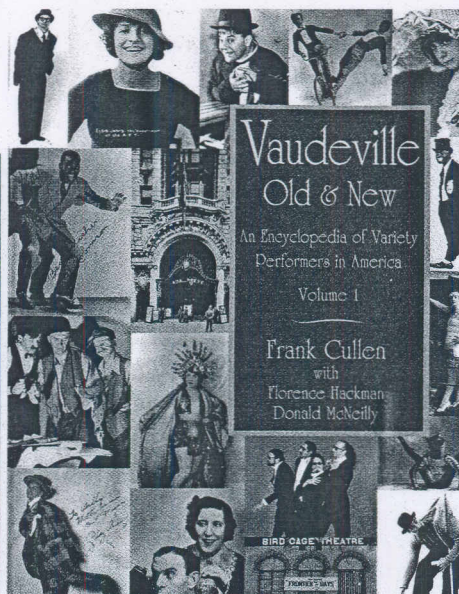
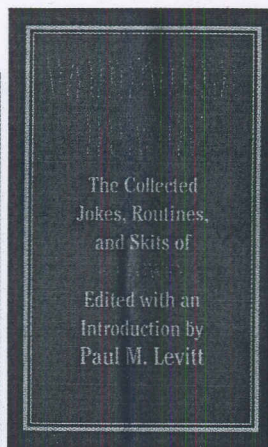
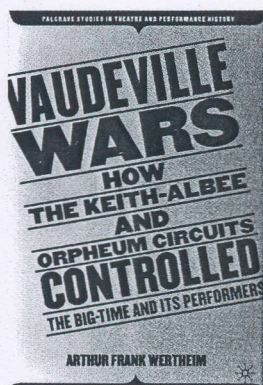


Schtick to the Facts, Ma'am

Three wildly different studies on vaudeville cover the major circuits in the history of that old hardy har har har

BY TRAV S.D.



VAUDEVILLE HUMOR: THE COLLECTED JOKES, ROUTINES, AND SKITS OF ED LOWRY

Paul M. Levitt, ed., Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Ill.

476 pp, \$17.95 paper.

VAUDEVILLE OLD AND NEW: AN ENCYCLOPEDIA OF VARIETY PERFORMERS IN AMERICA

By Frank Cullen with Florence Hackman and Donald McNeilly,

Routledge, New York. 2 vol., 1375 pp, \$295 cloth.

VAUDEVILLE WARS: HOW THE KEITH-ALBEE AND ORPHEUM CIRCUITS CONTROLLED THE BIG-TIME AND ITS PERFORMERS

By Arthur Frank Wertheim, Palgrave Macmillan, New York. 360 pp, \$69.95 cloth.

Few words in our culture are employed with such cheerful imprecision (and, occasionally, inaccuracy) as “vaudeville.” Some use it interchangeably with “burlesque” or “variety show.” Many have hazy notions about when it actually took place. A merciful few suspect that it is an actual town to be found on a map. This would have been unthinkable a few short generations ago, when vaudeville was as much a staple of American playtime as the Cineplex is today.

From roughly 1880 through 1930, every American city and town, big and small, had at least one (sometimes several) vaudeville theatres, places where people from all walks of life could pay a modest admission and see an eclectic bill of singers, dancers, comedians, acrobats, magicians and every other type of performing artist you can think of. Virtually every American performer of any consequence of that era trod the vaudeville stage, and it was vaudeville that supplied most of

the top movie, radio and TV stars of the 1920s–50s. Ironically, it was those very media (combined with other factors) that finished vaudeville as a multimillion-dollar industry.

There are countless prisms with which to look at a subject so big and so broad, and several have been essayed over the years in scholarly treatises: sexual, ethnic, economic, racial. There are also numerous popular and nostalgic works on the subject. For those with a greater than average compulsion to know *everything* about the topic, however, a trio of recent books offers an embarrassment of riches.

