and-female groups.[85] Given that many of these categories came complete with numerous

81 Hennessey Testimony, 916.

82 Brett Page, *Writing for Vaudeville* (Springfield, MA, 1915), 8.

83 Sophie Tucker, *Some of These Days: The Autobiography of Sophie Tucker* (Garden City, NY, 1945), 84.

84 Manager's Report Book, 13 June 1910–20 Feb. 1911, 4, Keith/Albee Collection.

85 Joe Laurie Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honkey-Tonks to the Palace* (New York, 1953), 20–230.

subgroupings, it was possible for artists to locate themselves within a remarkably precise performance taxonomy.

Ironically, the very intensity of the process of generic categorization forced vaudevillians to further the individuality of their acts.[86] Establishing a clear identity was crucial for performers, as the brevity of stage time required that their audiences understand—and react—immediately.[87] Acts typically referred to such a success as "putting it over," that is, creating a sense of shared community "that fostered real and immediate communication between artist and audience" while also leaving the crowd stunned and satisfied by a perfectly structured act capped by a "wow finish."[88] In the tightly competitive world of vaudeville, all of the acts on a bill were attempting to make their mark and "stop the show." To find this success, they needed to let the audience know what they were doing and, simultaneously, to surprise them, providing the novelty that would allow them to stand out from the competition and that became so important to the experience of vaudeville.[89]

Unlike the legitimate theater, in which realism was beginning to take hold, vaudeville performers constantly crossed the fourth wall in order to connect with the crowd.[90] The most effective way to achieve this was to express the individuality not merely of the performance but of the performer, selling audiences what the legendary vaudeville singer Sophie Tucker referred to as "personality."[91] Discussing the popularity of her songs in the autobiographical *Some of These Days*, Tucker explains that the "secret that makes for their success is the fact that they are all written in the first person. When I'm singing them, I am talking about myself. . . . [M]aking it a song about myself leaves [the audience] free to apply it to themselves."[92] Instead of playing a role clearly separated from their identity while on stage, such performers focused on offering audiences a seemingly authentic connection to their genuine character, albeit one mediated by the mechanisms of the vaudeville theater.[93] An

86 Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts*, 65.

87 Edwin Milton Royle, "The Vaudeville Theater," in Stein, *American Vaudeville*, 30.

88 Snyder, *Voice of the City*, 105; Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies*, 20; Walter De Leon, "The Wow Finish," in Stein, *American Vaudeville*, 193–208.

89 "Success of Vaudeville Explained by Manager," *Los Angeles Herald*, 10 Feb. 1905.

90 Butsch, *American Audiences*, 57–81; Daniel J. Watermeir, "Actors and Acting," in *The Cambridge History of American Theater*, vol 2, ed. Don Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (New York, 1999), 452–66; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 104–18.

91 Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies*, 19.

92 Tucker, *Some of These Days*, 96; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 62–66.

93 "They are my friends," explained vaudeville star Nora Bayes of her relationship to her audience. "I can think of no better symbol to express my own feelings toward the audience than that of a small party seated at a friendly table. . . . The vaudeville audience is the most sensitive, because it is there to meet old friends. . ." Of course, "the audience" was itself a creation of the system through which Bayes moved so successfully; it reflected both a generalization of individual crowds into a general public and the types of seemingly personal

integral part of the broader shift towards what has been termed a full-fledged "culture of personality" in the early twentieth century, these booking-derived developments helped to lay the ground for the explosion of entertainment celebrity in the coming decades.[94]

For audiences, the functioning of the vaudeville system had a profound aesthetic impact. The core of the form's appeal was its ability to present a wild diversity of acts with cosmopolitan glamour and well-oiled efficiency—elements closely allied to its rationalized, corporate construction and made possible by the informational economy behind it. Highlighting a promise to deliver the same acts to theaters and cities across the country, vaudeville enabled its audiences to experience a local, often intimate, instantiation of a nationally circulating entertainment culture.[95] Built around a standardized succession of unique artists, it placed the burden of individuality on certain aspects of performance while accepting the legitimacy of the system as a whole. In doing so, vaudeville helped to define the limits and meanings of mass entertainment, articulating how and where it could connect with audiences, what kinds of claims it was capable of making, and what vision of identity it might attempt to put forth.[96]

All of this was enabled by the intentional indeterminacy of the booking process.[97] "The difference of opinion regarding those different

relationships created with each of them by vaudeville's "technologies of feeling." Nora Bayes and Harry Richman, "Two Who Sang for Their Supper," in Stein, *American Vaudeville*, 267–70; Marlis Schweitzer and Daniel Guadagnolo, "Feeling Scottish: Affect, Mimicry, and Vaudeville's 'Inimitable' Harry Lauder," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 26, no. 2 (2012): 145–60; Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies*, 60; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 39–42.

