

**A Hard Act to Follow:  
Live Performance in the Age of the Hollywood Studio System  
(1920-1950)**

by

Vincent D. Longo

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(Film, Television, and Media)  
in The University of Michigan  
2022

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Matthew Solomon, Chair  
Professor Emeritus Richard Abel  
Associate Professor Maya Barzilai  
Professor Giorgio Bertellini  
Professor Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, University of Texas at Austin

Vincent D. Longo

[vilongo@umich.edu](mailto:vilongo@umich.edu)

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-6830-3380

©Vincent Longo 2022

## **Dedication**

For Viola, who showed me there is purpose in studying the past.

For Nick, who showed me how to find adventure in every present moment.

For Alyssa and Avery, who show me the future is bright and full of joy.

## **Acknowledgements**

I have had the privilege of having boundless support in my life and academic career. It has given me the means and opportunities to think critically and at length about history. It is a pleasure that I wish more could experience and was afforded to me only through the mentorship, labor, financial support, emotional support, and time of many people.

I am deeply indebted to my chair, Matthew Solomon, who I have had the pleasure of working alongside for more than a decade. Nothing in my career would be possible without his tireless mentorship and guidance. Matthew believes that everyone has something profound to say and can reveal something new about the world. This is evident in the way that he treats everyone with respect and holds their ideas and work to high standards. As a first generation undergraduate, this was shocking but also energizing. I am thankful every day for his immense generosity in the amount of time and mental energy he has dedicated to my career. He has mentored me from a fledgling undergraduate who did not even know what an archive was, to not long after entrusting me with entire research and digital humanities projects. He has shown that the best way to empower someone is to get them involved and invested. This belief is the foundation of my life as an educator and as a parent. For my dissertation, I am especially thankful for Matthew's sharp editorial hand, which highlighted and clarified my arguments and kept this dissertation from resembling a much longer tome. I ultimately chose to continue my studies at the University of Michigan for many reasons, but none more than my desire to continue working with Matthew. It has been one of the highlights of my life.

My dissertation committee, Richard Abel, Maya Barzilai, Giorgio Bertellini, and Kathryn Fuller-Seeley have helped me innumerable, both with this project and my career. Richard is a model historian and colleague. He championed this project from the beginning, generously offered to review drafts at any and every stage, and carefully read every page and footnote of this project several times, providing careful feedback each time. His feedback that my argument and focus needed to account for the 1920s was crucial for the project's development, even if it took me years to realize how right he was. Maya's undergraduate class, now called *Screening Jewish Cultures*, provided my foundational understanding about the ways in which media forms reflect and contribute to constructions of identity, and opened my eyes to Yiddish theater and Jewish performers who were centerstage in vaudeville's history. Her feedback on my present work continues to be just as enlightening and I look forward to many more conversations.

Giorgio's *Research Methods* was my first class in graduate school and his overview of the field of media studies has been crucial in navigating and understanding the many methodologies and subfields I encounter every day in my work. The questions he posed during the comprehensive exams changed everything I thought I knew about vaudeville, stardom, and mass culture. Most importantly, Giorgio is a great mentor. When so much advice is overly abstract or is so pragmatic it misses the big picture, Giorgio always blends the profound with the practical. Kathy's intellect is only surpassed by her own generosity and collegiality. She agreed to join my committee even though we had never met, and she welcomed me and my family for several meals and coffee during my fellowship at the University of Texas. Kathy writes the academic works of the highest caliber, and still spends considerable time on public history, through podcasts, interviews, and non-academic press publications. Her example is the future of the academy and one to which I aspire.

Outside of my committee, Ken Garner shaped this dissertation the most (though its shortcomings are of course my own). Ken bravely and unwaveringly read through my first roughest drafts, all of which were written out of order. His editing and our discussions brought out my ideas and arguments in ways that I could not have done myself, and he helped me find cohesion out of what seemed at times like chaos. His pointed and productive comments also gave me the confidence to continue forward, which I desperately needed to manage something of this length. I am thankful both for his editorial expertise and our newfound friendship and lunch meetings.

The Department of Film, Television, and Media (FTVM, formerly Screen Arts & Cultures) has been my academic home since 2012. At every moment, it has been a welcoming home that has surrounded me with brilliant, creative, and, most importantly, kind colleagues: Jim Burnstein, Hubert Cohen, Victor Fanucchi, Caryl Flinn, Hollis Griffin, Colin Gunckel, Stashu Kybartas, Daniel Herbert, David Marek, Dawn Hollison, Chris McNamara, Sheila Murphy, Sarah Murray, Matthew Noble-Olson, Melissa Phruksachart, Veerendra Prasad, Swapnil Rai, Robert Rayher, Yeidy Rivero, Terri Sarris, Oliver Thornton, and Johannes von Moltke. I am most proud of the fact that, over the years, each of them has welcomed opportunities to collaborate with and/or mentor me, and many of them entrusted me with far bigger opportunities than I thought I deserved at the time. Their collective efforts made this path possible and their commitment to integrating media studies and media production has been encoded in my scholarship and pedagogy.

All the successes and notable events in FTVM have been thanks to its irreplaceable administrative staff, Mary-Lou Chlipala, Carrie Moore, Lisa Rohde-Barbeau and Marga Schuhwerk-Hampel. This dream team handled every detail and possible trouble with a grace that

I have always admired. Event planning, logistics, internships, funding, marketing, tours, enrollment—they did it all and they knew every answer. My productivity is thanks to them.

My fellow graduate students, both current and alumni: have always welcomed me and their impressive work has never ceased to inspire me: Bailey Apollonio, Tanite Chahwan, Sophia Chen, Joseph DeLeon, James Elrod, Brinni Gentry, Amber Hardiman, Kayti Lausch, Josh Morrison, Richard Mwakasege-Minaya, Yuki Nakayama, Dimitri Pavlounis, Joshua Schulze, and Grace Wilsey. Nathan Koob, Katy Peplin, Benjamin Strassfeld, first my graduate student instructors and then fellow graduate students, encouraged me to pursue graduate studies, were always honest about what the path required, and helped me prepare competitive application materials. Kaelie Thompson is the greatest teacher I know, and it has been a pleasure to teach alongside her so many times. Marissa Spada and I spent a lot of time together as often the only two people in several required graduate seminars. As peculiar of a format that was, Marissa always made it fun and interesting, and I was glad to so often read her exceptional writing to which I have always aspired. Her encouragement and positivity toward my work has always overflowed, and was especially crucial during my first two years. It is an honor to graduate together.

This dissertation began from ideas generated and first explored in Markus Nornes's historiography seminar. Markus wholeheartedly supported my interest in vaudeville from the beginning, and even more importantly pushed me to develop a much richer understanding of the art and science of academic writing that is foundational to all my work.

Mark Kligerman first inspired me to be an educator when I was in my undergraduate studies, and has since been a standout colleague, mentor, and friend. Ten years ago, Mark's

classes helped me realize the real-world importance and stakes of critically analyzing media, and provided a model of passion for teaching and kindness toward students that is intertwined with intellectual rigor. Mark's pedagogy meets students where they are at in terms of skills and knowledge, but also challenges them to improve and expand their skill set. His method of instruction is addictive. He is funny, rigorous, and passionate; a combination students love and to which I have always aspired.

The support of Phil Hallman has been instrumental to this dissertation and my career. Not only did Phil bring me boxes of library books and archival scans in the middle of the pandemic that I needed to complete this project, but he taught me everything I now know about archival research, archival education, and archival accessibility. I hope that everyone has the opportunity to meet Phil in their lives. His empathy and passion know no bounds, and he has proven that he will do almost anything to help someone, not just his friends. He is also the smartest person in the room, (but would never admit it), which allows him to make waves as a scholar, curator, and librarian, *and* assist or provide feedback on almost any work. Phil makes all of it look effortless, though I know he works harder than anyone I know.

I have also shared (in)formative conversations about this project and/or my career with scholars and mentors outside my department, including Cara Caddoo, James Leo Cahill, Paul Conway, Mark Cousins, Victoria Duckett, David Gerstner, Charlie Keil, Rob King, Brendan Kredell, Pete Kunze, Christina Lane, Ross Melnick, Rielle Navitski, Miriam Petty, Murray Pomerance, and Nicholas Sammond.

This project received generous financial and institutional support from several organizations. At the University of Michigan, the Rackham Graduate School provided me several research grants which facilitated my travel to archives around the country, and its Merit



Fellowship provided me four semesters of dedicated time to process my findings and write the manuscript. I was also fortunate to receive a Rackham Internship Fellowship, co-funded by the Rackham Graduate School and the William L. Clements Library. Not only did the fellowship provide an extra semester to complete my dissertation and participate fully in the job market, working at the Clements Library enriched my understanding of American culture in innumerable ways. This was only possible through many great conversations with the Library's top-notch team, and exposure to their rich collection of archival materials. I would especially like to thank Paul Erickson for his mentorship and support during and after my fellowship, as well as Anne Bennington-Helber, Shneen Coldiron, Julie Fremuth, Emiko Hastings, Clayton Lewis, Terese Murphy, Angela Oonk, Tracy Payovich, Mary Pedley, Jayne Ptolemy, Sara Quashnie, Cheney Schopieray, Maggie Vanderford, and Michelle Varteresian, for their guidance, collaboration, and spirited collegiality. Working with all of you was one of the great pleasures of my career thus far.

During my graduate career, the Undergraduate Research Opportunity (run by the dedicated Michelle Ferrez and Luciana Nemtanu) funded and supported my collaborations with over thirty undergraduate student researchers. This project specifically is marked by the hard work of Rose Albayat, Karis Blaker, Nicole Diaz, Mackenzie Hubbard, Caden Hughey, Terra Lafreniere, Megan Lehman, Zoe Logas, Drew Meinecke, Emma Mendez, Alexandra Niforos, Kelyanne Rodriguez-Diaz, Erin Ringel, Sydney Simoncini, Jonah Sobczak, Jordan Stanton, Eric Stillman, Drewyn Talley, and Danielle Williams.

This project also received a Robert De Niro Endowed Dissertation Fellowship from the University of Texas at Austin's Harry Ransom Center, which supplied me with a beautiful office and a month-long residency at their archive. Though pandemic-related closures kept me from

taking my fellowship until the dissertation was nearly done, the materials I collected still inform crucial pieces of this project and will be invaluable as I continue to develop the dissertation. I would especially like to thank: Andi Gustavson and Danica Obradovic for coordinating my fellowship and welcoming me to Austin, Michael Gilmore and Steve Wilson for managing my many research requests and assuring that I found and viewed all the most pertinent materials, and for Kathryn Millan who so kindly recommended all the best restaurants in the city. The Richard Abel Travel Funds, supplied by my home department, also kindly supplemented this fellowship allowing me to maximize my time in Austin.

I would also like to thank the many archivists and librarians at the Margaret Herrick Library, The Warner Bros. Archive, the Theater Historical Society, and the New York Library for the Performing Arts who assisted in my research. I especially want to point out Patrick Seymour (Theater Historical Society) and Brett Service (Warner Bros. Archive) for their individual attention to my project, as well as sharing their expert advice on pertinent sources, all of which run through every page of this work.

This dissertation was written during some of the best and hardest days of my life so far, including my marriage, birth of my daughter, a global pandemic, and the loss of several family members and one of my best friends. Appropriately celebrating, grieving, and growing stronger through these moments has only been possible with the support of my family and friends.

My parents, Robert and Cynthia Longo, and my grandparents, Lawrence and (the late) Viola Smith, taught me to love God and to work as hard (physically and mentally) as I possibly can no matter what I do, whether parenting, writing a book, building a house, or cleaning the garage. They also unflinchingly supported me as I sought to be a filmmaker and then a film scholar, despite how far-fetched both must have seemed at the time. My mother and grandmother

instilled in me an interest in, and appreciation of, the magic and drama of movies, especially those from Hollywood's golden age. Because of them, I might be the only person my age whose favorite movie was, for a long time, *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944, Frank Capra). My sisters, Tia Milder and Angelina Longo, have been some of my best friends and biggest supporters for longer than anyone. I am prouder of both of you than you will ever know, though my competitive drive to be the best of the triplets keeps me from wanting to admit it. The extended Smith family (including the Garricks, Kimmels, Aspinwalls, etc.) have been a blessing in my life. Though I wish I saw them more, their support is unceasingly and without question.

The friendship of many people (and more than a few pets) kept these years not only manageable, but truly enjoyable. There will never be a day I do not miss Nicholas Smith. He taught me how to be a great friend, how to enjoy life, and how to find fun when others might only find boredom. I will always be in awe of how he could effortlessly bring people together and create close-knit friend groups, even if the only thing we had in common was his friendship (which was as a good a reason anyone needed to be friends). Devin Juleff's friendship has long been a blessing in my life, but it has proven to have no bounds over the course of this dissertation. Not only have I enjoyed both our deep and trivial conversations, he also graciously hosted me countless times when I visited the West Coast. If that were not enough, he also provided a thorough, yet somehow rapid proofread of this manuscript as it neared completion. He is a gentleman and a scholar who can do anything, though he would never admit any of that. My surrogate brother, Jay Garrick, was always there to lend an ear, help me unwind, and keep me up-to-date on everything I needed to know about popular culture. Our collaborations led me on this path, and he provided the companionship and support that allowed me to believe anything—a movie, script, or dissertation—was possible when he had my back. I have also

benefited from the friendship of Brad Schwartz, who is somehow the most successful and most humble person I know. His work is *the* model of accessible and engaging historical analysis underpinned by immense rigor and depth of research. I envy his ability to talk about his research so engagingly with just about anyone, and I can only dream my Nova would outrace his Mustang.

Many other friends, including Lauren Bootzin, Matt Boucher, Sarah Garrick, Evan Giampa, Karina Giampa, Kaitlyn Leffert, Ben Maynard, Lisa Maynard, Emma Schulte, Cassie Valentiner, Ellis Valentiner, Ben Wheeler-Floyd, Katrina Wheeler-Floyd, and Sam Wilson have helped me more than they know. Dominating at bar trivia, playing games, talking on the phone, and just hanging out was an essential reprieve (though intellectually stimulating in its own way) from the often-intense days and nights of my job. Writing is often a very solitary activity, but my pets, Toby, Nina, and (the late) Porter, were there to comfort me through every keystroke. Nina and Porter were usually in my home office before I awoke and would stay on my lap or on the window-sill the whole day. It was paradise even on the most stressful day.

I am incredibly proud to share this accomplishment with Alyssa, my wife of six years and best friend for fifteen years. You have surrounded me with supportive and generous in-laws, including Catherine and Daniel Beck, and grandparents, Ron and Wonda Beck, and the late Jesse and Rose Guevara. Rose was so proud when I finished my undergraduate honors thesis that she had me sign the cover page so she could frame it. It made me feel incredibly welcome and cherished in your family, a feeling which has only strengthened. I can only imagine how proud she would be of both of us now.

I am so lucky to share a life with you. You have blessed me so much, a proper thanks is impossible. You have ensured that my life has balance and happiness, you have shouldered my

tears, and given me understanding, hard truths, affirmation, and pep talks; all of which have given me the strength I needed to persevere. You make life worth living, and I know you would follow me to the moon. You have also blessed us with Avery. Parenting with you is an honor and continues to intensify my feelings for you: of love, of appreciation, and of inspiration.

I hope that this dissertation inspires you and Avery to follow your dreams. You've already given me mine.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	xv
CHAPTER	
<b>Introduction</b>	1
Notes	59
<b>1. Movies at the Variety Theater: An Overview of Live Performance in Theaters Showing Motion Pictures until the 1920s</b>	75
Notes	103
<b>2. Hollywood's Big Six: Media Conglomeration, Vertical Integration, and the Rise of the Variety Palace (1915 to 1929)</b>	113
Notes	166
<b>3. Showmanship vs. the Straight Picture Economy: The Imperfect Beginning of Vertical Integration and the Mass Retail System (1925 to 1929)</b>	180
Notes	218
<b>4. The Show Must Go On: Restructuring Variety Theater During the Great Depression (1930 to 1948)</b>	225
Notes	304
<b>5. Bandfilm: Racialized Space, Jazz Spectatorship, and African American Stardom <i>inside</i> the Swing Era Movie Theater (1930 to 1948)</b>	326

Notes	407
<b>Conclusion</b>	432
Notes	440
APPENDIX	442
BIBLIOGRAPHY	456

## Abstract

This dissertation argues that scholars should not equate the demise of vaudeville as a cultural industry in the early 1930s with the disappearance of live performance in movie theaters in the United States, which continued with much success in many large luxurious downtown theaters until the 1950s. Doing so has concealed variety theater as a critical shaping force in the industrial history of studio era Hollywood, the star system, and the experiences of theatergoers.

This dissertation intertwines the history of variety theater with that of the American film industry to recast the Hollywood studios as multimedia conglomerates (not just *film* companies) which came to control stage entertainment and displace big-time vaudeville through the creation of large theater chains and studio-run live performance circuits. Stage entertainment likewise played a crucial role in the industrial growth, organization, management, and financial success of the studios from the 1920s to the 1950s, affecting film production, distribution, and exhibition. This dissertation explains why the prevalence of variety theater symbiotically developed and reached new heights within movie theaters during the growth of the studio system, why it declined but continued during the Great Depression, and how this system continued to function economically and industrially until the 1950s.

In the course of making these arguments, this dissertation provides an overview of the major forms and formats of variety theater that played alongside films and their general prevalence. It also explains how and why the coming of sound and Depression did not completely standardize urban exhibition. Live performance continued during and after the



Depression because control over exhibition was not centralized and relied instead on the autonomy of local theater managers, who valued stage entertainment for its showmanship and profits. Even after Hollywood encouraged and incentivized standardized film-only programming during the Depression, the studios did not supply enough quality feature films to satisfy theaters in oversaturated urban markets. In need of headline-worthy entertainment, live performance remained a viable strategy for both studio-affiliated and independently-owned theaters.

These live performance circuits also supported a more diverse star system, and make visible in new ways the experiences and tastes of audiences of color. At a time when people of color were marginalized in highly stereotypical roles in Hollywood films, live performances by racially and ethnically diverse performers received star billing in many of the same theaters showing these films. Some theater managers and talent agents featured multiracial performers as a strategy to attract diverse audiences, especially African Americans, to movie palaces. This dissertation details the experiences of these under-researched audiences who were an important, but largely overlooked part of the movie palace experience. These claims are supported by a case study on live swing music and its African American stars and multiracial audiences, which argues were at the center of a contest to control and democratize movie-going that extended even into the Jim Crow South. The cross-racial popularity of African American bands and their dance music brought diverse audiences together, pushing against a range of racial barriers in movie-going. These included expanding the number of theaters that people of color could patronize, where they sat within theaters, and how they could act, challenging enforced norms of spectatorship that worked to discipline and segregate spectators.

## Introduction

In 1932, novelist Sarah Addington wrote an obituary marking what she considered a major shift in American entertainment: “On a certain evening in May a few hundred New Yorkers attended a wake. The rites were held at the Palace Theater; the corpse was vaudeville...the old palace has died. The two-a-day is gone, and another ghost walks the American scene. Gentlemen, your hats, while we speak of the dead.”<sup>1</sup> Many others joined Addington, lamenting the death in vivid, despondent obituaries for “old-man” vaudeville, whose death-knell many claimed came at the “closing” of the Palace Theater in New York City, once the emblem of its dominant place in mass entertainment and its determining role in the star system. Joe Laurie Jr., a vaudevillian and one of *Variety*’s head reporters on vaudeville, for example, eulogized: “The vaudeville we knew from the turn of the century to 1932 when the Palace closed its stage door and practically tacked up a sign reading ‘Vaudeville Dispossessed,’ the real, honest, vital vaudeville of the two-a-day of the Palace (and other big-time vaude) will never return.”<sup>2</sup>

According to just as many writers, however, over the next twenty-years vaudeville defied nature. It kept dying. *Variety* felt compelled to reaffirm the death of the United States’ first mass cultural industry in its annual year-end review in their “vaudeville” section of its paper from 1936 to 1955.<sup>3</sup> In 1941, for example, it wrote, “Until the present, someone has been constantly mistaking the reflexive jerking of vaudeville’s dead body for the drawing of a new breath of life, so it hasn’t been good taste to inquire into the fate of vaudeville sons and daughters since she

died.”<sup>4</sup> Vaudeville, however, would not stay dead again. In 1956, former vaudevillian Fred Allen tried once and for all to end the debate. In his autobiography, Allen asserted, “Vaudeville is dead. The acrobats, the animals, the dancers, the singers, and the old time comedians have taken their final bows and disappeared into the wings of obscurity...the optimism of the day and night dreamers is wasted. Their vigils are futile. Vaudeville is dead. Period.”<sup>5</sup>

Some writers explicitly disagreed that vaudeville was dead, but they too employed the death narrative in their counterclaims. While attempting to abolish the general consensus that vaudeville had perished, *Variety* admitted in 1936, “every now and then something happens to make it appear that the undertaker might’ve been called in too soon. Every now and then something happens to make the average opinion seem hasty.”<sup>6</sup> The largest chain of Fox West Coast theaters believed these two opposing views on vaudeville’s conditions could be reconciled. Their 1948 advertisement for an entertainment program consisting of an unknown feature film, the live music of Spike Jones and a series of comedians read, “vaudeville may be dead, but the ghost of the old two-a-days is still pretty lively.”<sup>7</sup>

In trade press as well as popular discourse vaudeville was defined by its death beginning in the early 1930s. At the same time, these examples indicate that it was a long *debated* and *uncertain* death, and something like vaudeville’s “dead body” continued among the living long after 1932 and the “closing” of the Palace Theater, which did not close at all. Instead, the obituaries marked the theater changing its programming to book vaudeville acts alongside sound motion pictures.