Vaudeville Wars, by Arthur Frank Wertheim, tells the frequently ugly story of the dozen or so Gilded Age moguls who transformed vaudeville from a penny-ante proposition into an organized nationwide industry. These were the rulers of the so-called vaudeville circuits, men like B.F. Keith, Edward Albee (grandfather of the playwright), Martin Beck,

F. Proctor and Marcus Loew—names that will grace the occasional theatre across the U.S. today. For the most part, these were ruthless men of business; the decent ones among them were generally bought off or creamrolled. It is a real-life melodrama with a most fitting ending, as the monopolist Albee (essentially the last man standing) is given his come-uppance by Joseph P. Kennedy, who represents a new generation of show business magnates as the head of RKO.

Wertheim, a former professor of American history at the University of Southern California, gives us what is likely to be the definitive work on the business side of vaudeville for a long time to come, offering countless details available nowhere else, well organized and completely comprehensive. For theatre and business historians, and amateur enthusiasts on the subject, the book is a valuable resource, one long needed. The casual reader might find the book dense and a difficult read; it's best digested in small doses, or relied upon as a reference work.

As comprehensive as *Vaudeville Wars* is, for sheer scope, scale and ambition, nothing holds a candle to *Vaudeville Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* by Frank Cullen, with Florence Hackman and Donald McNeilly. This two-volume monster, prepared by the staff of the American Vaudeville Museum (a web-based entity), contains over 1,500 entries, not just on the performers (despite the title), but on the managers, the theatres, the clubs and trade publications, and even the slang. This alphabetically organized reference work is also prefaced by a 34-page essay on the history of vaudeville and contains more than 500 photographs. Unlike many academic historians, Cullen and his team are bona fide show business buffs with an appreciation (beyond the usual scholarly respectives) for what precisely makes certain performers successful with audiences, which is after all why show business exists in the first place. Furthermore, the book (adroitly, I think) includes the past 70 years as part of its purview, meaning that it has entries on all the so-called new vaudevillians (including full disclosure—this reviewer). In every conceivable way, the book surpasses the previous authoritative work on the subject, Anthony Slide's *Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Greenwood Press, 1994).

As is natural in a work of such magnitude, *Vaudeville Old and New* contains some inaccuracies and omissions, but on the whole, it is the ultimate cornucopia for show business

fanatics—which, given its \$295 price tag, a full order of magnitude greater than most of us are accustomed to paying for books—it absolutely *has* to be.


A resource of a far different sort is *Vaudeville Humor: The Collected Jokes, Routines, and Skits of Ed Lowry*, edited with an introduction by Paul M. Levitt. Lowry was a comedian and dancer of middling success in vaudeville's waning days in the 1920s. The significance of his collection is that it exists at all. Unlike most minor vaudevillians, Lowry kept well organized files and scrapbooks of material, mostly culled from jokebooks and copied from other vaudevillians, as was common practice at the time. While editor Levitt (a professor of English at the University of Colorado at Boulder) calls the collection "rich," one will labor in vain to uncover a laugh amongst its hundreds of jokes, quips, puns, one-offs, monologues and skits. Such collections have always done a grave disservice to readers by presenting such material as representative of vaudeville humor. What should invariably be stressed in this context is that these are the hoary jokes of 2nd-, 3rd- and 4th-rate vaudevillians. The

real humor prized by vaudeville audiences was humor we know well, for it was devised by performers like the Marx Brothers, Bob Hope, Jack Benny, W.C. Fields and Burns and Allen. The omission of this central fact, I believe, is one reason why vaudeville humor is generally stigmatized as "bad" and "corny" in the public mind—when the reality is that only its worst comedians were.

Ironically, the best use of this book is as a social document. Not only does the collection abound in ethnic, racist and sexist jokes, but it contains amazing testaments to changing technology (several pages of automobile related jokes, for example) and changing mores, as sexual attitudes began to shift in the 1920s and '30s. (One measure of that is the existence of sex jokes at all in a theatrical form initially predicated on wholesomeness.)

One thing is certain: Those who take vaudeville seriously are liable to get all they can handle in any of these three books. ☑

Trav S.D. is the author of *No Applause—Just Throw Money: The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous* (Faber and Faber, 2005).



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