94 For a broader take on this dynamic, see Barry King, *Taking Fame to Market: On the Pre-History and Post-History of Hollywood Stardom* (London, 2015); and Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill, 2002). For a direct comparison, see Jennifer M. Bean, ed., *Flickers of Desire: Movie Stars of the 1910s* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2011); and Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1973), 271–85.

95 In many cities, the arrival of a high-class vaudeville theater was something to boast of, an indication of the growing refinement of the community. "Colonial to Add a Vaudeville Act," *Daily Gate City* (Keokuk, IA), 8 May 1910; "Open New Vaudeville House," *Freeport (IL) Journal-Standard*, 21 Nov. 1906; "Majestic List Partially Ready," Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 9 May 1906; "New Scenic Curtain at Industrial Is Up," *The Dispatch* (Moline, IL), 9 Mar. 1906; "Palladium," *Item* (Richmond, IN), 27 Jan. 1907.

96 "We might say then that on the circuits a new form of life was invented by the Vaudeville managers and the booking agents for American popular performers, and that it was the emergence of this form of life that explains many of the claims that were made about the significance of show business." Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies*, 35. For a more expansive view of the types of social claims connected to the theater, see Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (New York, 1986).

97 The idea of intentional indeterminacy as a creative act is drawn from the writings of composer John Cage. See Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT, 1939); and Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1999).

managers is what makes our business," explained Hennessey, the UBO manager. "If I booked all the houses in the United States for three years, after that you would not have any Vaudeville, because I would have my idea of shows, and they would be played to death."[98] Delivered in front of an FTC panel investigating monopolistic tactics, Hennessey's disavowal of control was strategic. Managers could—and did—target individuals, making an example out of performers for aesthetic, political, or personal reasons.[99] Despite this, his statement reflected a broader truth. Unlike their competitors in the circus or "legitimate theater," vaudeville's many managers were unable to assert final creative control over the products they sold.[100] Instead, by taking such material and subjecting it to the mechanics of the booking system, the industry produced a result that surpassed the potential abilities of any individual entrepreneur, one ultimately derived from the summed and averaged desires of its geographically and culturally heterogeneous audiences.

Modeled after a stock exchange, the booking apparatus of vaudeville functioned along similar lines, providing a "market place for the transaction" capable of compiling a wide array of information and condensing it into a single valuation.[101] However, unlike grain futures or pig-iron prices, it dealt with artistic performance, a distinctly different sort of commodity.[102] Developed through collective action, agencies created a remarkable venue for information exchange about the tastes and preferences of the American public.

Driven by the efficiencies of this system, vaudeville grew by leaps and bounds throughout the early 1900s. However, by the middle of the next decade, cracks had begun to emerge.[103] Moving pictures, first introduced to Americans through the vaudeville circuits, had begun to challenge the form's dominance among the lower segments of the entertainment market after the "nickelodeon boom" of the mid 1900s.[104] By the end of the teens, the feature films and bankable stars

98 Hennessey Testimony, 949.

99 Segrave, *Actors Organize*, 29–127.

100 For a comparison between the individualistic aesthetic of vaudeville and developments in the legitimate theater, see Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts*, 67; and Hirsch Foster, *The Boys from Syracuse: The Shuberts' Theatrical Empire* (New York, 2000), 83–93.

101 Hodgdon Testimony, 535. The comparison to the stock exchange is drawn from quotes in Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 158.

102 The classic account of the transformation of individual items into generic commodities during this period is found in William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, 1991), 97–147.

103 Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 153–93, 239–43; Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business*, vol. 3 (New York, 1988), 16–22, 57–61.

104 This is not to suggest a teleological replacement—many nickelodeons incorporated live performances into a program of short films, and the rise of "small time" vaudeville during this period was based entirely on the interaction between these two forms of entertainment. Rather, by missing an opportunity to substantively engage with the burgeoning film industry,

of early Hollywood, coupled with the construction of increasingly luxurious movie theaters by the larger exhibitors, had adversely impacted vaudeville's popularity more broadly.[105] In the face of these headwinds, the managers of the now-unified Keith-Orpheum syndicate refused to alter their business model to address the evident danger.[106] By the end of the twenties, the diminished firm was taken over Joseph Kennedy, who fired most of its executives and fused the chain with the Radio Corporation of America, transforming its theaters into movie houses and ending vaudeville as a stand-alone entertainment.[107]

Beyond enabling a better understanding of how vaudeville became America's leading theatrical form, a grasp of the informational system that structured its operations sheds a revealing light on many of the other entertainment styles with which it interacted. Certainly, Tin Pan Alley, the New York–based sheet-music industry that kick-started the modern music business, relied heavily on vaudeville performers to introduce its commercial compositions to a mass audience.[108] Its expert songwriters did not ignore the performance contexts that would determine the success or failure of their compositions.[109] Perhaps even more intriguing, however, is the interaction between vaudeville and film, the mechanically reproducible medium that ultimately replaced it.