Cinema and media studies has a long history of marking the purported death of entertainment forms--especially since the onset of the digital age.<sup>8</sup> As scholars, we should be skeptical of reports that cinema and television have met their untimely ends at the hands of new

media.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, media scholars have hardly contested the ostensible death of vaudeville. Indeed, the demise of American vaudeville in the early 1930s has largely been taken for granted and rarely debated. Although these histories are rarely celebratory and sometimes affectionate, many nevertheless confirm that the death of vaudeville came at the hands of Hollywood's growing dominance over the entertainment industry.<sup>10</sup> Most histories of vaudeville, of film exhibition, and of radio and television broadcasting tend to uncritically accept this death, as do industrial and stylistic histories of cinema during the Studio Era (1920-50). Together they describe how the rise of the studio system, the growing prevalence of sound films and radio and the economic collapse of the Great Depression made vaudeville shows obsolete, stole its audience and its stars, and rendered live performances too expensive for theaters to program and the common American to attend.<sup>11</sup> This narrative is also presented in some of the most popular films during the studio era including *The Broadway Melody* films (1936, 1938, 1940) *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936), *Ziegfeld Girl* (1941), *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), *For Me and My Gal* (1942), and even *Singin' in the Rain* (1952).<sup>12</sup>

However, scholars should not equate the demise of the autonomous vaudeville industry—in other words, the dissolution of the “big-time” vaudeville corporations including the Keith, Orpheum, and Albee circuits in the late 1920s—with the disappearance of live performance in motion picture theaters. Studio-affiliated and independent theaters continued to program live performance on the same bills as feature films, shorts, and newsreels, largely but not exclusively, in many of the large (over 1,000 seats) luxurious first-run theaters (commonly called “movie palaces”) until the 1950s and 1960s. Though these post-Depression circuits were considerably smaller than the more than one-thousand vaudeville theaters that existed until the 1920s, they

were economically and culturally important enough for *Variety* and *Billboard* to maintain “vaudeville” sections in their papers into the 1950s.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, *Variety*’s weekly listings of these programs enumerates the still sizable magnitude of this system within the American mediascape. Hollywood’s use of live performance operated within the consolidated, highly organized framework of first-run theaters. All of the major studios, including Paramount, RKO, Warner Brothers, Fox, and Loew’s (the parent company of MGM)—had studio-managed live performance “circuits” that consisted of a small network of theaters mostly in large cities like Detroit, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, Miami, Seattle, and San Francisco; but even cities as small as Deadwood, South Dakota, Bound Brook, New Jersey, and Marianna, Florida had theaters using live acts during this period. In total at least 270 cities had at least one theater within its jurisdiction that programmed a combination of live performance with film screenings from 1935 to 1948, with no less than ninety theaters operating in a single year.<sup>14</sup>

No matter the size, some theaters and cities regularly had a theater with a combination policy (a common period name for a theater programming live variety entertainment alongside feature films), and others only occasionally. The diminished number of venues compared to the number of theaters that operated at vaudeville’s peak until the 1920s meant that, for the most part, only the biggest stars in film, radio, and theater still appeared at these theaters, accompanied alongside the top vaudeville performers, including acrobats, magicians, singers, dancers, and jugglers, totaling (at least) more than 9000 different individual acts and groups, managed by more than one-hundred talent agencies.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, an overwhelming majority of Hollywood’s most economically important stars performed on these circuits at least once, and often many times.<sup>16</sup>

The prevalence of live performance in movie theaters that I am establishing might make one question why the death narrative was (and continues to be) so common. Part of the reason for the prevailing narrative centered on vaudeville's death is simply confusing the often lamented and more definite dissolution of big-time vaudeville with any and all live performance in motion picture theaters. Put another way, it stems from accepting at face value the widely circulated claim of the "death of vaudeville." The notion of "vaudeville" was always fluid, and one needs to account for its multiple names and meanings to properly study it. Over time, the term had various cultural associations to class and clientele, programming format and length, stardom, gender-association, and medium specific spectatorship.<sup>17</sup> These variations occasionally stabilized long enough to go by specific names. While tracing how vaudeville and cinema developed together, this dissertation chronicles and defines these iterations.

Beginning in early to mid-1900s, vaudeville largely referred to either two arguably dichotomous forms, "big-time" or "small-time" (which also went by "family time" or "popular-priced"), roughly defined and delineated in terms of location, ticket price, performers and stardom, theater location and quality, use of films, and class-association. Largely through competition between itself and the growing studio system during the 1910s and 1920s, the two vaudevilles began overlapping and intermingled further with other forms of variety theater and live performance like revues, movie palace presentations and prologues, and jazz. As a result, most bills in the 1920s resembled a hybrid of small-time vaudeville, big-time vaudeville, opulent movie palace revues and presentations, and big band performances with short bills, though the

particular makeup could range anywhere on the spectrum. To account for some of these extremes, some critics tried to rename vaudeville to account for its shorter, more hybrid form under new names like “pop vaudeville” or “State Lake policy” (after the Chicago-area theater often credited with its popularization). However, terms like “vaudeville” or “movie palace/picture palace” remained the most common. In theory, vaudeville at this time continued to refer to disparate booked bills played in small to medium sized theaters with 500 to 2,000 seats, and movie palaces to elaborate presentations in mammoth theaters (1,000 to 6,000 seats) which rivaled and often surpassed legitimate theaters in size, opulence, and amenities. In practice, the programs and their theaters became increasingly indistinguishable.

Most of the well-known terms for live variety performance lost their meaning in the 1930s or disappeared. Under the thrifty conditions of the Depression, presentations became less common and less elaborate, with most bills including four to six acts, one of which was almost always a name star from film or radio. Some programs roughly stitched together the acts into the form of a revue or presentation with costumes and a loose narrative, but these terms like revue and presentation became increasingly rare. Others proposed “bandfilm” because of the large number of bands booked as headline acts, but the only rebranding that gained traction with trade publications was “vaudefilm.” Some theater advertisers and studio executives also rebranded it “in-person presentations,” but this was still less common than “vaudeville” or a more vague term, including variations of “stage acts,” live performance,” or “variety theater.” In many ways, these terms acted as synonyms that referred to the same types of performances and the makeup

of bills — both involved live acts in which performers sang, acted in a playlet or a short comedy — and were called vaudeville and reviewed by the trade presses’ vaudeville critics. In each case, however, neither media was consistently the “A” or “B” part of the bill, although live performance headlined the program more often than not because of its high costs and ever growing reliance on the appearance of stars. The term “vaudeville,” in these general meanings, did continue to appear as an operative—albeit highly contested—entertainment category in sources as varied as trade press articles, newspaper advertising, in the contracts of the largest talent agencies, and legally written into the corporate structure of the studios until the late 1950s.

In short, the “death” of vaudeville meant many things (though remained largely associated with the “big-time” practices and associations of the Keith-Albee and Orpheum circuits), and was only partially tied to the decline in live performance’s prevalence. No one, however, during this period mistook it for the total separation of film exhibition with live acts, which continued to exist in almost every major American city. Put another way: the death of vaudeville does not signal the disappearance of variety live performance in movie theaters. Choosing to acknowledge vaudeville’s fluid historical definition rather than restrict it with a purist interpretation which would deem it dissolved in the late 1920s or early 1930s, this dissertation acknowledges all live performance types in motion picture exhibition during the 1910s, 1920s 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Doing so avoids writing the intermedial and industrial connections between stage and screen as an inevitable and arguably premature death narrative, while keeping open these connections far past the early 1930s. In turn, I regularly rely on the



more general terms for theatrical variety entertainment to account for the multiple formats and genres of live performance that graced the stages of motion picture theaters, unless a discussion calls for more specific language.

### **Variety Theater's Industrial and Cultural Force**

The preceding data (of which I include much more throughout) begins illuminating the scale and prevalence of live performance across the country in almost every major metropolitan area and every major studio. However, these numbers do not themselves answer a more important question: why does it matter to media history and historiography? The overarching argument of my work is that the implications of this live performance go far beyond exhibition. First, I argue that live performance played a crucial role in the industrial growth, organization, concentration, and financial success of studios throughout the 1910s to the 1950s, affecting each stage of the cinematic process, including production, distribution, and exhibition. My dissertation explains for the first time why live performances developed within movie theaters particularly during the growth of the studio system in the 1910s and 1920s, why it declined but did not disappear completely during the early 1930s, and how this system functioned economically and industrially until the 1950s. I argue that live performance during this period was a critical part of the studio system which helped shape Hollywood's vertical integration, the star system, box-office results, the experiences of many urban theatergoers, the types of films produced, the patterns of film distribution, and Hollywood's interconnections with music, radio, and later television.<sup>18</sup> It was a primary venue for sharing, building, and testing stars and material for new

films, for drawing large crowds to theaters for even the least financially successful films, and shaped the distribution of films in individual cities.

My project is part of a larger scholarly trend that examines the historical interrelationships between cinema and other media industries, especially Hollywood's symbiotic relationship to radio and recorded music. This dissertation adds to a growing body of scholarship that reframes the formation of the Hollywood studios during the 1910s and 1920s not simply as the rise of film corporations, but as multimedia conglomerates that invest and create oligopolies in a variety of media forms (broadcasting, music, legitimate theater), technology, and intellectual property.<sup>19</sup> I focus on both the vertical integration of the Hollywood studios into the production, distribution, and exhibition of motion pictures, and also their horizontal integration across media industries during the 1920s. With the exception of RKO, formed by the highly publicized merger of the two most famous vaudeville corporations (Keith-Albee and Orpheum) with a radio corporation and a film production company, scholars of this period who have positioned the studios in this way have focused almost exclusively on radio and recorded and published music.<sup>20</sup> I aim to add live performance to this combination, arguing that understanding the emergence of major studios is incomplete without a full recognition of the studios' hefty investment to produce and distribute live performances, creating their own circuits and production departments. Their goal was to create synergy across different media to increase their ancillary revenue and expand marketing. In fact, the studios' efforts to expand their vertical integration by acquiring theaters circuits owned by vaudeville corporations was deeply intertwined with their efforts to expand further into variety theater. In doing this, this dissertation provides for the first time a macro-industrial perspective of the film industry's investment in, and utilization of, live performance until the early 1950s. This dissertation seeks to fill an important

gap in the historical narrative of live performance in motion picture theaters from 1925 to around 1950. For this industrial section of the project, I focus especially on a critical period between 1925 and 1935, which established the conventions, policies, infrastructure, and corporate cultures which continued to dictate the use of live performance in theaters until at least the early 1950s.

Second, this dissertation is concerned with the socio-cultural implications of these industrial relationships. Most consequentially, I argue that the continuation of these practices requires us to rethink many of our assumptions about how the transition to sound and the onset of the Great Depression supposedly homogenized and standardized exhibition cultures by eliminating variable live performance and live accompaniment practices.<sup>21</sup> These findings to the contrary reclaim the first-run, studio-era theater as a venue where live performance could act in opposition to, or in support of, onscreen cultural norms that many have claimed disappeared with the adoption of standardized synchronized sound. Like many studies of silent-era theatergoing, I position the theater as a cultural and social space in which live performance often mediated the meanings of a supposedly homogenized cinematic mass culture, especially for various ethnic and racial minorities.<sup>22</sup>

As the study of these live performance circuits makes clear, audiences' experiences in these theaters were significantly different than a majority of theatergoers where single or double features intermixed with shorts was the norm, and it exposed Hollywood's most financially important audiences to a distinct, more racially inclusive, star system not solely dictated from the top-down.<sup>23</sup> Hollywood's integration of live performance also transferred models of performance and stardom from vaudeville and other interconnected media industries that were often at odds with Hollywood's institutional values.<sup>24</sup> As a result, Hollywood fostered a star system within its

circuits at odds with the largely white and non-ethnic paradigm it used onscreen.<sup>25</sup> These live performance circuits provided a space for racially and ethnically diverse performers (especially those in music) to receive top-billing on these movie-theater stages, while African American actors and musicians generally received marginal, stereotypical roles in Hollywood films. This is especially true for big bands led by African American stars like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Cab Calloway, who were many of the most highly paid and in-demand stars *on the stage* of many of these same theaters where they also appeared marginally onscreen.

This dissertation considers the interplay between live performances by racially and ethnically diverse performers and Hollywood exhibition and marketing practices and how each was received by audiences. Put another way, my research investigates the affordances of different media industries and entertainment forms for performers and audiences of color, and reveals historical spaces that fostered their agency during a time when most representation on screen worked to stereotype and marginalize them. My dissertation argues that another reason that live performance in motion picture theaters should not be ignored is that doing so has concealed both the important roles performers of color played in this space and the preferences and experiences of audiences of color, especially African Americans, who sought out this entertainment into at least the 1970s. Some theater managers and talent agents featured multiracial performers as a strategy to attract diverse audiences, including Asian Americans, Latinx Americans, and African Americans, to movie palaces. In other cases, increased patronage by racial and ethnic minorities was an unintended result of programming live acts because audiences of color actively sought them out. My project dispels the idea that attending movie palaces was only a white experience, and begins to detail the experiences of these under-

researched audiences who were an important, but largely overlooked part of the movie palace experience.

The reclamation of live performance in motion picture exhibition has significant consequences for American cinema historiography. Scholars' acceptance of the death of live performance in movie theaters and the near-total homogenization of exhibition cultures has gone unchallenged because it conveniently fits into a teleological hyper-efficiency narrative, in which its decline is seen as an obvious consequence of Hollywood's increasing industrial standardization.<sup>26</sup> I would contend that if Hollywood really was as hyper-efficient as sometimes imagined, live performance alongside motion pictures would have been eradicated, if not during the vertical integration and multimedia conglomeration of the 1920s, then certainly during the fiscal conservatism of the Great Depression. It is true that, in the name of greater efficiency and support for film production, executives from multiple studios, not just the often-cited Warner Bros., called for the elimination of stage entertainment in movie theaters beginning around 1928.<sup>27</sup> But this dissertation makes clear that we have so far accepted their words without a proper examination of the often-contradictory actions of the studios or even acknowledging the limits of what was actually within their control compared to that of agents, performers, and especially theater managers.

In short, the total elimination of live performance not only did not occur, but does not accurately represent Hollywood's process of industrialization and standardization nor its goals. In fact, the Hollywood studios did not share a consistent policy about the roles live entertainment should play in American distribution and exhibition. This dissertation argues that the history of stage shows in movie theaters demonstrates that American film scholarship has focused excessively on the narrative of a hyper-rationalizing studio system supplanting vaudeville-like

performance, a story which does not accurately reflect the actions of studios or individual theaters but instead relies largely on myths used by the Hollywood's film industry to dissuade theater managers from programming live acts. While the undeniable decline of live performance is largely due to the efforts of studios to persuade, train, and sometimes force theater managers to focus on exhibiting the studios' output of films, its *continued survival* is primarily the result of Hollywood's inability to fully achieve that aim. In fact, the studios often *needed* live performance to maintain its control over urban entertainment markets, and to cover for its inadequate film production. Independent theaters, disadvantaged by studio oligopolistic favoritism, also used live performance to gain some control over their programs. Thus, live performance functioned as one of the few ways independents could push against Hollywood's oligopoly.

## **Literature Review**

The arguments of this dissertation intervene at the intersections of three overlapping sub-fields of film and media scholarship: exhibition, distribution, and audience studies; star studies; and industrial studies of Hollywood and other media. Much media historiography proves the value of intermedial approaches to cinema history by showing how cinema is culturally, aesthetically, and industrially indebted to the influences, interventions, and framework of other media.<sup>28</sup> But, according to the dominant narrative in media historiography, almost all of cinema's intermedial relationships with theatrical cultures abruptly halt by the early 1930s, coinciding with the ostensible "death" of vaudeville.<sup>29</sup> I aim to reconsider this relationship and show how theatrical cultures continued to inform cinematic exhibition well after the era of vaudeville.

*Industry Studies of Hollywood, Vaudeville, and Other Media*

In contrast to radio, recorded music, and television, there is relatively little scholarship on the industrial interrelationship of cinema and live performance after the early 1930s. One exception is Robert McLaughlin's *Broadway and Hollywood: A History of Economic Interactions*, which examines the adaptations, the movement of personnel and performers, and the exchange of capital that linked these two major cultural industries from 1912 to 1970. He argues that commercial theater needs to be studied alongside Hollywood (and vice versa), as its largest single shaping force—economically, artistically, and organizationally—was the growth and industrial formalization of the motion picture industry.<sup>30</sup> Like McLaughlin, my study argues that variety performance (especially including vaudeville, presentations, and their iterations) cannot be appropriately investigated outside of its function in Hollywood. My dissertation goes a step further by showing how live performances--not just film adaptations of legitimate theater--were built into Hollywood's corporate structures, played in their theaters, and relied largely on their stars. Unlike Broadway, variety live performance was another product produced, distributed, and exhibited by the studios themselves, coordinated by the Hollywood studios' vaudeville booking offices and its theater managers in coordination with talent agents and performers. Like legitimate theater, then, Hollywood was also variety theater's largest shaping force, but these live performances are not related or interconnected, as with Broadway, they are a part of the motion picture industry.

In part the lack of studies focusing on this history is explained through the long-standing dominance of production-focused histories of the Los Angeles-based studios. This can be attributed partly to the media studies' prioritization of media texts, but also because archives generally favor production-related materials.<sup>31</sup> As such, most works self-designated as industrial

histories of Hollywood focus largely or solely on film production.<sup>32</sup> Exhibition-focused histories, such as Douglas Gomery's *Shared Pleasures* or Ross Melnick and Andreas Fuchs's *Cinema Treasures*, rely on sources created by the studios in their New York headquarters. These documents have been saved in far less quantity, making research on this topic more difficult due to the piecemeal surviving evidence.

Even within this smaller body of work, the relationships between vaudeville and cinema are better documented up to the early 1920s, with the few studies which examine the late 1920s and early 1930s arguing that vaudeville “died” in the early 1930s.<sup>33</sup> What is clear in this work, however, is that vaudeville helped to determine the types of films produced at various points in film history. Not only did this include the “cinema of attractions” characteristic of early cinema, but also Hollywood sound comedies of the 1930s. What Henry Jenkins calls the “vaudeville aesthetic”—and what others who make similar arguments about vaudeville’s influential role in early television and radio programming call its “formula,” “model,” and “culture”—is a performative, spectacle-filled style lacking narrative and character development.<sup>34</sup>

Most histories of vaudeville focus entirely around big-time vaudeville circuits and their competition with small-time vaudeville.<sup>35</sup> Adhering to a strict definition of vaudeville rooted in big-time booking practices (i.e. large circuits, vaudeville-specific stars, programs anchored in live performances), historians have declared vaudeville as dead anywhere from 1930 to 1932. Others, like Robert Snyder and Alison Kibler, mark vaudeville’s end around the same time period, but define it as the dissolution of vaudeville as a cultural industry; one unlike cinema which was simultaneously bureaucratic and national in scope, while still being able to successfully foster and cater to local communities.<sup>36</sup> In all cases, no work on the relationships between vaudeville and cinema extends its period of analysis past the early 1930s, and many



limit the scope of their research to 1920.<sup>37</sup> Even Robert Allen's noteworthy work on the subject, *Vaudeville and Film: A Study of Media of Interaction*, ends its analysis at 1915, citing the increasing complexity between the two industries caused by the growing studio system warranted further research before any conclusions could be drawn.<sup>38</sup>

Despite asserting its death as a cultural industry, scholars have demonstrated how vaudeville, as the first mass cultural industry, provided an influential model for Hollywood's industrial practices. In fact, four of the five majors (Paramount, Fox, MGM, and RKO) began as vaudeville corporations.<sup>39</sup> Conglomeration throughout the 1920s resulted in Hollywood controlling vaudeville's regional theater circuits, giving it exhibition networks throughout crucial, densely populated urban and metropolitan areas in the country. Like vaudeville, Hollywood had centralized business offices in New York City and vertical and horizontal integration, allowing it to regulate salaries and deter competition in production and distribution, and to build stars and control their images circulated through networks of theaters.<sup>40</sup> Vaudeville also provided Hollywood with a model for marketing and pricing for a mass audience, one that appealed to the upper and middle-class patrons through opulence and stars while also being inexpensive enough for the working-class.<sup>41</sup> American movie theaters also continued to use vaudeville's modular, act based programming—which played a feature film alongside shorts, travelogues, and newsreels.

While these influences are well-established, these studies reaffirm a periodization that posits that the maturity of the Hollywood studio system and the widespread adoption of synchronized sound severed cinema's connections with live performance in movie theaters. Histories of vaudeville, which center particularly on the big-time Keith, Albee, and Orpheum circuits, trace its decline as an autonomous media industry from their failures and troubles dating

back to the 1910s to the definite onset of their decline in 1926 due to competition from movie palaces and national theater circuits, eventually ending with the companies' merger with Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and Film Booking Office (FBO) in 1928 to form the vertically integrated studio Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO).<sup>42</sup> Others trace the decline and death of vaudeville to the death of the "Great Men" who founded the major circuits and vaudeville periodicals (Edward Albee, B.F. Keith, Pantages, Marcus Loew, Michael Shea, William Morris, Sime Silverman, and Samuel Rothafel), the disappearance of the "two-a-day" programming policy for which the big-time circuit was known, and to the transition of the Palace Theater in New York City, the most prestigious vaudeville theater, from featuring only live acts to combining them with sound motion pictures. In this latter narrative, the Palace Theater stood as a symbol of the power, luxury, class, and prominence of vaudeville in the media landscape but then turned into a well-publicized demonstration of Hollywood's (and sound-motion pictures) commercial domination and ostensible erasure of live performance. Accepting vaudeville's demise as a cultural industry with the disappearance of live performance, few media scholars have tried to delve much deeper into the relationship between cinema and vaudeville beyond the time of the latter's supposed death.

Outside of works explicitly about vaudeville's history, industrial histories of American cinema during the 1920s present live performance as a common feature of film exhibition practice at least until the late 1920s. However, they do not chronicle how it fit into Hollywood's process of industrialization and multimedia conglomeration. Richard Koszarski calls his history of American cinema from 1915 to 1928, *An Evening's Entertainment*, to emphasize that, during the late silent era and early studio era "going to movies" meant surrounding oneself with an array of entertainment forms including features, shorts, and various types of music and live

performance. Similarly, Ross Melnick's study of star exhibitor Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel's career, *American Showman: Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908-1935*, demonstrates that the work of the most celebrated and imitated theater-man of the 1910s and 1920s involved not just programming films, but also producing combinations of elaborate stage shows and radio broadcasts, building mega-movie palaces, and creating and maintaining the Roxy brand and its public persona.

Likewise, William Paul's book, *When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film* demonstrates that the development of movie theater architecture, spectatorship, and even film distribution and reception were deeply dependent on the history, aesthetics, and conventions of live theater (particularly legitimate theater, though occasionally vaudeville). Paul's book in part argues that conventional movie palace design of the 1910s and 1920s accommodated a shared purpose of showcasing films *and* live acts. He demonstrates how architects and theater owners aimed to balance the visual and aural needs of live performance - and legitimate theater's and big-time vaudeville's emphasis on middle-class culture and social uplift - with cinema's growingly cross-class audience who were more accustomed to the equal sight lines to the entertainment than usually offered by the hierarchical seating of live theatrical venues. As such architects incorporated the opulence, massive size, and the fully equipped stage of vaudeville and legitimate theaters with features indebted from storefront movie theaters, including front facing seating and carefully designed sight lines to the stage for all seats. In this way their designs supported the myth of a democratized entertainment venue in which all enjoyed relatively equal access to high-class entertainment at inexpensive prices. But the competing tensions between optimal live performance viewing and cinema viewing were not completely reconcilable. Movie palaces were, in Paul's words, actually

“terrible places in which to view movies,” as they were designed to house film screens, but not particularly-well designed to showcase films. In contrast, many privileged audiences’ view to stages.<sup>43</sup> As a result, they regularly filled the remainder of the stage with prologues, stage settings, and variety acts for which the house was more visually attuned. The palaces’ architecturally engrained ability to showcase variety theater in a combination format helps partially explain why live performance was included into many of these theater programs until the 1950s.

These accounts are invested in including live performance and the diverse mediascape, but they are only tangentially studio-histories of the media conglomeration of live performance as this dissertation seeks to be. Melnick’s study focuses mainly on Rothafel (who never was a studio-executive himself). Roxy’s usually short-lived, contentious collaborations with Loew’s, Fox, RKO, and finally Warner Bros, provide only hints at the widespread prevalence of live performance (including vaudeville, presentations, and personal appearances) and the ways it played into corporate strategies of prestige and theater acquisition. Roxy certainly established some industrial trends, but his work was always exceptional and only rarely demonstrated the normative uses of live performance (e.g. a small amount of live acts centered on programming stars, relatively simple decor and costuming, etc.) This dissertation even demonstrates that one of Roxy’s professional downfalls late in his career was not just his prodigality, but also his disregard for the star-centered live performance programming that dominated the shrinking and changing industry. While *An Evening’s Entertainment* highlights how commonplace live performance practices were, it does not explain the industrial motivations and structure behind them, nor the training, infrastructure, and corporate policies that supported them. Koszarki also limits his study to 1928, a decision designed to prevent much overlap with the next book in the

Charles Scribner's Sons "History of American Cinema" series covering the adoption of synchronized sound.<sup>44</sup> Ending the book at this juncture (a decision likely made by the editors of the series) furthers the false notion that live performance ended (or became negligible) in the early sound period. Melnick's study does not share this problem of periodization, but its reliance on biographical convention means that his book ends with Roxy's death in 1936, without studying the continuing relationships between stage and screen which persisted beyond him.

Likewise, Paul limits the bulk of his research for *When Movies Were Theater* to the pre-sound era, and his conclusion skips the studio era entirely by discussing the implications of his insights on approaching post-Paramount Decree (1948) widescreen formats like Cinerama. Paul, however, avoids repeating the displacement narrative of vaudeville's early demise by including an appendix providing an approximate sketch of when movie theaters stopped showing live performances in seven sample markets, all cities of varying sizes from several different regions of the United States (Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Hartford, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, Washington D.C.).<sup>45</sup> Using newspaper advertisements as his sole source, Paul demonstrates that every market had at least one theater showing live performance until the late 1930s, and only one (Hartford) ceased to offer stage shows before 1940 when its Palace Theater adopted double features in 1937. The remainder of the cities continued to offer at least one theater with a combination policy until the mid-to-late 1940s, and two (Boston and Chicago) discontinued combination bills in the mid-1950s. Paul's appendix efficiently disproves the long-standing claims that live performance disappeared in the early 1930s by showing this was not the case in his seven selected cities in the East coast, Midwest, and Southeast, and cities as large as Chicago and as small as Hartford.

Paul's appendix effectively counters the argument that the relationship between live performance and cinema exhibition ended in the early 1930s but his evidence is also limited by his sources, and on his focus on theatre design and architecture. In some cases, the appendix is simply inaccurate, under-approximating the extent of combination policies in the selected markets. For example, according to *Variety*, the Stanley Theater in Pittsburgh and the Capitol Theater in Atlanta presented stage shows until 1952, not 1945 and 1944 respectively; and even Hartford had a movie theater that showed live performances as late as 1953.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Paul's appendix does not explain why stage acts continued much further than previously assumed, nor why they ultimately ended when they did. Nor does it provide any space to discuss the impact of live performance on the experiences of spectators or on the systems of film distribution, as Paul so admirably does with theater architecture and the influence of legitimate theater in the 1910s and 1920s. Of course, Paul's book about theater architecture does not set out to answer these questions, though they naturally arise from the appendix's inclusion.

Unlike studies of the silent era, most histories of American cinema in the sound era assert the decline and ultimate death of live performance in motion picture theaters by the early 1930s at the latest. The cause of death is usually attributed to a combination of the popularity of film and radio, the replacement of live acts with "canned vaudeville" (live acts captured and shown on film) and vaudeville-like musicals, and the economic climate of the Great Depression, which rendered live shows too expensive to stage. Even those few studies that acknowledge the continuation of live performances largely in metropolitan theaters into the 1930s and 1940s do not explain the historical contexts that made possible and shaped this practice.<sup>47</sup>

There are, however, a few notable exceptions which provide insights into the roles that live performance played in Hollywood's industrial structure and programming patterns. In her

1944 *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*, Mae Huettig uses the annual reports filed with the United States Securities and Exchange Commission to show that the five major studios were not just vertically integrated and principally concerned with film production. They were also horizontally integrated through their control of subsidiaries across the entertainment industry, real-estate, and even manufacturing.<sup>48</sup> Huettig includes “vaude-ville [*sic*] booking agencies” in this list, though she does not elaborate on their role in exhibition, distribution, and stardom, mentioning them only to list the studios’ multiple sites of economic profit and control.

Douglas Gomery’s *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Going in the United States*, still the authoritative account of American exhibition practices, mentions that only the “top movie palaces in the largest American cities still booked [live] acts.”<sup>49</sup> Donald Crafton’s *The Talkies: American Cinema’s Transition to Sound, 1926-1931* and Tino Balio’s *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* also mention the continuation of live performance in large cities though only in passing. Their discussions are limited to a smattering of examples of onstage performances throughout the 1930s and 1940s, including Frank Sinatra, Gene Autry, and Louis Armstrong, among others.<sup>50</sup> Neither scholar develops a fuller analysis of these performances nor treats these theaters as anything more than anomalies.

Mark Glancy and John Sedgwick’s essay “Cinema Going in the United States in the Mid-1930s” establishes the prevalence of live performance in American theaters during a two-year span.<sup>51</sup> Using box-office statistics printed in *Variety* from October 1934 to October 1936, their data reveal that double billing did not dominate American theaters as usually depicted. Instead, much like exhibition practices of the 1920s, a typical three-hour program consisted of a diverse collection of entertainment including cartoons, newsreels, short films, and even live performance. Well into the sound period, the study indicates that 43% of theaters still featured

live performance, ranging from comedy shows featuring Jack Benny and the Marx Brothers to large-scale musical programs featuring radio's most popular orchestras and bands. Like Paul's appendix, this study proves the persistence and continued box-office potential of live performance at first-run theaters, at least for these two years. But Glancy and Sedgwick tell us little about exhibition strategies, the star system, or audiences.

City-specific studies of entertainment cultures acknowledge live performance during the period of my study as part (albeit a small one) of a national system of entertainment. Gregory Waller's essay "Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers: Small-Town Picture Shows in the 1930s" reveals the prevalent trend among Kentucky movie theaters (regardless of size) of programming live performances of "hillbilly" country-western music.<sup>52</sup> Instead of attributing such music as another way that theater managers modified the context and possible interpretations of Hollywood produced films to local taste, Waller argues that they were part of the ongoing nationalization of country music. Conversely, Colin Gunckel has demonstrated how theater managers in Los Angeles used live performance in the 1930s to cater to Mexican and Spanish speaking audiences.<sup>53</sup> My study likewise considers how live performance provided an important link from film exhibition to a variety of entertainment forms, sometimes, but not always, targeted to local consumption. However, I expand their methodology to first-run metropolitan theaters, which Waller explicitly sets his study against and which are not the primary focus of Gunckel's study.

Similarly, in their study of Philadelphia movie-going between 1934 and 1936, Catherine Jurca and John Sedgwick show that in the Stanley-Warner-dominated market not only did the Earle Theater, one of the circuit's flagship venues, program live acts but four neighborhood theaters also offered regular showings of "vaudeville" on the weekends or select week days.<sup>54</sup>



While the authors are largely dismissive of the importance of live performance in this market, claiming that it did not regularly “challenge the dominance of the feature film,” they explain its continued programming as stemming from Hollywood’s system of production which often supplied an inadequate supply of stand-alone feature films.<sup>55</sup> They argue that live performance, like “B” films, served primarily to fill the bill in Philadelphia as needed. By taking a national and industry-wide focus instead of a city-specific one, my study makes clear that this underproduction of “A” films was systemic in Hollywood, and was not specific to the Depression or due to the prohibitive costs of converting to sound. The survival of live performance continued long past 1936 due to an underperforming production system embedded into studio infrastructure, which was, in part, able to underperform without major repercussions because of the continuance of live performance.

Other sources mention live performances in these theaters but dismiss them as anachronistic or anomalous, and do not analyze specific combinations of live performance and cinema. These references occur most often in biographies, however, they also appear in histories of individual theaters as well as historical surveys of entertainment within a particular city or cities, and even in coffee-table style books about the star-system.<sup>56</sup> If these sources do discuss the connection between onstage performances and the films onscreen, it is almost exclusively for shows where a performer appears to promote a film (e.g. Judy Garland appearing with *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) or the cast of *Gone with the Wind* (1939) attending and performing live during a premiere screening). This was—by far—the least common programming strategy, but they were advertised aggressively and written about in the trade press and newspapers with more frequency and length than average. My dissertation will discuss these practices’ roles in the

larger systems of live performance, as well as outline the many other types of live performance strategies and programs operating from 1915 to 1950.

The problems with the aforementioned studies are not just about lack of attention to live performance, but also with their general narrative trend. These histories share a common narrative thread of the continual decline of the combination policy in American theaters that paralleled the ostensibly irrefutable dissolution of big-time vaudeville. In contrast, this dissertation makes clear that live performance in motion picture theaters reached its apex during the late 1920s and arose concomitant to the diminishing of big-time vaudeville. The heavy investment and utilization of live performance by Hollywood studios and the regional theater chains they acquired in the 1920s quickened, if not caused, the decline of vaudeville as an autonomous media industry. Yet, it also temporarily increased the extent of live performances used in first-run theaters. I present, then, a new transitional narrative to live performance in movie theaters, one that steadily rose during the mid-1920s, reached a peak level around 1927-28 and did not begin to decline steadily until 1930. Live performance then plateaued around 1934 and remained fairly consistent in its reduced state until the late 1940s.

Re-writing variety performance's narrative during this period also re-writes long accepted tenets of Hollywood's industrial history. Live performance's decline narrative is so widespread and unchallenged in media historiography because it adheres to the underlying assumption of Hollywood's increasing industrial rationalization throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, with which live performance was ostensibly incompatible. Perhaps the most common narrative thread in industrial histories of Hollywood during this period is the ever-growing efficiency of the studios' business practices and management, forming what Balio and others call a "mature oligopoly" with Fordist systems of production, economies of scale, its deep-seated divisions of

labor, vertical integration, distribution practices that exploited independent theaters, strategic control of first run theaters, proliferation of standardized musical scores, its adoption of the chain-store methods for distribution and exhibition, and standardization of synchronized sound which offered complete, standardized packages of moving images and music to theaters across the globe.<sup>57</sup>

According to this industry-focused research, these attempts to further rationalize and standardize exhibition involved the targeted elimination of stage shows. These studies have regularly pointed out that many studio executives, especially the pioneering Harry Warner, viewed sound technology not primarily as a method of achieving further cinematic realism, but as a means for eliminating costly live music performances at their theaters and replacing live acts with more cost-effective filmed versions.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, the Great Depression moved all the studios to reduce overhead as much as they could, of which live performance constituted a significant part. There is no doubt that, to quote a Fox Theaters executive discussing the viability of stage shows, “the human being has not the flexibility of the tireless, emotionless, inanimate film that is run by machinery and transported in a can.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, relative to the distribution and exhibition of mass produced rolls of celluloid, stage shows and other forms of localized entertainment were time-intensive, impossible to replicate and distribute, and involved the management of inefficient human bodies with egos and mental states. Stage shows, no matter the format or style, were costly and relatively inefficient and decentralized, requiring the payment and transportation of musicians, stagehands, producers, talent agents, booking agents, and the management of star performers (some of which with huge egos), as well as sets and costumes. In contrast to Hollywood’s strict divisions of labor, it also meant that theater managers had to divide their time between their duties of programming, advertising, and exhibiting films *and* the

booking, rehearsing, and advertising of stage shows. Managers even sometimes had to adjust the show during its run at their theater. A sample schedule from 1938 of a manager whose theater produced and programmed live acts makes clear just how massive an undertaking it was.<sup>60</sup>

I argue that citing the unequal efficiency of the media forms as the determinant cause for the changes and ultimate decline of live performance in theater is an oversimplified platitude. In the accounts by Douglas Gomery, Tino Balio, and Donald Crafton, among others, the adoption of synchronized sound brought with it the ultimate tool for standardization to replace both live accompaniment to films and live performances on the same bill, and distribute filmed versions of vaudeville acts. All subsequent use of live performance occurred in exceptional theaters in exceptionally large cities. As Gomery summarizes this narrative: “Save a handful in New York, Chicago, and other very large cities, [theaters] offered only [sound] films, an even more standardized easily monitored, and controlled product. Profits soared.”<sup>61</sup>

While this explanation adheres to the master efficiency narrative, it also contradicts it. The fact that mainly large, deluxe, even flagship, first-run theaters (which I confirm, with many exceptions) continued to book live performance contradicts our current understanding of studio-era film distribution and Hollywood’s process of monopolization, given that these theaters programmed live performances exclusively with inexpensive “B” films (what many critics referred to in this context as “bad films”) after 1929.<sup>62</sup> According to well-established and ever growing research, Hollywood’s control over film exhibition depended largely on studios owning a majority of the roughly 400 metropolitan first-run theaters, booking their highest quality films there before anywhere else, and boosting revenue and assuring patronage through restrictive distribution policies on their affiliated theaters (including runs, clearances, and zone and minimum price agreements), and granting these theaters flexible contracts not on offer to non-

affiliated theaters.<sup>63</sup> Thus, according to the efficiency narrative, these strategically mega-movie palaces were the most important theaters *to exhibit films*. Without further research into why they continued to program live acts, they do appear exceptional—that is, exceptionally wasteful. Studying live performance in movie theaters is thus an especially apt subject for judging the appropriateness of this dominant historical narrative because, along with live musical accompaniment of films, film historians have seen such performances as the principal casualties of Hollywood’s industrialization and adoption of synchronized sound.

### *Exhibition, Distribution, and Audience Studies*

Clearly, the survival of live performance in movie theaters does not appear to fit nicely into this narrative and shifts the study of Hollywood distribution and exhibition in important directions. My dissertation argues that exhibition studies need to account for a more holistic theater-going experience which acknowledges the central role of programming. Exhibition histories tend to avoid discussions or analyses of individual films or groups of texts (films, shorts, etc.). Sometimes, as in many of Robert Allen’s studies of theater-going in the American South, there is no mention of films at all.<sup>64</sup> Scholars justify this approach on the assumption that in the habitual action of theater attendance, individual films had only a marginal impact on the social and cultural experience of its audience.<sup>65</sup> Audiences were affected by a wide-range of entertainment options as well as issues of architecture, socioeconomics, segregation, local and nation-wide discourse, and other issues and stimuli around and outside the theater.<sup>66</sup> While many argue that this approach to studying “film history without films,” or at least without the primacy of individual films, is justified by the historical experience of its audiences,<sup>67</sup> others claim that this is polemical and reactionary, and against the long-standing centrality of the narrative feature

film across all aspects of film history, especially in production, film analysis, and reception studies.<sup>68</sup>

My project supports a growing body of work which reclaims the social and economic importance of programmed content and reconciles it with the theater-going experience, explaining how larger macro-industrial strategies of distribution account for audience demand and taste. John Sedgwick and Catherine Jurca's study of programming and attendance in Philadelphia from 1934-1936 shows that audiences expressed noticeable and quantifiable choices over the individual films they attended. This discovery leads them to rightly question the "film/exhibition studies without the films" approach, by asserting that "declaring films unimportant is not much of an alternative to considering them all important, especially given how little we really know about the choices that brought historical audiences into a given theater."<sup>69</sup> Similarly, my project demonstrates the drawing power of live performance in these markets, which was reported overwhelmingly in the trade press. The conclusion of my intervention is not a broad declaration that live presentations always overshadowed all other forms of amusement offered, and that historians should decenter onscreen media from their analyses. But it could and did impact who attended the theater and their experiences within it. Rather than delineate media forms, it is also productive to consider their similar uses. I argue that live performance functioned as another means of selling stars, and an approach shared by almost all American theaters regardless of programming strategy. Instead of focusing on the hierarchy of entertainment forms, my work focuses on their cumulative impact (though principally live performance) toward the selling of stars—Hollywood's principal product of this era—by saturating as much of the entertainment market as they could.<sup>70</sup>

The lack of studies on metropolitan theaters and their programming choices is also the result of the narrative in which Hollywood studios' standardized products (movies) shaped exhibition practices and audience reception. The question—why study first-run metropolitan theaters during the studio era? — has been answered by scholars in some ways but not in others. The common refrain among cinema scholars has been to invoke the macro-industrial explanation: we should study these theaters and their audiences if we want to know Hollywood's primary intended audience and the places where Hollywood made most of its money.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the monolithic, capitalistic workings of the studio system's distribution and exhibition have been well-covered in the work of Mae Huettig, Douglas Gomery, and Tino Balio, among others. Hollywood's economic monopoly over large American urban theaters, their imagined nationwide American audience based largely on these cities, as well as film studies' "gothocentric" focus on New York City exhibition has incited Robert Allen and others to mobilize for change within exhibition studies.<sup>72</sup> The resulting local and neighborhood studies have largely positioned themselves against (or at least present as an important alternative to) metropolitan-centric studies. The reasons, according to Allen and others, are that such urban-centrism threatens to flatten local and regional demographic differences by assuming, like Hollywood did, that the socio-cultural patterns and demographics of movie-going in first-run theaters could be understood as representative across regions and theater types.<sup>73</sup>

Dismissing first-run theaters as just another standardized cog in Hollywood's business machine is problematic for several reasons.<sup>74</sup> First, it implies that—as a part of the centralized system of distribution—the programming of films and other acts would also be standardized and hence not worth studying outside its well-established homogenized features. This bias is evident from the lack of studies on American distribution, programs of Hollywood theaters, or studies

centered around Hollywood-owned theaters during the sound era.<sup>75</sup> Instead, we find more work on non-programmatic elements of studio-era exhibition such as giveaways, architecture, and studies about the discourse around imaginary theaters.<sup>76</sup> As a result of the historiographic trend to decenter films as the objects of study, coupled with the long-standing view that programming was heavily standardized, contemporary cinema studies largely fail to consider Hollywood-affiliated and independent urban theaters, during the studio-era.<sup>77</sup> The existence of live performance in these theaters, then, has remained largely hidden in largely unexamined programs.

Like other recent scholarship combining macro-industrial methods with a close examination of regional distribution and exhibition practices, my dissertation disproves the complete homogeneity of exhibition and distribution practices. Studies of standard booking contracts by Richard Maltby, of programming in first, second, and third-run theaters in Philadelphia by Jurca and Sedgwick, and Andrea Comiskey's study of first-run exhibition during four years of the 1930s demonstrate that theater managers had varying amounts of contractual agency over the choice of films shown in their theaters. Their work also suggests that audiences' preferences—especially those in first run theaters—dictated what films were held over and which ones moved down the runs and zones.<sup>78</sup> My work expands upon these findings by showing that theater managers regularly chose to program non-celluloid attractions.

Live performance, as my dissertation points out, is another disruption to the notion of an all-controlling capitalist Hollywood, relying solely on a top-down homogenized, and standardized mass-retail system.<sup>79</sup> Specifically, live performance practices indicate that Hollywood did not simply mass-produce and distribute all of their products in the same way. It also shows that programming was controlled by many different people, including agents, theater



managers, and even the performers themselves, and not just centralized studio offices. Non-studio entities from other media organizations played sometimes powerful roles in determining the onstage and onscreen content. Large independent theaters that were centrally located enough to afford to program live performance used it to control the entertainment options within their own theater in order to program bills that they believed catered to their audiences unlike the films they were often forced to rent as part of their booking deals with the studios. Even in studio-owned theaters, individual theater managers—not national studio offices or even regional exchanges—were in charge of booking and programming acts. This control was often handed over by choice or contractually obligated to talent agencies or headline performers themselves, either because they wanted to book a star performer who demanded control or they wanted to rely on the expertise of others.

Thus, there is an evident need to study distribution and programming strategies of metropolitan theaters and the experiences of their audiences in relation to programmatic decision making. Theaters involved in live performance circuits were disproportionately small relative to the national total (at least since the 1920s, but especially so after 1933/34), but their importance as a first-run theater in the grand scheme of cinema history is exponentially large. *If*, as current research suggests, Hollywood made business decisions (across production, distribution, and exhibition) based on the reception and audience tests done at these theaters and mediated through exchange offices, then understanding these spectators' experiences is crucial to all aspects of American film history.<sup>80</sup> It is especially important then to understand how, by what (onstage and onscreen) content, and for whom these experiences were shaped in order to gain a clearer understanding of Hollywood's taste-making audience.

Such findings reclaim the first-run theater as a social space in which live performance could act in opposition or support of cultural norms. “Bottom-up” studies of live performance and cinema in a variety of exhibition venues during the silent era have been extremely fruitful in discussing both the historical agency of local audiences as well as larger systems of audience control. These studies position the theater as a cultural and social space in which live performance often mediated the meanings and experiences of homogenized cinematic mass culture, especially for ethnic and racial minorities.<sup>81</sup> In contrast, others have discussed the role of live performance in assimilating spectatorship to middle class norms while eliminating working-class viewing habits.<sup>82</sup> By seeking to discover what room for autonomy live performance allowed programmers (or how it acted as another site of control) and how its combination with other acts and films might have changed the meanings of Hollywood’s principal feature films for different audiences, this dissertation shows live performance acted as a site of contention that affected the socio-cultural experience of theatergoing persisted after the adoption of synchronized sound supposedly homogenized and largely de-socialized it.

My dissertation also examines the relationships between cinema and music *within* theaters. Scholarship about the industrial and racial relationships between music and cinema (for instance, jazz) after 1930 tend to focus only on film music, that is, movie soundtracks.<sup>83</sup> Taking a cue from research on silent film sound, I examine the theater as a historical space where the experience and meaning of cinema was mediated through music, especially for African American audiences.

Unlike many recent studies of exhibition practices which focus on a particular theater, city, or regional market, my dissertation focuses on systems governing distribution and exhibition nationally.<sup>84</sup> This does not mean I am not concerned with issues of local variation. My

examples include a range of different theaters (largely first run) from different studios or independents, in cities across multiple regions of the United States. However, while comparatively local studies delve into issues of how cultural geography, local politics, audience demographics interact with patterns and experiences of movie-going, my project is more concerned about the affordances this system supplied for regional and local variation and its effects on the industry. By affordances, I mean the potential (or perceived) features, capabilities, and constraints of a particular media industry (or any individual parts of it) which are governed by many social, cultural, and economic factors.<sup>85</sup> In this case, I mean that I am interested in revealing the extent to which national and regional exhibition, governed and regulated in part by studio distribution policies, facilitated or allowed localized programming and marketing of stars. My study does not focus primarily on live performance's effects in individual cities, rather on what these theaters reveal about national, regional, and city distribution and exhibition systems and how live performance circuits throughout these cities influenced the larger celebrity culture thereby situating how live performance was national and institutional and yet also local and regional.

Methodologies focusing on how mass culture is mediated on local levels do not render macro-economic accounts of Hollywood exhibition obsolete. As Gregory Waller's study of the live performance of hillbilly music in Kentucky during the 1930s makes clear, live performance was recirculated in a variety of ways that communicated with and appealed to local audiences even though it was part of national "mass culture."<sup>86</sup> Live performance practices fall outside the extremely constricted notion of mass production and distribution that is usually characteristic of Hollywood studies, but they are not outside the system. In fact, by and large, during the 1930s

live performance programming and promotion in movie theaters served star systems in film, radio, and live music more than ever before.

### *Star Studies*

In order to achieve this, my dissertation considers the circulation of stars within, between, across, and around many media industries, and the implications of this transmedial circulation for how the star system and audience relationships to stars are more broadly understood. While placing the star system and individual stars within the wider media ecology of the studio era is implied by many, live performance is rarely acknowledged after the sound era.<sup>87</sup> In his seminal work, Richard Dyer's method of reading "star images" involves close analysis of performers' onscreen roles, actions, and performances, as well as their off-screen "persona" constructed through publicity and promotion.<sup>88</sup> While Dyer includes live performance in the category of publicity and promotion, he does not discuss its particular contributions to their star images as my dissertation argues is crucial.