In recent decades, writing on the emergence of film has pushed back against narratives that posited an inevitable process of evolution from the chaotic diversity of the early pictures to the narrative stability of

---

the principal vaudeville firms ceded control to a new cohort of producers and exhibitors. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 139–62; Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York, 1990), 417–49. Much of our understanding of nickelodeon audiences comes from the moral rhetoric directed at them. See, for instance, Lee Grievson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley, 2004). For a classic debate about the composition of the nickelodeon audience, see Ben Singer, "Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibitors," *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 3 (1995): 5–35; and Robert C. Allen, "Manhattan Myopia; Or, Oh! Iowa!," *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (1996): 75–103.

105 On changes in cinema construction, see Richard Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and "Movie Mad Audiences," 1910–1914* (Berkeley, 2006), 45–55. For a varied analysis of the rise of the "movie star" during this decade, see Bean, *Flickers of Desire*; and Michael Quinn, "Distribution, the Transient Audience, and the Transition to Feature Film," *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 2 (2001): 35–56.

106 "Small time" vaudeville, a cheaper approach to the form represented by the Loew's circuit, had long adopted a far more conciliatory attitude toward film, incorporating it as the core of its attractions and building out a small vaudeville show around it. Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895–1915: A Study in Media Interaction*, (New York, 1980); Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 239–61.

107 Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 262–73.

108 Suisman, *Selling Sounds*, 56–90; Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies*, 1–2.

109 "How Singers Get Songs," *Billboard*, 16 Feb. 1901.

the Hollywood feature.[110] Starting with a reconsideration of the aesthetic complexities of what had once been dismissed as "primitive" cinema, this work has expanded to incorporate an analysis of the settings in which movies were presented and viewed.[111] Such scholarship has come to include examinations that highlight how the sustained interactions between live performances and moving pictures continued to structure the reception of film well into the era of movie palaces.[112] More recently, research within the "new cinema history" has focused on issues of distribution, circulation, and reception, investing its analysis with a sense of business specificity and geographic diversity.[113] All of this work has drawn attention to the ways in which technology alone cannot account for either the adoption of cinema or the evolution of films into the long-form structures central to the aesthetic of the "Classic Hollywood" period.[114] Given this, the context in which film first grew into a mass medium—a context defined by the popularity of vaudeville and the importance of the leading vaudeville syndicates—appears critical to the class dynamics, social behaviors, and aesthetic expectations that flowed through cinema in the 1910s and 1920s.[115]

A consideration of vaudeville's informational structures makes it possible to further develop these questions. It is important to determine not only what film provided that vaudeville did not or could not but also its converse: What, if any, structures did vaudeville enable that cinema was lacking? And how does an understanding of this earlier form help us to evaluate the dynamics that shaped Hollywood as an entertainment

110 For an example of a work that assumes the inevitable triumph of the studio film, see Schatz, *Genius of the System*.

111 This literature is quite extensive; see Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8, no. 3–4 (1986): 63–70; Miriam Hansen, *The Babel in Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), esp. 29–57; Paula Marantz Cohen, *Silent Film and the Triumph of the American Myth* (New York, 2001).

112 William Paul, *When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film* (New York, 2016), 114–21; Meredith C. Ward, *Static in the System: Noise and the Soundscape of American Cinema Culture* (Oakland, CA, 2019); Ward, "The 'New Listening': Richard Wagner, Nineteenth-Century Opera Culture, and Cinema Theaters," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 43, no 1 (2016): 88–106.

113 Richard Maltby, "New Cinema Histories," in *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*, ed. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Phillipe Meers (London, 2011), 3–41; Robert C. Allen, "Relocating American Film History: The 'Problem' of the Empirical," *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2006): 48–88.

114 Abel, *Americanizing the Movies*; Quinn, "Distribution." Steve Wurtzler develops a similar approach focused on the development of sound recording in *Electric Sounds: Technological Change and the Rise of Corporate Mass Media* (New York, 2007).