My project builds upon research into how live performance and vaudeville contributed to the Hollywood star system in terms of star creation and maintenance (including recruitment, evaluation, development, promotion, casting, marketing, and publicity). Janet Staiger and Richard deCordova have examined the formation of the star system in America during the early 1910s. Both argue that the star system was largely adapted from other cultural industries, namely legitimate theater, and vaudeville, both of which provided examples of how nationally and internationally recognized individuals could help market and sell films. They also showed that the movement of stars between different media could reveal issues of class, cultural distinction, and labor.<sup>89</sup>

After this initial exchange, media scholars have not acknowledged live performance's continued role in the post-Depression star mediascape. The one-way movement of stars *from* vaudeville *to* another media has instead been a central component of industrial and stylistic histories of cinema, radio, and television. In my view, scholars tend to treat instances of live performance after the early 1930s as anomalies or anachronisms rather than as an institutionalized part of the Hollywood system. In fact, references to live performance in movie theaters appear most often in biographies of performers and musicians, but they are usually not analyzed at length and are treated as another stop on their performance or publicity tour.<sup>90</sup> The focus on the individual performer misses the actual system facilitating their tour. Vaudeville stardom has been understood as a phenomenon that largely preceded Hollywood's transition to sound. In Jeanine Basinger's nearly all-encompassing survey of the classical Hollywood star system, for example, she uses Eleanor Powell as the star whose career trajectory serves as a representative example of the inner workings of the system. Basinger's account charts almost every detail of Powell's career in Hollywood from her beginnings in Broadway and vaudeville during the late 1920s to MGM's casting strategies for her. However, like so many stars, Powell's trajectory from live performance and cinema was not linear. She performed in front of Hollywood "movie" theaters for forty-nine weeks between 1931 and 1943, and even for three weeks in 1949.<sup>91</sup>

Other scholars define vaudeville not as a cultural industry but rather as a performance style governed by an emphasis on performativity and disparate spectacles.<sup>92</sup> This approach is characteristic of the mainstream narrative that sees vaudeville as a feeder for performers to enter the cinema, radio, and television. According to this body of scholarship, regardless of how much time had passed since vaudeville's "demise," its "spirit" (its aesthetic and format) moved from

the vaudeville circuits to sound film and radio in the early 1930s (for radio it was sometimes as early as 1925), and then again to television in the late 1940s.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, media historians tend to locate the importance of vaudeville in stars who began their career performing on vaudeville circuits and later performed in other media like Eddie Cantor, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, the Marx Brothers, and the Three Stooges.<sup>94</sup> In this body of scholarship, the two “survivors” of vaudeville, its aesthetic—condensed over simplistically to performativity and a lack of a narrative, characteristics that hardly represent all vaudeville acts—and its actors, become transformed by the new media to create uniquely cinematic, radiophonic, or televisual styles and stars. By acknowledging these stars’ continued performances within these vaudeville-like circuits, my dissertation aims to outline concrete, though non-linear and circulating paths of influence between live performance and cinema. This requires taking an approach to star studies cognizant of the wide media ecology of the Studio era that considers the diachronic meanings of stars throughout media forms and periods of time.<sup>95</sup>

My dissertation begins to explore the roles live performance has played in the heavily documented process of testing, building, and selling stars, and how it helped studios secure and then maintain control over the domestic film industry and regularize revenue using a star’s mass appeal.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, it will also expand our conception of who controlled individual stars and the star system and for what purposes. Many Hollywood histories of the golden age treat the star system as if it was under the total control of the studios, their teams, and their symbiotic relationships with newspapers, gossip columnists, and fan magazines.<sup>97</sup> In contrast, my work contributes to a growing body of scholarship that decenters the role of the studios and emphasizes how publicity agents and talent scouts, among others, controlled and manipulated stars’ images.<sup>98</sup> Heeding Richard deCordova’s point that the star system cannot be adequately

analyzed through individual stars and star events, this dissertation explores how the mass culture of celebrity moved across and through national, regional, and local contexts. It examines the management and publicity strategies used for the circulation of performers across multiple media industries.<sup>99</sup>

Just as my research reveals consequently that centralized studio offices not only did not have total control over distribution and programming, they also did not completely control “the star machine.” In fact, much of this was controlled by mega multimedia talent agencies, including William Morris—a talent agency that historians have suggested did not have direct influence over Hollywood talent until the 1940s.<sup>100</sup> In contrast, this project demonstrates that William Morris, and other smaller agencies, played a role in the Hollywood star system throughout the golden age with onstage tours, by dictating the publicity, tour locations, and content of the acts. Equally as important, this research reconceptualizes how Hollywood dealt with the geographic diversity of its audiences, at least in these privileged theaters. My research suggests that live performance during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s still relied partially on vaudeville’s localized system with individual theater managers who largely determined which acts were booked.

## **Chapter Overview**

At their core, these chapters are revisionist histories about Hollywood’s adoption and implementation of Hollywood’s so-called scientific business management and its only partially successful quest to create standardized entertainment products and theater-going experiences. The first chapter provides an overview of the major forms and formats of variety theater that played alongside films, their industrial setup, and their general prevalence in the United States until the 1920s. This background will be necessary to understand the subsequent arguments and

their stakes. The next three chapters present histories of the studio system and how the five vertically integrated companies came to control, to a significant degree, variety performance in the United States through the control of first-run theaters. Each chapter covers a different period of American film history, segmented in what I suggest best reflects the changing status of live performance in movie theaters. Chapter 2 covers the formation of the vertically integrated studios into multimedia conglomerates (rather than just *film* studios) heavily invested in variety performance from 1920 until 1929 during widespread adoption of synchronized sound. Chapter 3 examines how, during this period of intense conglomeration and vertical integration, the corporate culture and policies of theater chains differed from those in film production, and how this fostered and encouraged the use of live acts. The last of these chapters (chapter 4) focuses on how and why the relationship between live performance and the studio system changed during the most tumultuous years of the Great Depression (1930-1934), and shows how these changes established the conventions which dictated the prevalence and location of live acts until at least the late 1940s. Together they explain why Hollywood came to have dominant influence over variety entertainment, why live performance in movie theaters declined during the early 1930s, but did not disappear, and how the major industrial trends and transitions (e.g. the star system, the Great Depression, adoption of synchronized sound) worked to establish the conventions, prevalence, and location of live performance for the next twenty years.

Each chapter demonstrates that programming stage acts was *always* considered a viable and sometimes even studio-encouraged option for theater managers during the studio era, despite the specific conditions under which it was desired, necessitated, or/or encouraged changing with economic conditions, corporate culture, and distribution policy of the film industry. As such I refute claims that the popularity of film, in particular sound film, and radio, the decline of



autonomous vaudeville corporations, and the economic hardships of the Great Depression led to the eradication of live performance in movie theaters. Instead, the actions and reactions of the studio system and theater managers are to blame. Their interest in and systematic monopolization of variety live performance in the 1920s, and their oscillation between disinterest, apathy, curiosity, and lack of commitment to the media form in the early 1930s most directly contributed to rise, decline and ultimate shape of variety entertainment for this thirty-year period.

Studying variety performance allows us to nuance our understanding of Hollywood's industrialization and standardization processes in two overarching ways. It demonstrates, on one hand, that Hollywood's enactment of some of its core business strategies, particularly vertical integration, were afflicted with inefficiencies. On the other hand, it shows how live performance bookings were an important business strategy for Hollywood in a variety of contexts and periods that channeled distribution and exhibition in both efficient and monopolizing ways. Put another way, live performance might have been inefficient, but various constituents in the film industry needed it to remain competitive and rectify inadequacies. In the mid-to-late 1920s (chapter 2), Hollywood's adoption of variety entertainment (including vaudeville and highly involved and cost-intensive presentations and prologues) was based primarily on two tendencies. First, though live performance was costly and time-intensive compared to film distribution and exhibition, studios believed that presentations and vaudeville bills could be mass produced and distributed in a comparable manner to their celluloid companions and thus tried to fit them into their broader standardization goals. Second, Hollywood welcomed live performances because it valued the prestige of elaborate live spectacle and/or name acts just as much, and sometimes even more, than films, more optimally cost-effective business practices. In this way, the adoption of live performance mirrored the studios' construction or acquisition of movie palaces. Both could be

strategic and profitable investments at the right scale and in the proper situations, but overzealous competition between studios for their opulence and quantity could also lead to damaging financial overcommitments, inflation of expenses, and even bankruptcy and receivership. Similarly, I argue that the prevalence of live performances in first-run markets during this time was the result of the immaturity of vertical integration (chapter 3). While the studios increasingly acquired theaters during the 1920s, making them technically vertically integrated, production, distribution, and exhibition did not yet serve each other synergistically in the ways that the concept implies. Specifically, first run exhibitors still operated under a set of values and beliefs, which I call the “showmanship,” which emphasized the individualism of managers and a holistic entertainment strategy which prioritized attractions, amenities, and services over the economic prosperity of film production and distribution as predicted by the oligopoly-shared strategy.

While the prevalence of live performance in movie theaters undeniably declined during the early 1930s, Hollywood’s continuing industrial inefficiencies caused the studios to have recourse to live performances to a certain extent in urban theaters and continued to do so for the next two decades. As explained in chapter 3, studio executives around 1928 increasingly called for the elimination of stage entertainment in “movie” theaters in the name of a more perfect vertical integration through better (financially) supporting film production and not sharing admission revenue with expensive stage acts. Spurred primarily by financial conservation during the Great Depression, a majority of theaters previously booking live acts finally booked exclusively movies, or what was commonly called at the time adopting a straight picture policy (chapter 4). This decline was as much the result of the profit potential of less financially risky, time-effective, pre-packaged, and completely standardized synchronized sound films as it was

the studios' many so-called killing strategies against live performances.<sup>101</sup> These strategies disincentivized and in some cases restricted bookings of live acts with motion pictures. They also eliminated and reduced studio support for the practice and pushed a new system of beliefs and values on theater managers. Together, these changes encouraged strict divisions of labor and their preoccupation on locally advertising films, making live performance appear outside of purview of their job. As this dissertation makes clear, theater managers during and after the Great Depression -- even those that programmed live performances -- considered their occupation to be motion picture exhibitors above all else, a job which had increasingly institutionalized standardization and so-called "efficiency" inherent in programming, accounting, biased distribution contracts, lay-theories of medium specificity pushed by the studios positing the separation of film and stage, largely antagonistic toward variety theater.

However, live performance's decline was not swift or ultimate, as Hollywood's inefficiencies again undercut its goal of total standardized exhibition. While these strategies worked in most American theaters that now booked only films by 1934, live performance continued after the Depression largely in cities for several reasons. In part, the action of the studios contrasted with dogmatically anti-stage opinions of its studio heads; far from being ultimately antagonistic, studios generally viewed the prospect of stage entertainment as hopeful or were simply non-committal about its future. More crucially, however, live performance continued during and after the Depression because American exhibition was not controlled from the top down and Hollywood's vertically integrated oligopoly did not supply enough quality feature films to appease even all the studio affiliated theaters in oversaturated urban markets. Free to dictate their program and in need of headline-worthy entertainment in competitive markets, live performances remained a viable strategy for both studio-affiliated and especially

independent theaters. As I demonstrate in chapter 4, underproduction, decentralization, and competition which originated during the Depression drove the need for programming live acts alongside otherwise standard entertainment in American theaters, a practice that lasted until the 1950s.

### *Black Stardom and Theatrical Spectatorship*

After establishing the industrial contexts that shaped variety live performance and why it continued after the Depression, the final chapter (chapter 5) deals with the historical and historiographical implications of acknowledging the existence of non-standardized entertainment in American theaters. I focus on how live performance affected debates around the localization of mass entertainment, “film” spectatorship, racialized space, the star system, and the affordances of these circuits for performers of color. This final chapter consists largely of a case study focusing on live big band swing music in movie theaters, and particularly on the performances of Cab Calloway and other African American jazz performers in these venues. While performers of color were relegated to the margins of the movie theater *screen*, they were many of the most highly paid and in-demand stars *on the stage* in these same theaters. This was no truer than with big-band jazz as performed by African American stars like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Calloway. The chapter demonstrates how their popularity and swing’s value on audience engagement impacted the racial politics of space, behavior, and spectatorship in movie theaters (i.e., the policies, laws, and social norms policing or at least dictating who was supposed to attend or perform in certain theaters and how they should act). I argue that African American jazz musicians helped to racially integrate (however temporarily or partially) movie palaces for African Americans performers and attendees, even in the Jim Crow South. Through

this research into one of the most popular African American practitioners of the most popular type of live acts during the studio era, the chapter shows both the affordances that live performance in movie theaters granted to performers and stars of color in comparison to their on-screen roles, and the implications that live performance practices and stars from other media industries had on the socio-cultural experience of theater-going.

This chapter expands the scope of my intervention into star studies by contributing to scholarship that has questioned *who* gets to be a star and for *which audiences*. An overwhelming majority of performers touted as Hollywood stars—through the conventions of the star system (billing, promotion, and casting)—were, of course, white. If they did have ethnic traits, Hollywood producers assured they were not emphasized in their appearances or performances.<sup>102</sup> But this model and understanding of stardom completely relies on Hollywood’s industrial definition of stardom. In other words, much scholarship on celebrity focuses on the performers which the system creates as stars largely for the benefit and pleasure of an economically privileged, urban, white audience, thereby ignoring how different audiences might have defined stars for their own tastes.

Breaking from this top-down focus on stars, scholars like Arthur Knight and Miriam Petty have demonstrated how African American audiences of the 1930s and 1940s subverted Hollywood marketing and production norms to reclaim character actors and bit players as important figures of contention over the meaning of African American identity and culture. These black performers were considered stars by African American audiences despite appearing literally and figuratively on the margins of the screen, stuck in repetitive roles, lacking significant screen time, or in-depth characters. Performers like Louise Beavers, Fredi Washington, Hattie McDaniel, Lincoln Perry, and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson in Petty’s study

and African American jazz musicians like Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway in Knight's were able to "steal the show," by distracting both white and black audiences' attention during their few seconds of screen time. Their roles, even minute ones, relied on the same high-functioning studio star-system—on-screen credit, promotion, contracting— as other performers did, though on a smaller scale. Only occasionally did Hollywood marketing teams explicitly encourage black stardom on-screen.<sup>103</sup> Knight and Petty's work rightly establishes that studies of stars and stardom must account for the agency of different audiences in constructing stars, reacting against (though albeit still within) the white dominated star system and its star discourse.<sup>104</sup>

Building on the work of Knight and Petty, this chapter also acknowledges and studies black performers' varying degrees of stardom within the mediascape, not just onscreen. I argue that this complicates many black performers' marginal status in the Hollywood studio system.<sup>105</sup> Studies of black stardom rightly acknowledge that even the possibility of black Hollywood stardom relied on other media industries, like recorded music, radio, and vaudeville. But Hollywood's connections to other industries are not often explored in-depth, because they appear as "outside" or at most "adjacent to" the Hollywood studios. Indeed, because they focus on African Americans' reception of onscreen performances Petty and Knight's studies are largely concerned with the liminality of black performers. However, many black performers "used and abused" by Hollywood on-screen—Robinson, Calloway, Louis Armstrong, Ellington, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson—among others were among their highest paid, most-programmed, top-billed performers in the Hollywood-managed live performance circuits in first-run theaters with multi-racial patronage.<sup>106</sup> By examining Calloway's career as a live performer in movie theaters, this chapter will reveal how the Hollywood-sanctioned mainstream stardom of these black

performers within these circuits shaped the dynamics and meanings of the star system and for these individual stars for different audiences.

Chapter 5 also extends the interventions of my dissertation into spectatorship studies. The continued existence of live performance in movie theaters, in particular jazz performances, problematize and reframe the canonical histories of theatrical spectatorship. Histories of film spectatorship and its ideological effects are largely organized around two periods, the pre-classical and classical.<sup>107</sup> These periods are delineated by differing dominant modes of cinematic address, narrative emphasis, and exhibition practices. In the pre-classical paradigm, historians argue that these practices encouraged a mode of spectatorship that emphasized distraction, diversion, and arousal through constant and competing spectacles. This model is most obviously embodied by the exhibitionist and non-narrative “cinema of attractions” but was also facilitated through exhibition practices such as vaudeville, other types of variety theater showing films, and practices of silent film music. All of these involved competing spectacles, encouraged (rather than policed) collective social activities, such as singing and talking, and allowed local variation in programming and presentation. Together this fostered participatory, often unruly (at least in contrast to the soon-to-onset middle-class norms) locally and culturally specific acts of reception, especially for various ethnic and racial minorities.<sup>108</sup>

Fostering, or at least facilitating, unruly spectatorial behavior during the silent era did not always create a united, utopian environment. Audiences with differing expectations--both in white and black theaters--were often discursively segmented and physically segregated by class, and secondarily by gender and ethnicity.<sup>109</sup> Popular discourse posited that respectable, elite patrons and women across demographic categories sat in the more expensive seats closer to the stage and in box-suites, and practiced the middle-class values of silent appreciation reminiscent

of the Victorian era. In contrast, working-class men and boys sat in the balcony (i.e. the gallery), boisterously yelling at each other and the performers, laughing, booing, stomping their feet, and rocking their seats. At least one vaudeville manager described the tastes and actions of these “gallery gods” (a common term for disruptive spectators that had connotations of low taste and class), as “savage.”<sup>110</sup> Of course, the class associations signified by varying levels of action and vocality are not stable, generalizable categories for all patrons of a certain class or seating area. Despite his middle-class origins, the early film historian Vachel Lindsay differed from his ostensible class/spectatorship association when in 1918 he advocated for a “conversation theater” in which audiences chatted or could chat during film screenings.<sup>111</sup> Notebooks kept by Keith Circuit vaudeville managers note that women sometimes joined in with the rebellious gallery gods, and that the most successful acts -- described as “riots”-- cut across class divides and stirred up entire theaters.<sup>112</sup> These examples show that these categories are ultimately stereotypes of which scholars should be suspect. However, the actions of indeterminable, unquantifiable audiences matter less for the historical transformation spectatorship than the dominant assumptions of class-specific spectatorship, in which the upper-middle class was associated with silence and the lower and working classes with disruption, distraction, and socialization.

While there is some disagreement on the exact timeline of the transformation, histories of cinema spectatorship recognize that by the late 1920s and early 1930s, the norms of the classical paradigm were well established. By this time, the social conventions and theatrical policies of movie-going positioned spectators as homogenized silent, passive attendees ideally absorbed into the illusion of a narrative. This norm still largely exists today in theatrical spectatorship. The justification for this periodization is the mainstream integration of synchronized sound which marked the end of both locally variations in sound practices, focused auditory attention on



dialogue, and seemingly ushered in the decline of vaudeville and other live performance practices in motion picture theaters. The disappearance of these staple features of participatory culture from the pre-classical paradigm are generally seen as the casualties of Hollywood's efforts to create a homogenized mass culture based around concepts of middle class uplift and respectability. A significant part of this homogenization and standardization strategy was to encourage and enforce silence as a spectatorial norm. Theater architecture encouraged silence by removing enclosed spaces and by placing strangers next to each other. In-theater policies required silence under threat of removal and newspaper discourse further emphasized isolated contemplation as a preferred practice and berated those that did not comply. Curated, classical musical scores also centered audience attention on identification with the screen's characters and narrative. Some theater managers and orchestra leaders even interrupted shows to chastise unruly patrons.<sup>113</sup> The normalization of silence and the erasure of local or alternative live experiences de-democratized the theatrical soundscape, reducing many of the social functions of theatergoing, suppressing locally specific linguistic environments, and supported individual contemplative experiences of watching films. In this way, Hollywood's cultural machine attempted to standardize not only its products, but also their reception by more fully controlling the factors affecting the viewing context.<sup>114</sup>

These histories of spectatorship need qualification and nuance. Staiger's revisionist account argues that these studies ignore examples of non-silent audiences and make sweeping generalizations regardless of the varying modes of exhibition and reception. In *Perverse Spectatorship: The Practices of Film Reception*, she provides a handful of examples of audiences who fit her presentation of diverging from the presumably bourgeois spectatorial norms of silence, respectability, and inactivity, sometimes but not necessarily for progressive aims.<sup>115</sup> The

examples she provides of audiences during the classical era include children misbehaving at matinee film screenings as well as the test audience of Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) laughing inappropriately and talking back at the picture. Staiger uses other examples from later decades to propose several methodological and historiographic changes to the history of spectatorship. She points out that scholars should avoid the decade-based periodization schema, where silence is always the accepted norm, and instead account for concurrent and diverse groups of exhibition contexts and modes of cinematic address. This is especially true for non-theatrical viewing, which operates on different norms than that of theatrical viewing depending on the context. For instance, her analysis frequently returns to parties such as those watching stag films in which talking is not only encouraged, but expected.

Building from Staiger's claim, my work argues that the participatory mode of exhibition that scholars have considered lost and lamented was neither specific to pre-sound cinema nor absent following the arrival of sound. While it surely was not the dominant mode of spectatorship, as it persisted in only a small fraction of more than 10,000 in the United States, theaters playing the live, hot jazz of Calloway and other bandleaders nonetheless provide examples of institutionalized perverse spectatorship that are less sparse and less of a hodgepodge than what Staiger presents. After all, live performances in movie theaters existed in almost all major American cities and were contracted by every studio. I am not suggesting that these acts were made truly locally specific, as Miriam Hansen and others suggest with early cinema, as this system ran in accordance with the nationalized jazz industry and star system.

While I argue that live performance could and did make possible manifestations of a public sphere as suggested by Hansen in pre-sound exhibition venues, these movie palaces nonetheless operated under the institutionalized norms of middle class respectability, including

silence and stasis like other movie theaters, even if some jazz performers pushed against them. Thus I would maintain that the periodization proposed by Hansen and others, attesting that stasis and silence became the norm during the 1920s, accurately reflects the norms of theatrical spectatorship, even in these venues with very divergent programming practices.

## **Methodology**

My dissertation primarily relies on archival and historical research as the basis for these arguments. I have researched sources into ephemeral performances, the day-to-day business and production practices governing where live performance in movie theaters occurred, what parties controlled its programming, content, and marketing, and how these factors changed over time. I also discovered material on how these agents, studio executives, theater managers, and performers conceptualized the role of live performance in the “movie” going experience, the localization of mass entertainment and celebrity culture, and how live performance fit into the larger business operations of the American cinema which, as current scholarly accounts assert, has no logical reason to exist after the 1930s.

This task brought me physically and, increasingly during the Covid-19 pandemic, digitally to archives located across the United States: the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the Theater Historical Society, the Warner Bros. Archive at the University of Southern California, the Keith-Albee Collection at the University of Iowa, and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas - Austin. These repositories house a diverse array of primary sources including financial records detailing costs and revenue of theaters that booked live performances, production documents and memos and between studio and theater personnel responsible for

producing these shows, contracts and correspondence between performers, theaters, and agents, operation manuals discussing how to coordinate stage shows and other non-filmic bookings at theaters (including on-stage weddings, contests, etc.), onstage photographs of acts with their wardrobes and set dressings, and travel itineraries detailing the logistics of these circuits. I have also discovered sources that shed light on the ephemeral nature of acts and the reactions of audiences including transcriptions of entire shows and reports created by theater managers and other observers that describe individual acts and feedback about them from audiences.<sup>116</sup>

These archival collections allowed me to examine the practice of, and personnel behind, creating, distributing, and marketing live performances within movie theaters from multiple perspectives, from Hollywood executives and individual theater managers to non-star performers and set painters, and many positions in between. This research represents each of the major studios, including executives, studio booking agents, lawyers, talent managers, and theater managers within the studios, as well as talent agencies as large as William Morris and Music Corporation of America to such smaller players as William Meiklejohn, Bert Levy, and Dave Idzal, who functioned as intermediaries between the radio, music, Broadway, and vaudeville talent and the studio booking office and theater managers. It also includes sources from theaters from different regions with various studio-affiliations: from flagship theaters in New York City (including the Capitol Theater (Loew's) and the Paramount (Paramount)) and studio-affiliated theaters in cities like Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Austin to independent movie palaces in Los Angeles. I also have documentation from live performance producers, both those controlled (but eventually let go) by the studios and independent companies like Fanchon and Marco who sold revues and booked acts as subcontractors with studio circuits and independent theaters. Lastly, I use material from a range of individual performers that appeared on movie theater

stages, including stars like Humphrey Bogart, Orson Welles, Martha Raye, the Marx Brothers, Ronald Reagan, and Cab Calloway, and those from “standard” vaudeville acts including monologists and chorus dancers.

Another key, though underutilized, source I use in various chapters are exhibition manuals written between 1914 and 1938. Often written by high-ranking studio officials or industry insiders, they describe the standard operations, beliefs, and policies governing theatrical exhibition (and variety performance) at the times they were written. They demonstrate the codification of Hollywood’s systems of efficiency into their corporate culture and policies. What these sources reveal is that the booking of live performances was *always* considered a viable programming strategy, even for studio-affiliated theaters. In fact, all three of the manuals used in this dissertation provide resources and information to help managers program live acts alongside motion pictures. However, the situations and scenarios in which the programming strategy was condoned by the best practices of the industry grew fewer and fewer as Hollywood increasingly centered its focus around cinema. Thus, these sources reveal the power (and its limits) of studio policies on the exhibition industry, and how they shaped the variety entertainment industry.

In order to place these primary sources in larger industrial contexts and trends, I rely on trade papers including *Variety*, *Billboard*, *The Film Daily*, and *The Motion Picture Herald* as key resources supplying the majority of industry discourse and data about live performance practices. My project breathes new life into these heavily utilized sources by focusing on the almost entirely overlooked “vaudeville” section of these papers which continued throughout the period of my study far beyond the entertainment’s so-called demise. All of these periodicals, though especially in these sections, include detailed economic and programming trends (covered weekly as well as in year-end overviews), provided revenues of bills at individual theaters, and even

reported on the debates about the merits and functions of live performance. In addition, their critical reviews are perhaps the most accurate accounts for the whole theatrical experience. Reviewers from *Variety* and *Billboard* in particular assessed each of the live acts and the screened films together in the same article, judging their success individually as well as collectively. *Variety* also supplied some indications of audience response. Studios as well as booking exchanges required that theater managers fill out detailed reports on the reception of individual acts so that this information could better inform other managers when deciding to book them in the future. They also reported on which element of their program drew crowds—though how they determined this is unclear. Though they never reproduced the information at length, these inferences were printed in *Variety*, about whether the live performance or the feature film drew the crowd to the theater. I use this information to reveal what vaudeville critics and reporters uncover about the film industry that media studies scholarship has missed by only focusing on articles by film reporters.

This method perpetuates a core historiographical argument of this work: much of the accepted and commonly reiterated narrative about live performance in motion picture theaters is based on often hyperbolic discourse emanating from the film industry and its proponents, rather than on what actually happened (or at least can be proven). Indeed, reporters covering variety entertainment regularly contradicted some of the most common (and commonly accepted) narratives in film history. This is especially true regarding the demise of vaudeville. Executives and critics in the film industry regularly cited the adoption, and comparative popularity, of synchronized sound film as a major – if not the deciding - cause in the decline of the live performance. Reporters of variety theater, by comparison, almost never perpetuated this narrative of medium displacement, except with respect to theaters with small seating capacities that could

not afford both live acts and expensive sound reproduction and amplification equipment. Instead, they attributed vaudeville's decline to the economies of scale of movie palaces, corporate conglomeration and vertical integration which put theaters and vaudeville companies in control of film-minded managers and executives, restrictive film renting contracts which essentially made theater managers choose between exclusive film bookings and a combination policy with lackluster films, and the training of theater managers to value overhead-centered accounting, strict divisions of labor, and the sanctity of the all-too-rare blockbuster over the quality of the whole theatergoing experience; all factors which worsened during the Depression. They also regularly cited these reasons in addition to fears that live acts were no longer entertaining and needed revitalization.

In some cases, I can corroborate these reporters' claims contradicting film history's master narratives with compelling evidence, and in others it is simply a matter of differing opinions or mutually incompatible accounts. In either case, these contradictory claims should remind media scholars that some of what we have accepted as true in the story of live performance in motion picture theaters is based on hearsay or, at worst, deliberate misinformation meant to assert the superiority and dominance of cinema. Relying too heavily on trade press accounts on the cinema industry, as much scholarship has done, only demonstrates that the studio heads wanted to rid company theaters of live performance. It also misses the concrete actions they used to accomplish this, how and why they failed, and how these actions shaped the live performance circuits that emerged and remained stable throughout the 1930 through the early 1950s.

I also use quantitative methods, including database construction and analysis, to assess the changing use of live performance in American movie theaters. One of my primary arguments

is that live performance was a normal, common, and institutionalized feature of studio era exhibition affecting every key region and major city in the United States. Proving this requires establishing the extent of live performance, and especially vaudeville, within American popular culture from the 1920s to the early 1950s. Vaudeville is sometimes called the first mass culture industry.<sup>117</sup> While I agree with this statement in general, vaudeville's extent—especially in relation to the motion picture industry—has never been adequately assessed. This has made live performance susceptible to narratives of death and decline in the wake of cinema's expansion as many studies assume that American vaudeville (as exemplified by the major circuits) was more extensive than it was and subsequently that instances occurring after 1934 are exceptions. Put another way, without even adequate approximations of its changing size, scholars can easily over- or underestimate its scale, and the “death” narrative is often premised on the view that vaudeville had massive circuits comparable to the film industry which shriveled to near zero by the Great Depression.

Proving the prevalence of live performance thus requires statistical data, demonstrating the frequency and distribution of live acts across the nation, as well as their circulation and programming at individual theaters. I have accomplished this goal in part by compiling historical statistics published in trade publications and data collected by the United States government. However, because this data is often piecemeal, incomplete, and/or only covers a limited time, I use it largely to supplement my own database project, based on datasets of variety performances printed weekly in *Variety*. As early as December 4, 1909, *Variety* published weekly listings of vaudeville programs across the country, including the names and locations of theaters, the names of each act programmed on the bills, and when programs opened to audiences. They published this list under the name, “Bills Next Week in Vaudeville Theaters,” until January 6, 1926, when



*Variety* changed their policy to reporting presentations and vaudeville together under the title “Presentations-Bills” (a sign I argue that vaudeville and presentations, and vaudeville and the motion picture industry were beginning to overlap). The name of this column changed several times between then and December 11, 1929 when *Variety* adopted the heading “Variety Bills,” and organized the theaters by their studio affiliation. This name remained until March 1, 1961, at which point *Variety* changed the name of the listing to “Current Bills,” when only the Radio City Music Hall regularly practiced combination booking; at this late date, the section reported mainly on night-club appearances. I use the “Variety Bills” dataset to trace the changing scale of this industry, the frequency of bookings, where acts traveled across the country, the location of theaters involved, and how frequently they hosted this live entertainment from 1930 to 1948.<sup>118</sup> I combine that with information in the *Film Daily Yearbook* in order to determine the theater’s size and its run.

The dissertation relies on five complete years of data: 1930, 1935, 1939, 1944, and 1948. While complete data from each year of the twenty-year span would provide a clearer picture of the changing scale and programming, the data sets would be too extensive to compile for this dissertation. Even 1939, the year with the smallest complete data set, has 1,753 programs and includes 18,067 data points. This information was entered manually, as computer automation software proved unsuccessful and crowdsource platforms like Zooniverse proved as time consuming as manual entry because of the need to break the process and files into quickly manageable tasks. Nonetheless, I selected the sample years to provide snapshots of industry as it changed over time, from the beginning of the Great Depression to the end of World War II. In addition to including them in my argument’s narrative history, I include summaries of the statistical findings of these datasets in the appendix; there readers will also find a link to the

entire dataset, so that other researchers can trace the programming and distribution of live acts and films nationally, regionally, and by city. In this way, my research will not only contribute to scholarly debate, but will hopefully inspire and facilitate others to conduct their own work on this neglected, fairly ephemeral phenomenon.

Together, the Variety Bills database project and historical statistics corroborate and expand upon many of the findings from the two previously mentioned studies covering 1934 to 1936. With this data, I estimate that the major vaudeville circuits comprised no more than one-tenth the size of the motion picture industry in the 1910s and 1920s and numbered no fewer (in the most conservative approximation) than 90 urban theaters during the 1930s and 1940s, which comprised almost one-fourth of all first run theaters.

While this database presents a more detailed picture of the scale and scope of combination policies than ever before, it is likely to be an underestimate too. *Variety*'s list only includes theaters that reported their bills to *Variety*'s offices in New York. Over the course of this research, I have found many examples of studio-affiliated and independent theaters, and even entire circuits, utilizing a combination policy that did not report their bills to *Variety* or *Billboard*.<sup>119</sup> Some of these theaters, including the Orpheum in Los Angeles, programmed live acts nearly every week during the period of this study, but they rarely appear in *Variety*'s lists.<sup>120</sup> In some cases, the issue seems to be tied to specific cities, like Detroit, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, which are rarely represented in the lists. For example, a number of theaters in Detroit (specifically RKO Downtown, the Paramount, the Fox, the Michigan, and the Paradise theaters) regularly booked live acts, though not every week, but they rarely appear in the "Variety Bills."<sup>121</sup> While Detroit is an anomaly given its location in the heavily represented Midwest, some regions of the United States, in particular the South and Southwest, are rarely listed even

though *Variety* and *Billboard* published many articles proving that live acts regularly traveled to this region, especially in circuits like the Interstate which used stage acts frequently.<sup>122</sup> In other cases, entire circuits in the Midwest and East Coast did not report that their theaters used a combination policy.<sup>123</sup> While theaters in the Paramount-affiliated Balaban and Katz circuit (centered in Chicago) regularly appear in the listings, the Balaban and Katz subsidiary circuit, Great States (including theaters in Indiana, Illinois, and Nebraska) do not, despite programming as many combination policies in as many theaters as their parent circuit.<sup>124</sup> Likewise, theaters in the Brandt Circuit located in Brooklyn, Yonkers, and other surrounding areas of New York City also never appear, despite the circuit's dedication to programming live acts which it marketed as proof that "VAUDEVILLE IS NOT DEAD" during the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>125</sup> A complete idea of the scale and scope of live performance in movie theaters will thus only be possible when national data published in places like *Variety* is combined with local or even regional studies of theater programming, using sources like newspaper advertisements.<sup>126</sup> This information would suggest that the use of live performance was even more widespread than what my dissertation is able to assert.

While it may not have died at the hands of other media, my work argues that live performance remains the victim of periodization. Media historians must stop perpetuating this oversimplified displacement narrative in which film, radio, and television completely supplant live performance in the early 1930s. This will only come when we reconceptualize the studio era as yet another (albeit different) period in which different media industries competed and collaborated for audiences, and stole and exchanged styles, genres, and stars; in which live performance—controlled by studios, agents, theater managers, and even stars themselves—played a crucial role for selling and controlling stardom and regulating film distribution. At stake

with a newly conceived periodization and the study of these live performance circuits of the 1920s - 1950s then, is not simply an intermedial and interdisciplinary approach to film history. It is also a crucial reclamation of the social and cultural experience of millions of moviegoers who continued to visit the independent and studio-owned motion picture theater not only for its stars onscreen, but also for the ones onstage.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Addington, "Never will the Two-A-Day Addict Witness Big-Time Vaudeville," *The Stage* 9, no. 10 (July 1932): 19.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Laurie, Jr., *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Holt, 1953), 4. One of Laurie's earliest working titles for this book was "Here Lies Vaudeville." Joe Laurie, Jr. "Greenroom Echoes," *Variety*, January 8, 1941, 12. For other contemporaneous published examples, see: Nathan, George Jean. "On Vaudeville." 1931. In *The American Stage: Writing on Theater from Washington Irving to Tony Kushner*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Boone: Library of America, 2010), 366-67; Charles W. Stein, *American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 335-78. The same rhetoric is echoed in private letters from famous and/or affluent people (e.g. Herbert Hoover and Elenore Roosevelt) about vaudeville collected by Laurie. Joe Laurie, Jr. Papers, Box 2, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>3</sup> *Variety* published these year-end reviews in January the following year. Before the mid-1930s, these year-end reviews were sometimes at the end of December the same year. Examples include: Joe Schoenfeld, "Year in Vaudeville," *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 195; Joe Laurie, Jr., "At the Wake," *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 195; Hal Halperin, "Do they Want Vaudeville," *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 193; Joe Laurie, Jr., "Vaudeville Memories," *Variety*, January 5, 1938, 177; Joe Schoenfeld, "Vaudeville's Last Gasp," *Variety*, January 5, 1938, 177; Joe Schoenfeld, "Fear-Chilled Vaudeville," *Variety*, January 4, 1939, 171; Joe Schoenfeld, "Vaudeville's Abortive 'Comeback,'" *Variety*, January 3, 1940, 133; Joe Schoenfeld, "It's Bandfilms—Not Vaudeville," *Variety*, January 8, 1941, 145; Joe Schoenfeld, "Those Good (and Jolly) Old Vaudeville Days," *Variety*, January 8, 1941, 147; Joe Schoenfeld, "Vaude's 'Revival'—Again," *Variety*, January 7, 1942, 171.

<sup>4</sup> Hal Halperin, "What's Become of the Vaude People?," *Variety*, January 8, 1941, 146.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Allen, *Much Ado about Me* (Boston: Little Brown, 1956), 236, 257.

<sup>6</sup> “Dead or Alive?,” *Variety*, May 27, 1936, 47.

<sup>7</sup> “Vaudeville is Not Dead, Fox West Coast Decrees,” *Boxoffice*, November 27, 1948, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 149-50. Death is perhaps the most widely deployed analogy in historical writing. As cultural historian Carolyn Steedman points out, “Life,” constituted by human birth and death, “is the analogy of historians.” While she insinuates that this analogy situates historians alongside shaman, aiming to bring historical events, “back to life,” it also makes us like morticians performing an autopsy. In the general sense, historical research largely focuses on subjects, phenomena, and contexts that no longer exist, which supplies the necessary historical distance to examine it properly. In that sense, historians are often in the business of conducting postmortem examinations, closely examining external and internal factors in order to determine their subject’s cause and relative time of death.

<sup>9</sup> Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014); Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!: Bazin’s Quest and Its Charge* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Andre Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema?: A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> For two histories, written more than fifty years apart, that treat vaudeville’s death with affectionate tones see, Trav S. D., *No Applause, Just Throw Money: The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 270-96; Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., *Show Biz: From Vaude to Video* (New York: Holy, 1951), 268-377, 433-8.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 151; Ann Saddlemyer, *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario 1800-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 261; Frank Cullen, *Vaudeville Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* (New York: Routledge, 2007), xi-xxxii; Gary Bohan, *Sharkey: When Sea Lions Were Stars of Show Business 1907-1958*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2022); Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 24; Donald Crafton, *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief and World-Making in Animation* (Berkeley, Calif; London: University of California Press, 2012), 136; Michael Hauptert, “The Economic History of Entertainment and Sports,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Modern Economic History*, ed. Robert M. Whaples and Randall E. Parker (New York: Routledge, 2013), 198–212; Brian Seibert, *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 209; Anthony Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 368, 547; John Kenrick, *Musical Theatre: A History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 84; Anthony Slide, *New York City Vaudeville* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2006) 9-10; Marilyn Casto, *Actors, Audiences, and Historic Theaters of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2021), xvii; David Monod, *Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment, 1890–1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 187-226; M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and*

*Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 199-205; Robert Allen, "The Movies in Vaudeville: Historical Context of the Movies as Popular Entertainment," in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 80-2; Arthur F. Wertheim, *W.C. Fields from the Ziegfeld Follies and Broadway Stage to the Screen: Becoming a Character Comedian* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 23, 74; Michele Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 32, 61; Lori Harrison-Kahan, *The White Negress: Literature, Minstrelsy, and the Black-Jewish Imaginary* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 25; Joe Laurie, *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace* (New York: Holt, 1953), 127; Albert Maclean, *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965); Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 159-60; Stein, *American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries*, 335-78; Arthur F. Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-time and Its Performers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 249-79; Leigh Woods, *Transatlantic Stage Stars in Vaudeville and Variety: Celebrity Turns* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 4, 228; Nicholas Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies: Popular Musicians and Mass Entertainment in American Culture, 1870-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 61; Douglas Gilbert, *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1940), 6; Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915* (New York: McFarland, 2015), 57; Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 298-303; Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: BFI, 2005), 11-45; Richard B. Jewell, *RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan Is Born* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 111; Christopher H. Sterling and John M. Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 83; Michael J. Hauptert, *The Entertainment Industry* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 9-52; Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) 24-5; Lynn Spiegel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 95, 138, 142, 144-5; Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 86, 184, 189; Arthur F. Wertheim, "The Rise and Fall of Milton Berle," in *American History, American Television: Interpreting the Video Past*, ed. John E. O'Connor (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), 76; David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 60-1; Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 17, 59; Michael Slowik, "Film Exhibition in Vaudeville: What We Learn From Keith-Albee Managers' Reports." *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 39, no. 2 (2012): 73-92. Michael Slowik, "Keith-Albee Managers' Reports." *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*

*Nineteenth Cent Theatre Film* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 93-103; John L Marsh, "Vaudefilm: Its Contribution to a Moviegoing America," *Journal of Popular Culture* 18, no. 4 (1985): 17-29; Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 93-6; Ross Melnick and Andreas Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theaters* (St. Paul (MN): MBI, 2004), 73; Ross Melnick, *American Showman: Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908-1935* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 366; Frank Rose, *The Agency: William Morris and the Hidden History of Show Business* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 13; Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 136-40; Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926-1931* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 265; Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 25-27; Nicholas Sammond, "A Space Apart: Animation and the Spatial Politics of Conversion," *Film History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 268-84. Sammond's online companion to *Birth of an Industry* extends his discussion about the death of vaudeville see, Nicholas Sammond, "Vaudeville - Online Companion to *Birth of an Industry*," Scalar, Accessed on March 29, 2022. <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/birthofanindustry/from-blackface-to-burlesque?path=vaudeville>.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 123, 225; John Sedgwick and Mark Glancy, "Cinemagoing in the United States in the Mid-1930s: A Study Based on the Variety Dataset," in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert Clyde Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 170.

<sup>13</sup> *Variety*, January 6, 1960, 241-6; *Billboard*, July 4, 1953, 13-15. As the years progressed after the late 1940s, the amount of material in these sections declined. Often articles covered vaudeville shows in the United Kingdom or they included nostalgic passages about big-time vaudeville during the early 1900s. The numbers of "vaudeville" theaters and performers has not been accurately tracked, and thus is left quite vague here. The relative size of the industry before and after its decline is indicated in the number of booking agencies. In 1930, 121 booking agencies in Chicago alone. By 1935, only 38 existed in the United States all located in Hollywood and New York. See, 1930 *Film Daily Year Book*, 572; 1935 *Film Daily Year Book*, 998.

<sup>14</sup> These findings are from my database project which uses *Variety* to trace the use of the live acts throughout the country in selected years (Appendix A).

<sup>15</sup> "Vaudeville and Presentation Bookers," *Film Daily Year Book 1930* (New York: Film Daily, 1930), 572.

<sup>16</sup> This statement relies comparing the stars on the yearly "Exhibitors' Poll of Top Ten Box-Office Stars" to those that performed on these circuits from 1930 to 1949 (see footnote 4). I am

four years into the study, which shows that 80% of performers on these lists performed on these circuits.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of vaudeville's changing association with gender see, Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 199-214.

<sup>18</sup> The interconnections between these live performance circuits and television are not discussed at length in this dissertation but is the subject of future research.

<sup>19</sup> Melnick, *American Showman*; Robert McLaughlin, *Broadway and Hollywood: A History of Economic Interaction*. (New York: Arno Press, 1974); Thomas Schatz, "Film Industry Studies and Hollywood History," in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 45-54; Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting*; Jeff Smith, *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011); Douglas Gomery, *The Coming of Sound* (London: Routledge, 2005); Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, eds., *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Jewell, *RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan Is Born*, 8-39; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 262-74. After the early 1930s, RKO's continued interest in variety live performance is also unexplored. Even Richard Jewell's two-volume "business history" of RKO only acknowledges the corporation's formational aspirations to be an "amusement field" equally reliant on its vaudeville sector, film production, and sound technologies, before accepting that "vaudeville faded from the American scene" during the Great Depression, and subsequently focusing largely on the history of RKO's production office. For a corporation built around the capitalistic synergy of a wide variety of commodities from more than three media fields, Jewell's "business history" focusing only on production hardly seems adequate, though its limited focus does allow him to thoroughly analyze this important (though hardly singular) part of their business model.

<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Rielle Navitski for helping me realize this was an overarching intervention of my research.

<sup>22</sup>Richard Abel, "Patchwork Maps of Moviegoing, 1911-1913," in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert Clyde Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007); Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 99-101; Cara Caddoo, *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014) 13-41, 64-93; Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 298-300; Judith Thissen, "Next Year at the Moving Pictures: Cinema and Social Change in the Jewish Community," in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert Clyde Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007); Mary Carbine, "'The Finest Outside the Loop': Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905-1928," in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick: Rutgers



University Press, 1996); Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 30-42, 95-118.

<sup>23</sup>For discussions of the changing prevalence of double feature programming during the studio era see, John Sedgwick and Mark Glancy, "Cinemagoing in the United States in the Mid-1930s," 166-7; Frank H Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1938), 50-3.

<sup>24</sup> Though not without its racist stereotypes several scholars have argued vaudeville before the early 1930s developed a deep relationship with ethnic theater and a star system which did not demand the denial of ethnic identity, allowing Jewish and Irish comedians, and African American and Yiddish singers, among others, to inhabit the cultural mainstream. Robert W. Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xv-xvi, 42-63, 160-1. Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 11, 25; Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Mark Hodin, "Class, Consumption, and Ethnic Performance in Vaudeville," *Prospects*, no. 22 (1997): 193-210; William Howland Kenney, "The Influence of Black Vaudeville on Early Jazz," *Black Perspective in Music* 14, no. 3 (1986): 233-48; Larry Eugene Rivers and Cantor Brown, Jr., "The Art of Gathering a Crowd: Florida's Pat Chappelle and the Origins of Black-Owned Vaudeville," *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (2007): 169-90.

<sup>25</sup> Ian C. Jarvie, "Stars and Ethnicity: Hollywood and the United States, 1932-1951," in *Stars, the Film Reader*, ed. Lucy Fischer and Marcia Landy (London: Routledge, 2004); Daniel Bernardi, *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Another common explanation for the displacement of live performance is the decline in its popularity. For example, Donald Crafton writes: "Before 1930 audiences might have attended theaters to participate in several locally specialized forms of entertainment, whether stage shows, talent contests, or sing-alongs. Increasingly, the movie house showed sound movies and nothing else. The most probable reason is that live participatory events became poorly attended while talking pictures held interest." Crafton, *The Talkies*, 265.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Young, "Synchronized Sound Comes to the Cinema," in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 6; Crafton, *The Talkie*, 71-2; James Buhler and Hannah Lewis, "Evolving Practices for Film Music and Sound, 1925-1935," in *The Cambridge Companion to Film Music*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and Fiona Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 12.