115 One potential avenue for such questioning is an examination of the changes and continuities of celebrity as it moved from stage to screen. See Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure*; and King, *Taking Fame to Market*. Also, Allen, *Vaudeville and Film*; Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*

industry? Certainly, a better grasp of vaudeville's history provides a number of suggestive parallels to many of the business practices that cinema scholarship describes as central to the functioning of the "mature" Hollywood studio system.[116] In particular, block-booking, in which production companies required that theaters rent an entire slate of movies together, and the "runs, zones, and clearance" system, in which movie houses were sorted into hierarchical levels and granted exclusive rights to specific geographic areas, were direct echoes of nearly identical practices employed by the vaudeville syndicates.[117] Similarly, the adoption of various types of audience-response and box-office research by production companies appears less a groundbreaking innovation than an attempt to recapture the informational advantages of the live performance systems that had preceded them.[118] Given the importance of vaudeville as a training ground for many early movie executives, and the direct corporate connections between three of the five "major" studios and earlier vaudeville circuits, these similarities seem far from accidental.[119] While further research is needed to flesh out the potential implications of such links, it is clear that a better understanding of the management practices and business dynamics of pre-movie show business is critical to a fuller understanding of how and why Hollywood developed as it did.

These practices also patterned the emerging market for mass entertainment in the United States.[120] By the time cinema and radio emerged as the paradigmatic entertainment forms of their era, Americans had already spent decades interacting with a highly rationalized, corporate industry selling them cultural commodities at a national level. In order to succeed, vaudeville's performers were pushed to alter their acts to better align with both audience taste and the demands of the system.[121] Meanwhile, a myriad of local preferences gradually shaped, and were reshaped by, centralized booking decisions.[122] Over time, such processes helped to remake consumer expectations of popular

116 Gomery, *Hollywood Studio System*, 71–80.

117 Richard Maltby, "The Standard Exhibition Contract and the Unwritten History of the Classic Hollywood Cinema," *Film History* 25, no. 1–2 (2013): 138–53; Gomery, *Hollywood Studio System*, 73–75. For a discussion of similar practices within vaudeville, see Snyder, *Voice of the City*, 82–103.

118 Gerben Bakker, "Building Knowledge about the Consumer: The Emergence of Market Research in the Motion Picture Industry," *Business History* 45, no. 1 (2003): 101–27; Michael Pokorny and John Sedgwick, "Profitability Trends in Hollywood, 1929 to 1999: Somebody Must Know Something," *Economic History Review* 63, no. 1 (2010): 56–84.

119 Fox, RKO, and MGM all emerged in relation to vaudeville presentation. Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York, 1989).

120 Monod, *Vaudeville*, 2, 91–147.

121 Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts*, 60–67.

122 Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 23–54.

performance and define the nature of commercial leisure as a social phenomenon. By examining these dynamics as they operated on a variety of temporal and geographic scales, it should become possible to develop a fuller and more nuanced analysis of the impact of mass culture on American society in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Such questions reflect the potential benefits that have begun to emerge from a broader engagement with the business history of entertainment.[123] The perspective that governs such efforts cannot be confined to individual firms, or even specific industries; instead, such work might draw inspiration from the wide-ranging literature on performance culture more broadly, seeking to connect a fine-grained analysis of a tightly defined context with a more capacious understanding of the functioning of entertainment commodities in the consumer market.[124] In doing so, such scholarship could make it possible not only to more accurately ascertain how and why the American entertainment industries first evolved but to begin to lay the foundation for a better understanding of how they have shaped our world in the years since.

. . .

SAMUEL E. BACKER is a PhD candidate in history at Johns Hopkins University. His scholarship examines the intersections between art, culture, and capitalism during the long nineteenth century, focusing specifically on the origins of the American entertainment industry. He is also cofounder of the Johns Hopkins Workshop in Digital History and is a producer for podcasts including *Afropop Worldwide and Money 4 Nothing*.

123 Recent examples of such work include Regev, *Working in Hollywood*; Barnett, *Record Cultures*; Suisman, *Selling Sounds*; Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham, 2015); Scott, "These Ladies Do Business"; Denning, *Noise Uprising*; and Sandra Jean Graham, *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry* (Chicago, 2018).

124 The literature in theater and cultural studies offers numerous examples of the benefits of this approach; see Rosemarie K. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825–1860* (New York, 1997); Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens, GA, 2005); James Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Era of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996); W. T. Lhamon Jr., *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*; George, *Show Town*; and Brown, *Babylon Girls*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007680521000489 Published online by Cambridge University Press