<sup>28</sup> Examples include: Doron Galili, *Seeing by Electricity: The Emergence of Television, 1878-1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); Doron Galili, "Intermedial Thought in Classical Film Theory: Balázs, Arnheim, and Benjamin on Film and Radio," *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 88, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 391-99; Richard Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and the "Movie-Mad" Audience, 1910-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Richard Abel, *Motor City Movie Culture, 1916-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020). Allen, "The Movies in Vaudeville;" Allen, *Vaudeville and Film*; Giorgio Bertellini, *Italy in Early American Cinema: Race, Landscape, and the Picturesque* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Carbine, "The Finest Outside the Loop;" Victoria Duckett, *Seeing Sarah Bernhardt: Performance and Silent Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Tami Williams, *Germaine Dulac: A Cinema of Sensations* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014); David Mayer, *Stagestruck Filmmaker: D.W. Griffith & the American Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009); Charles Musser, "Towards a History of Theatrical Culture," in *Screen Culture: History and Textuality*, ed. John Fullerton (London: John Libbey, 2004); Charles Musser, "The Clash between Theater and Film," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5, no. 2 (2007): 111–34; Steven J Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 183-7; Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 149-88; Matthew Solomon, *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Susan Sontag, "Film and Theatre," in *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology*, ed. Robert Knopf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Robert Knopf, "Buster Keaton in the Context of Stage, Vaudeville, and Silent Film Comedy," in *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology*, ed. Robert Knopf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Gregory A Waller, *The Stage/Screen Debate: A Study in Popular Aesthetics* (New York: Garland, 1983); Gwendolyn Waltz, "Half Real-Half Reel: Alternation Format Stage-and-Screen Hybrids," in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, ed. André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac, and Santiago Hidalgo (Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Andre Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction: From Kinematography to Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006); Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> I discuss several exceptions below, but for another example see, Gregory A. Waller, "Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers: Small-Town Picture Shows in the 1930s," in *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> McLaughlin, *Broadway and Hollywood*, n.p. "introduction."

<sup>31</sup> Melnick and Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures*, 6-7; David Bordwell, forward to *Shared Pleasures*, xii; Eric Smoodin, "Introduction: The History of Film History," in *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 2; Richard Maltby, "How Can Cinema History Matter More?," *Screening the Past*, no. 22 (December 2007); Richard Maltby, Philippe Meers, and Daniel Blitereyst, eds., *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011);

Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, eds., *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> An important exception is *The Hollywood Trust*, which analyzes all aspects vertical integration. Most works that include all production, distribution, and exhibition are designed as textbook-like overviews of film history. Kia Afra, *The Hollywood Trust: Trade Associations and the Rise of the Studio System* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>33</sup> Davis Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 19-33; John E. DiMaggio, *Vaudeville U.S.A.* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973); Andrew Erenberg, *Queen of Vaudeville: The Story of Eva Tanguay* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Alfred F. McLean, "Genesis of Vaudeville: Two Letters from B.F. Keith," *Theatre Survey*, no. 1 (1960): 82-95; Robert C. Allen, "B.F. Keith and the Origins of American Vaudeville," *Theatre Survey* 21, no. 2 (1980): 105-15; Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences*, 108-20; Brooks McNamara, "Medicine Shows: American Vaudeville in the Marketplace," *Theatre Quarterly* 4, no. 14 (1974): 19-24; Kathryn J. Oberdeck, *The Evangelist and the Impresario: Religion, Entertainment, and Cultural Politics in America, 1884-1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Anthony Slide, *Selected Vaudeville Criticism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarcrow Press, 1988); Stan Singer, "Vaudeville in Los Angeles, 1910 - 1926: Theatres, Management, and the Orpheum," *Pacific Historical Review* 61, no. 1 (1992): 103-13; Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895-1915*; Kibler, *Rank Ladies*; Knopf, "Buster Keaton in the Context of Stage, Vaudeville, and Silent Film Comedy; Marsh, "Vaudefilm: Its Contribution to a Moviegoing America;" Slowik, "Film Exhibition in Vaudeville: What We Learn from Keith-Albee Managers' Reports;" Abel, *Americanizing the Movies*, Abel, "Movie-Mad" Audience, 1910-1914; *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910*; Thissen, "Next Year at the Moving Pictures: Cinema and Social Change in the Jewish Community." Allen, "The Movies in Vaudeville: Historical Context of the Movies as Popular Entertainment;" Laurie, *Vaudeville: From the Honky-tonks to the Palace*; Maclean, *American Vaudeville as Ritual*; Snyder, *The Voice of the City*; Stein, *American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries*; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*; Gilbert, *American Vaudeville*.

<sup>34</sup> Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde;" Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*, 24-5; Spiegel, 95; Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting*, 86; Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable*, 61.

<sup>35</sup> I am not including histories of early cinema which discuss film's use in vaudeville. In contrast to studies which explicitly claim to be "vaudeville" histories, these works tend to more focus on small-time vaudeville, where films were used more often, but do a better job of balancing discussions of all forms of vaudeville which used film. Most of them do not study vaudeville's relationship to cinema after the 1910s or early 1920s, however. See, Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and the "Movie-Mad" Audience, 1910-1914*; Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare*; Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction*.

- <sup>36</sup> Snyder, *The Voice of the City*, 158-61; Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 204-5.
- <sup>37</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment*, 187-226; Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies*, 144; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 274-9.
- <sup>38</sup> Allen, *Vaudeville and Film*, 298-303.
- <sup>39</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 11-2, 27-8, 37-8, 56-7.
- <sup>40</sup> Orpheum's central business office was actually in Chicago, largely because the bulk of their theaters operated in and West of Chicago.
- <sup>41</sup> Allen, "The Movies in Vaudeville," 77-81 Janet Staiger, "Seeing Stars," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991) 2-16; Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 25-31.
- <sup>42</sup> This narrative is most evident in such works as, Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 262-73; Jewell, *RKO Radio Pictures*, 8-19.
- <sup>43</sup> Paul, *When Movies were Theater*, 2.
- <sup>44</sup> The University of California Press reprinted this series.
- <sup>45</sup> Paul's methodology does have limitations. His samples only include one Southern city, Atlanta, and nothing in the West or Northwest. Paul, *When Movies were Theater*, 299-302.
- <sup>46</sup> The Regal Theater in Chicago continued to show combinations until at least 1956, not 1955. "Variety Bills," *Variety*, December 24, 1952, 46; "Variety Bills," *Variety*, August 27, 1952, 54; "Variety Bills," *Variety*, June 3, 1953, 56.
- <sup>47</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 75-6; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 72-3; Balio, *Grand Design*, 27-9; Glancy and Sedgwick, "Cinemagoing in the United States in the Mid-1930s, 170; Catherine Jurca and John Sedgwick, "The Film's the Thing: Moviegoing in Philadelphia, 1935-36," *Film History* 26, no. 4 (2014): 58-83.
- <sup>48</sup> Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry*, 300-10.
- <sup>49</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 72-3.
- <sup>50</sup> Crafton, *The Talkies*, 252; Balio, *Grand Design*, 28.
- <sup>51</sup> Glancy and Sedgwick, "Cinemagoing in the United States in the Mid-1930s."
- <sup>52</sup> Gregory A. Waller, "Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers: Small-Town Picture Shows in the 1930s," in *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, ed. Gregory A. Waller (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).
- <sup>53</sup> See Colin Gunckel, *Mexico on Main Street: Transnational Film Culture in Los Angeles before World War II* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 143, 163, 167. As a preliminary discovery, such an approach demonstrates that managers used live performance to target certain demographics to first-run theaters than our current conception of these audiences account, such as programming Asian acrobatic acts to attract Asian American patrons (discussed in the conclusion).
- <sup>54</sup> Jurca and Sedgwick, "The Film's the Thing," 66.
- <sup>55</sup> Jurca and Sedgwick, "The Film's the Thing," 66.

<sup>56</sup> For some examples, see Semmes, “*The Regal Theater and Black Culture*; 74, 167, 172” Gunkel, *Mexico on Mainstreet*, 143, 163, 167; Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 32; Robert S Sennett, *Hollywood Hoopla: Creating Stars and Selling Movies in the Golden Age of Hollywood* (New York: Billboard Books, 1998); Lars Bjorn and Jim Gallert, *Before Motown: A History of Jazz in Detroit, 1920-60* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 70.

<sup>57</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 34-65; Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 7-10, 71-80; Thomas Schatz, *Genius of the System Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 2003), 88-244, 548-79; Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women’s Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*; Jon Lewis, “Money Matters: Hollywood in the Corporate Era,” in *The New American Cinema*, ed. Jon Lewis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 87–121. Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, 231-288.

<sup>58</sup> See footnote 26.

<sup>59</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 88.

<sup>60</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 110-5.

<sup>61</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 59.

<sup>62</sup> Like me, these critics were not claiming that all B films were of poor quality, just generally those B films that managers programmed alongside live acts.

<sup>63</sup> Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*, 203-34; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 34-82; Andrea Comiskey, “The Sticks, the Nabes, and the Broadways: U.S. Film Distribution, 1935-1940” (Madison, University of Wisconsin, 2015), 1-10, 40-68; Jurca and Sedgwick, “The Film’s the Thing: Moviegoing in Philadelphia, 1935-1936; Richard Maltby, “The Standard Exhibition Contract and the Unwritten History of the Classical Hollywood Cinema,” *Film History* 25, no. 1/2 (2013): 138–53.

<sup>64</sup> Robert C. Allen, “Relocating American Film History,” *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2006): 48–88; Robert Clyde Allen, “Decentering Historical Audience Studies,” in *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 20-36.

<sup>65</sup> Much of this work is included in what is sometimes called the “The New Cinema History.” While scholars like Richard Maltby and Melvyn Strokes, among others, credit film study’s “historical turn” in the late 1990s with instilling the field with the realization that a proper social and cultural history of cinema must include the history of its audiences, they also assert that these concerns cannot and should not be marginalized. To combat this possibility, the authors propose a conceptual distinction between “Film History,” a history of production, texts, and stylistic influence, and “Cinema History,” which includes both socio-cultural and commercial studies of exhibition spaces and the audiences who attend them. The proposed goal for such a

reconceptualization aligns with the problems with analyses of style and production thus far acknowledged throughout this essay. As Maltby writes, “In order to make connections to other disciplines, the study of cinema must abandon its preoccupations with medium specificity and with the centrality of the film text”; an obsession which they characterize as “intellectual isolationism.” Paying attention to cinema history instead of film history should condition scholars to examine the actions, people, and culture in the theater, and not simply the flickering images on the screen. Maltby, “How Can Cinema History Matter More?”

<sup>66</sup> For excellent examples covering all of these issues see, Christopher J. McKenna, “Tri-Racial Theaters in Robeson County, North Carolina, 1896-1940,” in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Robert C Allen, Richard Maltby, and Melvyn Stokes (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008), 45–59; Jeffrey Klenotic, “‘Four Hours of Hootin’ and Hollerin’” Moviegoing and Everyday Life Outside the Movie Palace,” in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Robert C. Allen, Richard Maltby, and Melvyn Stokes (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008).

<sup>67</sup> David Bordwell, forward to *Shared Pleasures*, xii; Smoodin, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>68</sup> Jurca and Sedgwick, 59-60.

<sup>69</sup> Jurca and Sedgwick, “The Film’s the Thing,” 59-60.

<sup>70</sup> Turner, “Approaching Celebrity Studies,” 16.

<sup>71</sup> Allen, “Decentering Historical Audience Studies,” 21.

<sup>72</sup> For another example of this discourse see, Kathryn Fuller-Seely, *Hollywood in the Neighborhood*, 9-12.

<sup>73</sup> Allen “Decentering Historical Audience Studies,” 22. An important exception to Hollywood’s tendency to assume metropolitan audience as representative is in marketing. Marketing schemes (and trade press discourse) often accounted for differences in audiences in terms of class and gender dichotomies. See Richard Maltby, “Sticks, Hicks and Flaps: Classical Hollywood’s Generic Conception of Its Audience,” in *Identifying Hollywood’s Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: BFI Pub., 1999), 32-8.

<sup>74</sup> Nathaniel Brennan, “The Great White Way and the Way of All Flesh: Metropolitan Film Culture and the Business of Film Exhibition in Times Square, 1929–1941,” *Film History* 27, no. 2 (2015): 1–32. Another problem with this paradigm is that it creates a local-history vs. metropolitan-history dichotomy that lumps all cities together regardless of location. This approach forgets that a large majority of the thirty-plus cities with first-run theaters were in many of the same fly-over states as their local studies, and similarly have a dearth of scholarly attention in film historiography relative to New York City. Likewise, other than their metropolitan location—based similarly on an obviously class-based economic algorithm—we know very little about the people who attended these theaters or their theater-going habits (as difficult and ever-shifting as they are to ever know). Despite the tendency in economic film histories to lump them all together as sources of revenue, these cities and their patrons alike varied greatly in terms of ethnicity, gender, professions, and taste. Even the population of these

cities varied extensively from ones as large as Chicago (3.4 million in 1940) to ones as small as Charlotte, North Carolina and Des Moines, Iowa with both just over hundred thousand people. This knowledge about these circuits also reclaims regionalism—not just city vs. rural—as an important category of scholarly discussion. This would have given them very different regional or city-specific experiences of classical “Hollywood” cinema.

<sup>75</sup> Exceptions include: Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934* (London: British Film Institute, 1985); Comiskey, “The Sticks, the Nabses, and the Broadways;” Jurca and Sedgwick, “The Film’s the Thing.”

<sup>76</sup> Gregory A. Waller, “Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater,” in *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 169-85. The other essays covering the 1930s in Fuller-Seeley’s anthology of Neighborhood Theaters follows this model.

<sup>77</sup> Here I use Richard Maltby’s concept of cinema studies as the distinct from film studies to mean interested in movie going as a commodity and social culture experience rather than film as text or object of study.

<sup>78</sup> Maltby, “The Standard Exhibition Contract and the Unwritten History of the Classical Hollywood Cinema;” Jurca and Sedgwick, “The Film’s the Thing; 57-63;” Comiskey, “The Sticks, the Nabses, and the Broadways, 1-10.”

<sup>79</sup> The “mass-retail” system is the concept used by Douglas Gomery to explain how all distribution was determined by national offices. I discuss this more in chapters 2-4. Douglas Gomery, “U.S. Film Exhibition: The Formation of a Big Business,” in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 218-37.

<sup>80</sup> Susan Ohmer, *George Gallup in Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Melvyn Stokes, “Female Audiences of the 1920s and Early 1930s,” in *Identifying Hollywood’s Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, ed. Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes (London: British Film Institute, 1999);” Maltby, “Sticks, Hicks, and Flaps, 28-33.”

<sup>81</sup> See note 21.

<sup>82</sup> Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 93-96; Steven J Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 173-184.

<sup>83</sup> Peter Stanfield, *Body and Soul: Jazz and Blues in American Film, 1927-63* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Jennifer Fleegeer, *Sounding American. Hollywood, Opera, and Jazz* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014); Krin Gabbard, *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Krin Gabbard, “The Images of Jazz,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 332–46; Krin Gabbard, *Jammin’ at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>84</sup> In this way, my dissertation shares a macro-industrial scope similar to a work like Gomery’s *Shared Pleasures*, in contrast to works that draw larger conclusions from geographically situated studies, like Waller’s *Main Street Amusements* and Abel’s *Motor City Movies*.

<sup>85</sup> Ronald E. Rice et al., “Organizational Media Affordances: Operationalization and Associations with Media Use,” *Journal of Communication* 67, no. 1 (February 1, 2017): 106–30.

<sup>86</sup> Waller, “Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers, 185.”

<sup>87</sup> Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 2007); Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine* (New York: Vintage, 2009); Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2010); Graeme Turner, “Approaching Celebrity Studies,” *Celebrity Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 11–20.

<sup>88</sup> Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1-16.

<sup>89</sup> Staiger, “Seeing Stars,” 8-11; deCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 25-31. In contrast to deCordova and Staiger’s work, Andrew Shail’s recent revisionist account of the origins of the star system rarely acknowledges the influences of vaudeville and variety theaters in the formation of film stardom. This appears to be an oversight, as Shail makes no explicit claim that vaudeville’s influence should be retracted, despite disagreeing with much of deCordova’s work. Andrew Shail, *The Origins of the Film Star System: Persona, Publicity and Economics in Early Cinema* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

<sup>90</sup> For some examples, see Simon Callow, *Orson Welles: Hello Americans* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 312; Alyn Shipton, *Hi-de-Ho: The Life of Cab Calloway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 43, 56; Scott Schechter, *Judy Garland: The Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Legend* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 59.

<sup>91</sup> All enumerations of weeks of performance come from the *Variety* database.

<sup>92</sup> Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*, 8, 24; Spiegel, *Make Room for TV*, 24, 95, 138; Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 86, 189; Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting*, 61-3.

<sup>93</sup> Marc, *Comic Visions*, 61.

<sup>94</sup> Marc, *Comic Visions*, 60.

<sup>95</sup> Mary R. Desjardins, *Recycled Stars: Female Film Stardom in the Age of Television and Video* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2015). Desjardins notes that star studies typically provide synchronic explanations of stars and their relationships with specific publics. In contrast, Desjardins’s methodology traces female stars across different historical periods and media (especially cinema, television, radio, and video) from 1948 to the 1990s arguing that the meaning of individual stars change over time depending on medium and socio-cultural contexts.

<sup>96</sup> Paul McDonald, *The Star System: Hollywood’s Production of Popular Identities*. (New York: Wallflower, 2013), 15-66; Basinger, *Star Machine*, 1-72. Both McDonald and Basinger document the many stages of performer location, hiring, fixing, controlling, and exploiting. These include Hollywood’s recruitment of stars via lucrative contracts from other media industries (theater, vaudeville, radio), as well as the recruitment of amateur performers by talent scouts in nightclubs, theater, vaudeville, opera, sports, and ballet. They have detailed Hollywood’s methods of developing and transforming performers’ physical, class, and ethnic appearances through various cosmetic treatments, fashion changes, etiquette classes, teaching them hobbies like fencing and horse-backing riding. Many of the same sources outline the



methods studios used to control the estimated two-thousand performers around Hollywood, through contracts, options, with each studio relegating no more than fifty to one-hundred to the regular payroll and no more than thirty as stars, the strategies of large-sized, up to sixty-person studio publicity teams (consisting of publicists, photographers, reporters, fan magazine liaisons, among others) constructing and disseminating star images, information, and names across posters, photographs, newspapers, magazines, and radio, and coordinating personal appearances. Lastly, these sources also discuss the strategies behind casting and inter-studio loan policies; and crucial process of gauging a performer's mass appeal (or, at least their potential) through surveys, polls, fan mail, and fan clubs.

<sup>97</sup> Christine Gledhill, *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge, 1991); Paul McDonald, "The Star System: The Production of Hollywood Stardom in the Post-Studio Era," in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2012); Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (London: Sage, 2007); Marsha Orgeron, *Hollywood Ambitions: Celebrity in the Movie Age* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2008); Marsha Orgeron, "Media Celebrity in the Age of the Image," in *The Oxford Handbook of Film and Media Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Robert S Sennett, *Hollywood Hoopla: Creating Stars and Selling Movies in the Golden Age of Hollywood* (New York: Billboard Books, 1998).

<sup>98</sup> Tom Kemper, *Hidden Talent: The Emergence of Hollywood Agents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Giorgio Bertellini, *The Divo and the Duce: Promoting Film Stardom and Political Leadership in 1920s America*, 2019; Frank Rose, *The Agency: William Morris and the Hidden History of Show Business* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996). Some studies claim that managers and talent agencies did not play a central role in star creation and management until after the dissolution of the studio system. See, for example, McDonald, "The Star System: The Production of Hollywood Stardom in the Post-Studio Era." My work, along with others, shows it precedes it.

<sup>99</sup> In this dissertation, a case-study of big bands grounds these larger trends.

<sup>100</sup> Kemper, *Hidden Talent*, 241-8.

<sup>101</sup> I adapted the phrase "killing strategies" from a discussion by Donald Crafton's about Hollywood's deliberate and planned elimination of prologues. Crafton, *The Talkies*, 252.

<sup>102</sup> Jarvie, "Stars and Ethnicity," 168, 177; Adrienne L. McLean, *Being Rita Hayworth: Labor, Identity, and Hollywood Stardom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 31-65; Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*, 153-184.

<sup>103</sup> Miriam J. Petty, *Stealing the Show African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016); Arthur Knight, "Star Dances: African-American Constructions of Stardom, 1925–1960," in *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). Examples from Petty's and Knight's work include Universal's

unprecedented alternative “colored” trailer for *Imitation of Life* (1934) distributed to black theaters which displaced the white lead characters making Fredi Washington and Louse Beavers appear as the film’s protagonists, and the promotion of the Al Jolson vehicle, *The Singing Kid* (1936), as a Cab Calloway film in black neighborhoods, despite the famed African American singer never speaking and appearing only a few moments in the film. In contrast to these unique instances, discourse supporting black performers as stars mostly came through the efforts of black spectators and critiques. Because their stardom stemmed largely from performances and roles entrenched in stereotypes, however, black critics heavily debated the significance of this stardom which for many came with increased visibility and social influence at the cost of further entrenching negative representation.

<sup>104</sup> Their subjects are, of course, African American audiences. But their methodology is applicable to a range of minority groups with printed discourses to analyze.

<sup>105</sup> Knight, “Star Dances.” Knight states that the possibility of Black stardom comes from cultural frames outside or adjacent to the movies, but also does not explore the implications of this.

<sup>106</sup> Kathryn Fuller-Seeley’s recent book on Jack Benny includes two chapters dedicated to Eddie Rochester’s career. In contrast to the depiction of these other Black performers, Fuller-Seeley does not portray Rochester’s stardom as marginal. Rather it was in direct competition with Benny’s. Rochester’s many weeks on the live performance tours demonstrated how big of a star he was and how these live performance stages allowed Black stars center stage. In 1939, for example Rochester toured the country on a bill alongside Betty Grable, with a report claiming that Rochester not only drew the crowd but attracted one which shattered box-office receipts. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, *Jack Benny and the Golden Age of American Radio Comedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 120-87; “A Record for ‘Rochester,’” *Motion Picture Herald*, November 11, 1939, 14.

<sup>107</sup> Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 30; Miriam Hansen, “Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Permutations of the Public Sphere,” *Screen* 34, no. 1 (1993): 197–210; Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991). Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction;” Tom Gunning, “Primitive’ Cinema—A Frame-Up? Or The Trick’s on Us,” *Cinema Journal* 28, no. 2 (Winter 1989): 3–12; Tom Gunning, “The World as Object-Lesson: Cinema Audiences, Visual Culture and the St. Louis World’s Fair, 1904,” *Film History* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 422–44; Tom Gunning, “Now You See It, Now You Don’t: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions,” *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 32 (1993): 3–10; Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, 271-88.

<sup>108</sup> Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 43.

<sup>109</sup> Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 24-31, 38; Carbine, “Finest Outside the Loop,” 235-40.

<sup>110</sup> Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 45.

<sup>111</sup> Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 15-6.

<sup>112</sup> Slowik, “Film Exhibition in Vaudeville,” 73-92; Slowik, “Keith-Albee Managers’ Reports,” 93-103; Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 40-54.

<sup>113</sup> Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, 271-88. Even this case shows how audiences in the gallery did not all participate in rowdy behavior. When Keith chastised a theater audience like this, he reportedly received a round of applause, which included many seated in the gallery.

<sup>114</sup> Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, 271-88.

<sup>115</sup> Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000). Staiger's examples from the studio era include juvenile delinquency in movie theaters and the audience for Orson Welles's *Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) laughing and talking inappropriately during a test screening.

<sup>116</sup> Among the most singular of documents at the Margaret Herrick Library are several script versions for the Marx Brother's *Go West!* (1940), which they tested at theaters throughout the Midwest. Each version was used in a particular city, and notes audience reactions and how the screen writers took their reaction into account when editing the script. As I have argued, these documents show how the testing of material on these circuits affected the content of several Hollywood scripts. Vincent Longo, "A Tough Act to Follow: Studio Era Hollywood in the Age of Live Performance," HoMER Conference, Nassau, Bahamas, 2019.

<sup>117</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 1-20; Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies*, 1-6.

<sup>118</sup> It would be possible to track this information back as far as 1909 using the same methodologies with *Variety's* precedents to the "Variety Bills" list.

<sup>119</sup> *The Billboard* also featured a list of variety theater programs across the United States. By contrast, *The Billboard's* organized their listings by act so that readers could find a particular performer or group and then see where they were performing. For example, see "Route Department," *Billboard*, March 6, 1937, 33.

<sup>120</sup> Orpheum Theatre, Los Angeles -- performers (A-Z) 1935-1949, B'hend and Kauffmann Collection, Folders 138-9, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

<sup>121</sup> The Paradise Theater, for example, programmed live acts every week that they operated, but the theater closed during the summer. Drew Meincke, "The Paradise Theater (1941-1951): African American Movie Palaces and the 1943 Racial Uprising in Detroit," *Film Matters* 13, no. 1 (July 2022): 83-95.

<sup>122</sup> "Louis Novy, Manager, Paramount Theatre, Austin, TX-Roadshow Correspondence," Boxes 2-4, Hoblitzelle Interstate Theatre Circuit Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas – Austin. See also chapter 5.

<sup>123</sup> 1944 is an exception to this claim, when *Variety Bills* included listings for the "Southern" circuit.

<sup>124</sup> "Great States – Booking Contracts," Balaban & Katz Collection, Theater Historical Collection. The Great Lakes Circuit is sometimes listed in contracts as Publix Great States Inc.

<sup>125</sup> "Thanks, Mr. Brandt!," *Variety*, May 1, 1940, 44.

<sup>126</sup> For two studies that substantiate this hypothesis in different regions and periods see, Abel, *Motor City Movie Culture*, 84-134; Waller, "Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers."

## Chapter 1

### **Movies at the Variety Theater: An Overview of Live Performance in Theaters Showing Motion Pictures until the 1920s**

Cinema emerged in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in a highly intermedial media environment, with moving images projected in cafés, circuses, fairgrounds, and most commonly vaudeville theaters alongside repertoires of live acts.<sup>1</sup> As much scholarship has attested, these relationships between moving images and theatrical cultures and industries continued well into the late 1920s, influencing everything from film aesthetics, spectatorship, Hollywood's corporatization, star system, and theatrical distribution and exhibition.<sup>2</sup> Robert Allen and Richard Abel have documented the nationwide relationships between early cinema and vaudeville through 1915, generally considered to be the end of early cinema in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Research into the relationships and conventions between these two media forms and industries from 1915 until vaudeville's supposed death in late 1920s is less extensive, as is research into the several other live performance formats, including presentations and prologues, which grew to prominence in movie palaces beginning in the late 1910s.

Most simply, the aim of this chapter is to establish a brief taxonomy and history of each of the major types of live performance in theaters playing motion pictures until around 1920. This is when Hollywood's vertical integration and conglomeration with vaudeville corporations on a mass scale foundationally changed these delineations (the topic of the next chapter). In surveying forms of variety live performance during the 1910s, this chapter establishes a

contextual framework and historical background for our later understanding of the role of motion pictures and its industry in fostering and preserving forms of live performance in the post-big-time vaudeville (c. 1932) era. The description of each format of live performance includes its approximate prevalence in American theaters, methods of creation and programming, and how the ideological proclivities of the major companies, circuits, and producers involved in their production and exhibition informed the conventions of the format, as well as its conceptions of its audience.

By bringing histories of vaudeville and performing arts into conversation with research into film history and original research into trade press articles and exhibition manuals, this chapter will clarify the immense changes within the American entertainment landscape from the mid-1910s to the late 1920s in two specific ways. First it aims to establish the extent of live performance, and especially vaudeville, within American popular culture in the 1910s and 1920s. This chapter estimates that the major vaudeville circuits comprised no more than one-tenth the number of theaters considered a part of the motion picture industry in the late 1910s and 1920s.<sup>4</sup> With this information, I demonstrate in the following chapter that claims about the “death of vaudeville” in the mid-to-late 1920s did not mark a decline of live performance as much as in the specific format of big-time vaudeville. In contrast, different iterations of vaudeville and all types of live performance actually increased for much of the 1920s in motion picture theaters; as did the size of the vaudeville corporations, though they lost the identity that had once defined them (and has continued to define them in media historiography). Therefore, cinema was less a harbinger for the death of vaudeville than an entertainment medium that provided new exhibition spaces for live performance and that existed side-by-side with vaudeville during the 1910s and 1920s.

Second, this chapter will describe the qualities (method of production, program format, prestige, approach to mass culture) that made different formats of live performance desirable or undesirable to Hollywood studios at various points in their development. Knowing these qualities will help explain why certain types of live performance disappeared by the early 1930s and what elements remained in the following decades. In chapters two and three, this information will be crucial for explaining why live performance, and particularly presentations, based on their method of production and their emphasis on cultural uplift, temporarily appealed to the major film studios who were preoccupied with building grand (in both number and opulence) exhibition circuits. These features, along with the conflation of vaudeville corporations with movie studios during the 1920s brought live performance and movies closer together, made programming live performance more prevalent in urban exhibition, and brought variety entertainment under the control of Hollywood studios. After clarifying this symbiosis between live performance and motion picture exhibition, the fourth chapter seeks to explain why the film studios finally sought to eliminate live performance in American movie theaters, why they failed, and why they returned a more vaudeville-style mode of sharing live performance with film bills which preserved some heterogeneity in mass culture exhibition, particularly in metropolitan markets. Understanding these claims require a firm understanding of the differences and similarities between theaters (vaudeville vs. motion picture), industries (vaudeville circuits vs. film corporations), and types of variety live performance.

Until the early-to-mid 1920s, the American entertainment ecosystem had three major types of live performance in motion picture theaters: vaudeville, presentations, and personal appearances. All of them shared characteristics in their performance styles, organization, and production, and, like motion pictures, the program for each format was often intended to change

every week in large urban-based venues and would be accompanied by a variety of other films and/or live acts. However, vaudeville and presentations remained generally separated industrially (in terms of the people, actors, theaters) and discursively (e.g. how and who covered them in trade press) roughly until the post-WWI era.

### **Vaudeville and its Variations**

In its most general meaning, the term “vaudeville” referred to an entertainment program featuring a number of disparate acts, usually booked separately, of which at least one (but usually many more) needed to be live. Since its origin, however, the term has had several industrial and programmatic variations. Across these variations, vaudeville before the mid-1920s worked to appeal to and build a diverse national audience. Borrowing the format and repertoire structure of saloon and minstrel shows, what was first called vaudeville emerged in the 1880s. Many forms of entertainment like legitimate theater and symphonies were distinctly high-brow and financially out of reach for most working-class audiences. In the mid-1880s, however, rising wages, changing labor laws, mass newspapers (that could print ads), and increased transportation supplied workers and immigrants with disposable income, more leisure-time, and easier access to urban entertainment.<sup>5</sup> These changes made possible a new business formula that vaudeville theater owners quickly adopted, attracting working-class patrons with affordable prices and middle-class audiences with quality theaters and top-notch entertainment. With this basic formula in place, vaudeville began largely in individual theaters and small chains throughout larger cities.<sup>6</sup>

During the first decade of the 1900s, successful vaudeville companies formed larger national and regional chains. They also developed several new, more specific iterations of

vaudeville, including big-time and small-time.<sup>7</sup> Formed around 1890 in major urban areas (e.g. New York and Chicago), the big-time vaudeville circuits, exemplified by the Keith, Albee (which merged into the Keith-Albee circuit in 1915), and Orpheum circuits, presented elaborate and expensive live performances with high production values and big stars twice a day: a matinee and an evening show. Their theaters were ornate, intimate, and located in city centers convenient for shoppers and those living in the nearby neighborhoods using public transportation. Like vaudeville bills across its many iterations, a program might include any combination of eight to twelve live acts, ranging from magic shows, spoken comedy, a dance number, a playlet, an acrobat act, to even the appearance of a convicted murderer. Most performances fell into various categories of standard acts, such as “sight” acts (a.k.a “dumb” acts), including visual novelties that did not talk, including acrobats or cyclists, and “flash” acts, generic dance acts usually with some costuming or scenery.<sup>8</sup> In a big-time theater, the program generally changed weekly with admission ranging from fifty cents to one dollar, and sometimes higher.<sup>9</sup>

The big-time circuits also created and maintained vaudeville-specific stars who would headline their programs. Comedy stars including Bert Williams, Sophie Tucker, Will Rogers, Lillian Russell, and later the Marx Brothers, Eddie Cantor, and Mae West are most often remembered for their vaudevillian roots, all beginning their careers in vaudeville and achieving celebrity status while performing on the big-time circuits.<sup>10</sup> However, there were also hundreds of vaudeville-specific stars who specialized in minstrelsy, impersonations, monologues, magic, singing, animal wrangling, lecturing, and other acts.<sup>11</sup> The Keith, Albee, and Orpheum circuits created a monopoly over star performers through unscrupulous strategies. The big-time infamously blacklisted performers who performed in other circuits and required performers to



join the National Vaudeville Artists (NVA), a “union” they controlled. They also required performers to book engagements through their United Booking Office, allowing the big-time cartels to attain a cut of performer’s booking fees. The goal was to inhibit performers from booking with other circuits and to get them to sign long-term tours at low salaries. Despite immense pushback from other unions (namely the White Rats), performers, and short-lived rival big-time circuits (William Morris Circuit and Shubert Circuit are a few examples), these monopolistic strategies worked remarkably well for almost twenty years. Keith-Albee’s control over stars was furthered by their ownership and control over the Palace Theater on Broadway. For vaudeville performers and critics, no theater symbolized the big-time more than the Palace Theater in New York—which also housed the executive offices for the Keith-Albee circuit. Most performers considered the Palace the pinnacle vaudeville venue which determined the circuit’s star system. A booking at the prized venue signaled that a performer had “made it,” and a headline booking marked them as an undeniable star.<sup>12</sup>

The big-time circuits (sometimes also called “vaudeville-only” or “straight-vaudeville”) also prided themselves on their limited inclusion of films in their programs.<sup>13</sup> Though a typical bill might include a one-reel comedy or a newsreel, big-time theaters rarely showed feature length films and kept the running time of film material well below half the total time of the bill, if not less. The report books kept by Keith managers also indicate their relative lack of interest in short films. While most managers wrote sizable reviews of the live acts, their feedback on their program’s films was usually far less detailed. Some managers would simply write, “o.k.” or “good” to indicate that a particular Biograph or Pathé film was acceptable for a program, while other managers might provide only a short note (relative to the always lengthy feedback on live acts).<sup>14</sup> By the mid-1910s, most managers stopped recording notes on films.<sup>15</sup>

Despite its high ticket prices, production values, and opulent decor, big-time vaudeville neither catered exclusively to, nor was solely patronized by, upper and middle class audiences. Instead they promoted elite taste to its mass audience. The Keith circuit especially pushed elitism in their advertisements and other public relations. The admission scale was higher than many other entertainment forms other than legitimate theater, but it did not exclude working class audiences. Keith managers' reports indicate big-time audiences were composed of a variety of classes, genders, and ethnicities, even if the middle class made up the largest share of their audiences.<sup>16</sup>

Conversely, small-time vaudeville circuits (also known as “family-time” and “popular-priced” vaudeville) defined themselves during much of their early history against the high-brow aesthetics and ticket prices adopted by the big-time circuits, targeting working class and immigrant audiences, often living in urban neighborhoods. In smaller cities, small time theaters expanded their focus on the middle class. The term “small-time” functioned largely as a catch-all term for any vaudeville that did not qualify under the auspices of the big-time. Thus it encompassed a wide range of theaters and circuits in terms of size and quality—from dilapidated theaters in small-towns to metropolitan theaters that rivaled the big-time in size and opulence (discussed more in the next chapter). Histories of cinema and vaudeville often portray the Loew's circuit and the Fox Circuit, both founded in 1904, as epitomes of the small-time circuits. While they started as more characteristic small-time companies, Loew's and Fox, however, represented the higher end of the spectrum by the late 1910s which in part explains why they eventually transformed into major Hollywood studios. Other more typical, or at least mid-to-lower-tier, examples include Moss, Pantages, Bert Levey, George Leventritt, Lubin, Ackerman

and Harris, Interstate, West Coast Theaters Vaudeville, Western Vaudeville, Amalgamated, Gus Sun-Frank Keeny, Proctor, Columbia, and the Poli Circuits.<sup>17</sup>

Despite some differences in quality, small-time theater shared several other similarities. Small-time theaters explicitly catered to working-class audiences. Even Marcus Loew, the so-called “Small-Time King,” in advertisements claimed their theaters’ goal was “the filling of the poor man’s hour with fun.”<sup>18</sup> The admission price of small town theaters reflected this approach, ranging from ten to thirty cents. The inexpensive admission necessitated more shows per day, with the full program running three to six times a day (though most operated on the low end of this spectrum, running three shows per day). Given early cinema’s relationship to working class audiences, film and small-time vaudeville made for convenient partners.<sup>19</sup> Film material made up about half the running time of a small-time bill, with the other half comprised of four to six live acts of the same variety as the big-time, but with fewer, if any, headliners. The big-time largely prevented stars and well-known staple vaudeville acts from performing in small-time and other theaters through blacklists and long-term, exclusive contracts. Even still, most performers preferred big-time theaters because of the higher-pay and less grueling schedule of only two shows daily, though this privilege was largely restricted to the top acts. Small-time theaters paid their performers from twenty-five to one hundred dollars per week to keep overhead comparatively low, whereas big-time salaries ranged from the hundreds into the thousands for stars. If given the choice (and many were not) many performers also felt that only performing twice per day at big-time theaters maintained their acts’ freshness and creativity, whereas performing three, four, or even five times per day led to exhaustion and the quick loss of novelty--one of the foundational qualities of a marketable vaudeville act. A small-time program,

including the films and the live acts, tended to change more frequently than at a big-time theater, with bills sometimes only lasting half a week.<sup>20</sup>

Although scholars have examined the largest of the circuits, the exact scale of the American vaudeville industry as a whole during the late 1910s and early 1920s is largely unknown. By the mid-1910s, it was certainly smaller and less prominent than the motion picture industry, but its extent is difficult to determine for the earlier period.<sup>21</sup> I estimate that the major big-time and small-time vaudeville circuits comprised roughly 1,000 to 2,000 theaters at its peak during the mid-1920s, making them far less numerous than the more than 20,000 theaters that the industry considered “motion picture” theaters.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that by the mid-1920s, this 20,000 count *included* vaudeville theaters.<sup>23</sup>

The inclusion of vaudeville theaters in contemporaneous approximations (and not separated out), is one of the many factors that make assessing the extent of vaudeville difficult. The primary difficulty, however, rests in the industry’s fragmented nature, made up of many independent theaters and small chains. Beneath the big-time circuits and the prominent small-time circuits existed at least three other interrelated groups of vaudeville theaters, the “coffee and cake circuit” (sometimes shortened to “c & c”) and “independent vaudeville,” as well as the Theater Owners Bookers Association (T.O.B.A) Circuit, dedicated to showcasing black performers (discussed in chapter 5).<sup>24</sup> The coffee and cake circuit was not a formal circuit; rather it was a common catch-all term for individual vaudeville theaters in rural areas and small towns, usually owned by single proprietors or at least not part of a chain or booking agency. Independent vaudeville referred to circuits of theaters within rural areas and small towns *booked by the same agency*, which one supposes was still considered part of the larger coffee and cake circuit. In other words, they formed a circuit not through shared ownership but through a shared

booking agency charged exclusively with booking acts for its theaters. Neither coffee and cake nor independent vaudeville theaters were covered in significant detail by the national trade presses and is largely untraceable in the absence of studies of entertainment in smaller cities and towns. Occasionally, larger independent vaudeville circuits received national attention. A 1925 *Variety* article enumerated the four largest independent vaudeville agencies—(Fally) Markus, (Walter J.) Plimmer, (Jack) Linder, and Dow (after the surnames of the men who operated the booking agencies that programmed the theaters). These agencies collectively booked 105 theaters, with each controlling about twenty-five. Not all of these theaters booked vaudeville acts everyday of the week, however. Some booked only film programs several days of the week, though no reason is given. The article also lists four other independent circuits—those booked by John Robbins, Joe Eckst, Matty Rosen, and John Coutts—but only mentions that they booked less theaters than other agents.<sup>25</sup> One common place to find mentions of the coffee and cake circuit are in anecdotes of star performers recalling their early careers. Together, these stories suggest these collective theaters functioned at least partially as a testing and training ground for acts seeking to break into the larger circuits.<sup>26</sup> However, their collective size is currently unknown and appears to have been comprised of many, many single theaters or smaller circuits.

In contrast, the prevalence and location of the big-time vaudeville circuits and the prominent small-time circuits, especially Loew's and Fox's venues in New York and other major cities, were covered heavily in the trade press and are thus better known. Like the lower-tiered vaudeville circuits, though, it was a fragmented industry with many circuits comprising less than 100 theaters during much of the 1920s.<sup>27</sup> Until 1925, vaudeville corporations primarily divided up their booking regions, with some working east of Chicago and the Mississippi River, and others working west. The East coast vaudeville circuits were composed of Loew's, Fox, Keith-

Albee, and Poli, among others. Loew's maintained a circuit of seventy-five theaters in at least twelve states in 1923, with a majority located in New York City.<sup>28</sup> In 1919, the Keith-Albee Exchange booked 128 theaters in thirteen states.<sup>29</sup> Between 1912 and early 1927 Fox had grown from twelve New York theaters to forty-five, while the Poli circuit remained relatively small, only controlling nineteen theaters by 1927.<sup>30</sup> Orpheum, Pantages, and West Coast Theaters operated between Chicago and the Pacific coast. In this region, the Orpheum Circuit owned forty-five theaters in thirty-six cities, with theaters as south as New Orleans and as north as Winnipeg, Canada.<sup>31</sup> Pantages booked seventy-two theaters in 1926 located from Chicago to the west coast, thirty of which they owned and the remainder being affiliates.<sup>32</sup> In 1925 West Coast Theater's vaudeville division advertised bookings in "over one hundred theaters," all in California.<sup>33</sup>

While the extent of independent vaudeville or even some of the larger circuits are ultimately not determinable, it should be clear that vaudeville was a small industry compared to the motion picture theater industry.<sup>34</sup> The major vaudeville circuits collectively controlled no more than 500 theaters throughout the early 1920s, making it only a fraction of the size of the motion picture industry in terms of number of theaters. However, almost all of these theaters were located in highly populated, desirable urban areas. For this reason, comparing audience sizes, however, vaudeville proportionally outperformed its size. Even in 1925--the beginning of vaudeville's supposed decline--the big-time circuits employed 12,000 acts per day who performed for an estimated 11.2 million people per week.<sup>35</sup> By comparison, the motion picture industry served roughly seventy-five million moviegoers per week, meaning vaudeville served an estimated audience of about 15% the size of motion picture industry.<sup>36</sup> Their strength and

prominence thus stemmed not from their large numbers of theaters or patrons, but rather by their central location in major urban entertainment and shopping districts.

As a whole, American vaudeville's extent is also traceable by the large number of booking agents. Even in January 1928, well into the decline of big-time vaudeville (covered in chapter two), 390 vaudeville agencies operated in twenty-three cities in twenty states, from cities as large as New York City to as small as Butte, Montana. Of course, the bulk of them worked from major entertainment hubs like Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. While the data does little to indicate even an approximate number of theaters using vaudeville—an agency might book for hundreds of theaters like the Keith-Albee's United Booking Office did, or for a single theater—it further suggests vaudeville's underpinnings as a more regional (even sometimes local), fractured media industry.<sup>37</sup>

Another reason for the indeterminate size of the vaudeville industry is the difficulty in discerning how many theaters considered “movie theaters” (compared to “vaudeville” theaters) used live acts, and how frequently they did so. Within almost all individual cities, “movie theaters” far outnumbered “vaudeville” theaters. In Birmingham, Alabama in 1925, for example, there were twenty-five theaters, only three of which the city amusement inspector considered “vaudeville” theaters. Two of these vaudeville theaters even showed feature films regularly.<sup>38</sup> However, the distinction between vaudeville theaters and motion picture theaters did not mean that theaters considered to be primarily for motion picture exhibition did not at least dabble in vaudeville. A survey conducted by Columbia University and Babson's Statistical Organization which was published in *The Motion Picture News* in November 1922, suggests that the number was not negligible. The research team surveyed 10,000 “primarily picture houses” theaters (roughly half of American theaters at the time) and intentionally did not include theaters that

were identified primarily as vaudeville theaters; they found that 599 of the polled motion-picture theaters also programmed vaudeville acts.<sup>39</sup> The frequency at which they did this was not specified. A survey design flaw notwithstanding, this large sample size suggested that just under 1,200 *movie* theaters programmed vaudeville.<sup>40</sup> Another, albeit smaller, survey corroborates the one in *Motion Picture News*. The Cinema Club of Cleveland and Northern Ohio studied sixty-seven theaters (presumably cinema theaters) in Cleveland in spring 1922 and reported that ten of them presented vaudeville acts.<sup>41</sup>

Even though by some metric these theaters counted as movie theaters, their occasional programming of vaudeville acts should not be dismissed as an ancillary feature of the program that did not draw an audience. The Columbia survey reported that that “33%” of the audiences of the cinema theaters primarily came for the vaudeville acts, with the remaining 67% divided among the feature film, the shorts, and live music.<sup>42</sup> This number should not be mistaken for the number of theaters using live performance of any kind in their theater, which was likely larger. A theater which even routinely programmed a singer, for example, was not considered to be programming vaudeville. Vaudeville, at a bare minimum, referred to the programming of multiple acts.<sup>43</sup>

In part, licenses in individual cities determined the ability for a single theater to book a combination policy (a common name for a theater that regularly programmed live acts and films). By 1920 American cities had enacted various licensing policies for theaters. Some supported the combination policy by charging a single price for a license that allowed both motion picture exhibition and vaudeville.<sup>44</sup> For example, Charleston, West Virginia, charged theaters \$125 annually to program “moving picture show[s] or vaudeville, or both.”<sup>45</sup> Others required separate license fees.<sup>46</sup> Some cities assumed that specific theaters would operate on a



“motion picture only” policy, but few theaters, possibly none, were licensed solely for straight-vaudeville. Columbia, South Carolina, for example charged \$50 annually for a theater to show motion pictures, with vaudeville costing an additional \$25. There were no other options. In other cases, cities made operating a combination theater an expensive endeavor requiring theaters to pay two separate license fees. Grand Rapids, Michigan required theaters to purchase two separate \$150 licenses to show motion pictures and live acts. In short, city policies could further codify the separation (or lack thereof) of motion picture and vaudeville theaters, or, at least make it possible, albeit at a price, for a theater to program both.

Relative to its size, vaudeville’s approach to mass culture is better-established. Vaudeville’s enduring success—across its iterations and names—stemmed from its understanding of the specific tastes of local audiences and its ability to cater to them. Instead of treating their audience as homogenized, vaudeville corporations aspired to understand their patrons’ ethnicity, class, and gender divisions and develop bills that appealed to specific audiences. This was true even for the nationally renowned Keith circuit. Keith himself claimed in publicity that he saw his mass audience unified by their desire for upper-middle class taste. However, cultural historian Alison Kibler points out that Keith admitted in company memos that he was more comfortable regarding his audience as a collection of distinct social groups.<sup>47</sup>

Keith’s vaudeville empire appealed to mass audiences by making individual theater managers responsible for programming. The Keith circuit handled many of its performer contracts through the United Booking Office to negotiate (or exploit) the best prices, especially for its biggest stars. Beyond this negotiatory function, individual theater managers had substantial control over their bills as one can see from their detailed manager reports. Managers aimed to create what some called a “balanced program.”<sup>48</sup> This had two meanings. First, they

wanted to construct bills which had a variety of genres, performance types, and acts. More importantly, though interrelated, managers sought programs with at least one act appealing to each distinct group they perceived in their audience. In turn, a manager's job centrally relied upon knowing the tastes and habits of these groups. By programming a performance by an Irish tenor or an Irish film like *Dublin Dan* (Solax Film, 1912), for example, managers sought to appeal to a theater's large Irish immigrant community, while others relied on the French singer Yvette Guilbert's reputation as a feminine artist to attract upper-middle class patrons and the female audience.<sup>49</sup> Of course, such a strategy did not guarantee that the audiences would appreciate acts that sought to appeal to their identity, nor that other groups would not meet acts with antagonism. For example, an immigrant "balcony" crowd at one of Keith's New York City theaters heckled and jeered Guilbert off the stage—preferring the preceding slapstick comedy instead.<sup>50</sup>

Within this system, vaudeville developed a deep relationship with ethnic theater and a star system that did not require the denial of a performer's ethnic identity. Stars who graced both ethnic theaters and the esteemed stage of the Palace Theater emerged as cornerstones of the industry. Attracted by the money and celebrity status promised by the big-time circuits, Jewish performers like Al Jolson, Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor, and Bella Baker moved from the Yiddish theaters in New York and California to vaudeville. Others, including Fanny Brice, continued to perform in Yiddish theaters while touring the vaudeville circuits. Their acts proved successful because of their appeal both within their ethnic communities as well as to mass audiences, who were often fans of jazz and other popular music styles. Cantor often performed his acts in Yiddish, if the makeup of the audience was largely Jewish.<sup>51</sup> Tucker's most famous song, "My Yiddish Mama," according to historian Robert Snyder, appealed to Jewish audiences'

painful experiences of American assimilation and social mobility, but also because of its general theme about motherhood.<sup>52</sup> Jewish audiences often demanded these songs and performances because of a strong desire for ethnic belonging. In her examination of Yiddish theaters in New York in the early 1910s, Judith Thissen argues that Jewish immigrants demanded more Yiddish vaudeville as a grassroots countermeasure to the ongoing Americanization efforts in cinema which they felt threatened their Jewish community.<sup>53</sup>

Of course, not all entertainers “performed” and foregrounded their ethnicity in their acts, nor were an ethnic theater’s relationship to vaudeville necessarily so positive. Ethnic and racial stereotypes characterized vaudeville acts across groups. For every relatively positive or at least benign Irish star like singer Maggie Cline, “The Irish Queen,” and tap dancer Pat Rooney, Sr., there existed other acts that depicted drunken Irishmen with a stock red nose and a ruddy complexion. In this way, while vaudeville’s manager system was responsive to the diversity of their audiences and facilitated a celebrity culture that was responsive to its immigrant communities, it also often indulged in bigoted and crude forms of entertainment that heightened the ever-present tensions between immigrant groups, classes, and genders.<sup>54</sup> As much as they supported this system, Keith and others were well aware of these problems, and dedicated much of their time to “cleaning up” vaudeville by censoring acts they considered asocial or risqué. Differing opinions of managers and audiences about what constituted clean or ideal entertainment kept this change from occurring on a widespread level. With no single opinion in charge, the manager system made the total “clean up” of vaudeville a nearly impossible goal.<sup>55</sup>

The ability for vaudeville, as a cultural industry, to be simultaneously bureaucratic and national in scope, while still being able to successfully appeal to local communities also relied on what vaudeville historian Robert Snyder has called “circularity.” Vaudeville performers,

managers, and audiences valued a perceived intimacy to one another, which they believed allowed them to communicate and react, largely without the use of technology such as microphones mediating the communication.<sup>56</sup> This value affected both the aesthetic and types of most acts. Historian David Monod estimates using 35,000 reviews that eighty-percent of all vaudeville acts did not feature fictional characters, that is to say they designed their act to seem as if they were not performing at all. Most acts also utilized direct address where the performers spoke to the audience in some form. The idea was for the performers to appear authentic and foster perceived intimacy with the audience.<sup>57</sup> These qualities continued to make vaudeville and vaudeville-like performances a powerful vehicle for stars (well into the 1960s), as stardom relies on creating and maintaining this perceived intimacy and authenticity with fans.

The small sizes of most vaudeville theaters intensified these effects. Many of the most prominent and first run big-time vaudeville theaters contained less than 1,000 seats and survived financially through selling more expensive tickets. The average capacity of theaters owned by the Orpheum circuit, for example, was 543, with the smallest theater only accommodating 150 paying customers at a time.<sup>58</sup> The average Orpheum theater was thus less than one-fourth the size of even a mid-size, 2000 seat movie palace. Even the aisles of Keith-Albee's Palace Theater (located in New York City), the unrivaled epitome of vaudeville prestige, only contained 1,733 seats.<sup>59</sup> The small space within these theaters fostered greater repartee and intimacy between performer and audience, thereby facilitating a range of both non-auditory and auditory communication from laughing to facial expressions and everything in between. Vaudeville, as it was generally presented and seen by its contemporaries, was an active, even participatory, form of mass culture.

## Stage Presentations and Prologues

Besides vaudeville, the most common formats of live performance programmed alongside motion pictures were two variations of stage presentations: the presentation and the prologue. Both utilized orchestral accompaniment and were usually designed in a collaboration between the stage manager and the musical director working in the same large, metropolitan motion picture theater. Other iterations involved touring performers and companies, which would have their own directors and coordinate with local theater managers.<sup>60</sup> A prologue, sometimes referred to as an “atmospheric prologue,” is the most well-known stage presentation in cinema history because of its explicit connection to the feature film, which gave it the potential function to change, or at least add to, the meaning of a given film.<sup>61</sup> A prologue used actors, singers, dancers, and musicians (especially a large orchestra or organ) set against an elaborate *mise-en-scène* meant to reproduce an important setting or scene in the film. The second type of stage presentation was often simply referred to as a *presentation*, or less commonly, a non-atmospheric prologue.<sup>62</sup> In contrast to the prologue, the presentation had no connection to the feature film but was still just as grand in staging, performance, music, and decor. Usually stage directors designed the presentation’s visual and aural elements around a theme, such as numbers in famous ballet (e.g. *The Nutcracker*), a famous painting, or historical event (e.g. Napoleon’s 1812 burning of Moscow).<sup>63</sup>

Film histories often trace the presentation’s rise to prominence to Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel’s forays in several New York City theaters, especially the Strand which opened in 1914 and is considered one of the earliest, and most prominent, movie palaces.<sup>64</sup> Many prominent practitioners of the form co-existed alongside Roxy during the late 1910s and early 1920s, working in various parts of the country with their own themes, including: Sid Grauman, Fanchon

and Marco, Jack Partington, Frank Cambria, John Murray Anderson, Louis K. Sidney, and Joe Plunkett.<sup>65</sup>

Almost all presentations shared a similar, highly-involved method of production akin to legitimate theater and feature films. Presentations largely depended on a division of labor of potentially dozens of workers divided into two departments, the production department and the music department, which together comprised a team of directors, scenario writers, choreographers, set designers, costume designers, stage managers, performers, orchestra members, and organists. The exact size of the team varied by the size of the theater and the scale of the production which also determined who controlled the various departments. The larger the theater, the stricter the division of labor. In the largest theaters, the theater carried three collaborating team members: a production manager in charge of all aspects of the stage offerings; a musical director, in charge of planning and selecting the musical accompaniment for both the stage and screen; and the general theater manager, who oversaw all departments and largely was in charge of accounting, advertising, and other front of house duties. In a smaller theater the musical director could double as the production manager. Some other small theaters also relied on their general manager to act as the production manager.<sup>66</sup>

No matter the size or division of labor, the department head(s) and their teams would generally produce a new prologue or presentation every week, preparing for future shows at least three weeks in advance. In other words, the team needed to balance the coordination of three shows at once, even though only one was performed at any given time. Even in a theater with its own production manager and musical director, presentations added to the general manager's workload, piling on a range of additional tasks to their day-to-day, and hour-by-hour schedule, including reviewing rehearsals, editing the show, meeting with the production and music

departments, and holding talent tryouts.<sup>67</sup> All of this work mainly benefited a single theater, as most presentations up until the early 1920s were only staged in the theaters where their directors and their production crew worked.<sup>68</sup>

Because presentations required a large production crew and came with sizable production costs (cast, crew, props, customs, rehearsals, etc.), they required theaters with a comparatively large seating capacity. This made presentations less prevalent than vaudeville.<sup>69</sup> However, the number of presentations presented in American theaters during the late 1910s and early 1920s is even more difficult to approximate than vaudeville because they were not, at this time, attached to a particular corporation and thus traceable by the company's size, and had no specific booking agents. Thus, discovering an approximation would require surveying a range of theater bills in different cities and regions.

The evidence that does exist appears to be inconclusive, unfortunately. The same aforementioned survey from the November 1922 edition of *Motion Picture World*, reported that “2.47%” (247) of the 10,000 polled motion picture theaters used “prologues.”<sup>70</sup> If the extrapolation is accurate, this would mean that 494 theaters used prologues in their theaters at least occasionally. Unfortunately, unlike the extended number of vaudeville theaters, this number cannot be corroborated. *Variety* did not track presentations as its own category, for example, until December 30, 1925, itself a sign that presentations were not that prevalent or at least that regular compared to vaudeville. Even at that point, no more than a couple of dozen theaters reported regularly featuring them.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the difficulty in quantifying presentations, we know some of the motivating factors in their use. While managers generally staged prologues alongside top-quality films, this was not always the case with presentations.<sup>72</sup> *Variety* stage acts have a long history on the same

bill as low-grade film products, because some managers historically utilized this programming approach out of necessity rather than desire. Take the example of Balaban and Katz.<sup>73</sup> Though the company formed into a regional chain comparatively late, owning just six theaters in 1919 (including only two movie palaces), Balaban and Katz expanded into the most profitable theater chain by 1924 owning thirty-six Chicago-area theaters, most of which qualified as De Luxe buildings. Often regarded as the seminal movie theater chain by scholars and considering themselves “motion picture exhibitors,” Balaban and Katz ironically achieved its success with little access to top-grade Hollywood films, over which other theaters and small chains around Chicago with longer-standing relationships with the studios had priority. Instead, Balaban and Katz readily booked and screened less-desired feature films. As the company’s leaders explained in *The Fundamental Principles of Balaban & Katz Theatre Management*, a manual created in 1926 to guide the chain’s theater managers in corporate policy and strategy, “we cannot afford to build up patronage depending entirely upon the drawing power of our feature film as we display them. We must build in the minds of our audience the feeling that we represent an institution.”<sup>74</sup> Instead of top-notch feature films, this institutional identity rested on factors that would come to define movie palaces and studio-owned first-run exhibitions during the mid-to-late 1920s: service, luxurious buildings and accommodations, centralized location, and stage shows.<sup>75</sup>

The presentation rose to its modest apex on the stages of the movie palaces in part because the stage format and the entertainment venue worked in harmony. The boom in movie palace construction between 1913 and 1928 (discussed in chapter 2) is often credited to two interrelated factors, one economic and the other cultural.<sup>76</sup> Theater exhibitors aimed to create a large mass audience which would continually buy inexpensive tickets, an entrepreneurial ambition often couched in the democratic rhetoric that going to the movies was available to



everyone.<sup>77</sup> Because of the increasing costs of theater operations (film costs, advertising, labor costs, etc.) theaters with large seating capacities became an economic necessity for exhibitors by the mid-to-late 1910s, especially because economies-of-scale could keep ticket prices low (e.g. 25 to 35 cents). As will be discussed in chapter two, the move toward vertical integration of film studios, which was bolstered by Wall Street investments during the mid-1920s, also increased movie palace construction, as studios competed to acquire large theater chains which controlled important first-run metropolitan markets.<sup>78</sup>

On the other hand, scholars have described movie palaces of the 1910s and 1920s as advocates of cultural uplift, reforming class divisions to create a mass audience across lines of class, gender, and ethnicity (and unevenly across race, as people of color were often not allowed or sat in segregated sections) by selling a fantasy of upper-middle class luxury, comfort, exoticism, and consumption through programming, architecture, amenities.<sup>79</sup> In short, movie palace managers and presentation directors (when not the same person) aimed to create an experience that was inexpensive enough for working class movie-goers and prestigious enough to also attract more middle- to upper-class patrons.<sup>80</sup>

A key component of this uplift strategy, whether exercised by the Balaban and Katz circuit in Chicago, or in the theaters of Roxy or Grauman, involved presentations and prologues. In comparison to vaudeville's polyvocality, whose decentralized mode of production and emphasis on disparate acts showcased diverse talents and ideas, presentations were monovocal, the product of a single director conducting several departments with some creative control. Certainly differences in themes, styles, and performances between directors (Grauman or Roxy compared to Fanchon and Marco, for example) or individual presentations could create unique or even divergent meanings and present various ideas about identity, religion, and nationalism,

among others.<sup>81</sup> However, the presentation in general largely played into the luxury, comfort, exoticism, and capitalistic consumption of the movie palaces. Most often, as in those of Roxy and Grauman, presentations achieved this goal by incorporating “high art” of European movements in performing and musical arts such as ballet and classical orchestra music, and adapting them into a revue-like structure with exotic themes and cabaret-like performances. Film historian Phil Wagner has effectively argued that the brother-sister team of Fanchon and Marco (F&M), based in Los Angeles, created their “Ideas” (the brand name for their presentations) in contrast to what they viewed as the “Eastern” style of Roxy and Grauman.<sup>82</sup> Instead of replicating the latter’s “high art,” F&M’s “Western” presentations were non-classical, emphasizing chaos and disunity, and incorporated the frontier mythos of California as an untouched land which bred “expressive freedom, uncharted expansion, and cultural reinvention.”<sup>83</sup> As important as these differences are, I would add that the goal of even F&M’s presentations was still uplift even if their approach differed from Roxy and Grauman’s New York style.<sup>84</sup> Many of F&M’s presentations such as the “Aztec Idea” and the “Parisian Idea” played into the exoticism characteristic of the movie palace (most notably in their architecture). Even more tellingly, F&M Ideas showcased consumerism, including presentations which thematized yachting, beauty culture, and the “new world of abundance” made possible by modern technologies in capitalist society.<sup>85</sup> To be clear, as I demonstrate in chapter 5, not all live performances (e.g. onstage jazz) presented on movie palace stages during the 1910s or 1920s adhered to these cultural uplift strategies. However, because presentations fit this mold well, they were the most common format of live performance in movie palaces during this time.

The last format of live performance in motion pictures went by many names: name acts, headliners, in-person presentations, with perhaps the most common (at least in industry

discourse) being *personal appearances*. This form might resemble any of the aforementioned formats, meaning it could be a feature of a vaudeville bill or was integrated into a presentation or prologue. In either case, a personal appearance was predicated on the performance of a major star from any form of entertainment: recorded and/or live music, vaudeville, legitimate theater, radio, and film. As media convergence proliferated, these stars performed across these intertwined industries, and did not belong to one particular medium. From the late 1920s onward were the personal appearance of stars from sports or “freak show” forms of entertainment, such as conjoined twins, or topical “celebrities,” such as renowned pilot Charles Lindbergh, were less common but not unheard of in vaudeville.<sup>86</sup> No matter the star’s particular medium or reason for their fame, theaters and their audiences expected a performance whether it was singing, dancing, stand-up or sketch comedy, or acting in a short play. Sometimes, though far from the norm, the content of the performance was derived from the performer’s other work in other media. In 1915, for example, George Beban—the future “Italian face of American cinema”—promoted his film career and his recent film *The Alienist* by exploiting his well-known status in vaudeville by performing an act of his new film onstage.<sup>87</sup> If a performer was a bandleader, comedian, or radio personality, they were often expected to also open, close, and emcee the show.<sup>88</sup>

### **Industrial Separations into the Early 1920s**

Across vaudeville and movie theaters, at most an estimated 2,000 used some sort of live performance, be it vaudeville or presentations. In terms of programming practices then, differentiating vaudeville from motion picture theaters is difficult, especially if the vaudeville theater utilized a small-time policy and showed feature films. However, publications dedicated to the film industry, such as *Film Daily Yearbook* and its predecessor *Wid’s Yearbook*, which

started in 1919, rarely covered any news or information about live performance in theaters until 1925.<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, these sources do reveal the importance of vaudeville theaters as exhibitors of films. Many vaudeville theaters, even many big-time theaters owned by Keith-Albee and Orpheum, and less surprisingly for Loew's and Fox, were considered "important first run [picture] houses" with a priority selection of motion pictures. Independent film exchanges throughout several states sold and distributed "Vod-A-Vil Movies," one-reel films of vaudeville acts presumably targeted toward movie theaters wanting to show a recorded alternative to live acts.<sup>90</sup> Mentions of these exchanges and these canned vaudeville acts end in 1925, at which point it is unclear whether they stopped making these films and/or the independent exchanges dissolved.

The main reasons that the film industry trade press did not largely cover live performance in theaters until well into the 1920s likely stemmed from the fact that there still existed a separation between motion picture production and exhibition, as most film producers with the exception of Famous-Players Lasky and First National in 1919, had not pushed to vertically integrate. As a result, a movie theater manager seeking to program vaudeville acts or presentations would have to divide their attention to two largely separated industries: vaudeville and film production.

Even though movie theaters and vaudeville theaters could share similar programs and show live performance and movies together, there were some clear lines of separation between them in exhibition manuals, trade magazines, and industrial organizations into the early 1920s. Despite the vaudeville theater's possibility of booking live acts and showing films, theaters considered to be "vaudeville theaters" were usually owned by a vaudeville corporation (e.g. Loew's or Keith-Albee), or at least had a dedicated booking agent (e.g., Bert Levey). A motion

picture theater, in contrast, was not owned by a vaudeville corporation or run by booking agent, and likely only engaged vaudeville acts occasionally, if they even could architecturally support them. Even many movie palaces were not built with stages until roughly 1920.<sup>91</sup> In terms of seating capacity, most vaudeville and motion picture theaters were small, making them hard to differentiate. However, on the high end, many more motion picture theaters reached palatial size before 1920.

Even harder distinctions existed between vaudeville theaters and theaters that showed presentations. *Variety* maintained a distinction between vaudeville and picture theaters, as well as vaudeville and presentations, through its separate “Pictures” and “Vaudeville” sections. Even when *Variety* began tracking presentations on December 30, 1925, the feature appeared in the “Pictures” section and not near the “Bills Next Week” section, in which they had traced vaudeville bills since December 4, 1909. Differentiations deeming vaudeville as a disparate, or not ornate entertainment were upheld by the courts. A ruling by the Fifth Ave. Court in Brooklyn stated that the manager of the Globe Theater did not need a vaudeville license to continue to booking presentations because the judge drew a “fine distinction” between vaudeville and presentations in which “‘special costumes’ are worn.”<sup>92</sup>

Despite these distinctions, the overlaps between a motion picture theater and a vaudeville theater made some in the film industry nervous. Even by the mid-1910s, American film exhibition had already begun, albeit only for about five to eight years, to organize into its own industrial sector.<sup>93</sup> In part, exhibitors did this with the aim of distinguishing the new medium from more established cultural industries (e.g. vaudeville, fair-grounds, the circus, etc.) from which it stemmed. As a principle, this dissertation questions the extent to which any ostensible *motion picture* venue was different from variety performance venues that showed films, given

many used live acts at some point and place. At least discursively, however, there was an uneasy awareness of the similarities among the industries, which some during the industrialization of American cinema wished to more clearly delineate. This fueled a growing, though quite weak and non-unified, argument in the industry to foster movie-only theaters without live performance. One of the earliest published manuals on the technical, narrative, architectural and industrial conventions of the film industry, *Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting* written by John B. Rathbun and published in 1914, encapsulates this stance and the key tenets of its reasoning which we will see develop in the next chapters.<sup>94</sup>

Rathbun was considered a reputable industry insider through his multiple professions. In addition to teaching college-level machine design and authoring several technical guides to automobile engines and airplane design, Rathbun was the associate editor of *Motography*. This monthly trade journal covered all aspects of the film industry, and was particularly focused on exhibition, exploitation (i.e. advertising), and corporate structures and strategies. Four years after the manual's publication, the owner of the *Exhibitors Herald* (later *Motion Picture Herald*) purchased *Motography* and merged it with his own paper.<sup>95</sup> Rathbun's manual explicitly claims that the evidence and data underpinning the advice in the book stems directly from his work for *Motography*.<sup>96</sup>

Rathbun clearly states his interest in separating cinema and live performance as well as reporting on the industrial separation between movie and vaudeville theaters: "In our opinion it is best to exhibit pictures and pictures only [...] Let the vaudeville houses run the vaudeville."<sup>97</sup> However, Rathbun is not dogmatic in this assertion. In fact, written during the tail end of the vogue of illustrated songs, he suggests that such musical numbers serve as a possible exception to his dichotomy.<sup>98</sup> Despite his aversions, Rathbun suggested that programming vaudeville could

be a practical strategy depending on the demands of a theater's clientele and he provided practical advice on how to work with talent agents to book vaudeville acts, on estimating the costs of these acts, and also advocated sharing acts with other theaters to maintain variety and to spread costs.

Though Rathbun was not inflexible, the arguments underlying his advocacy for motion picture-only theaters would eventually develop across the industry. His first argument centered on specialization. Rathbun's primary concern was rather that theater managers would be unable to dedicate the appropriate amount of time to study *both* the recent output of films and popular live acts in order to create bills that would appeal to the specific tastes and desires of their local audiences. In the standard practice of theater managing, doing this required working with two separate industries and coordinating with two separate booking agents—one at the local film exchange and another with a local or regional vaudeville/talent agent—and most likely required attending two separate theaters if a manager wanted to study both potential live acts and films to program. Without the time-intensive research Rathbun advised, programming vaudeville acts in motion picture theaters would haphazardly result, in his view, in a “cut up” program “lacking in character.”<sup>99</sup>

Thinly veiled behind a guise of audience preference, Rathbun also justifies his advocacy for the film-only theaters with the claim that films could fully replace and supplant live performance without any consequence, and the medium of cinema had the potential to far surpass live performance as an entertainment form. Rathbun claims that “many people object strenuously to the introduction of vaudeville as they had rather have pictures only for their money.”<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, he mentions that an audience that desires a combination policy does so largely because of their dissatisfaction with the program designed by a “careless picture

show manager.”<sup>101</sup> In other words, his point is that local audiences never desire live performance in lieu of, or even in conjunction with, motion pictures as long as the theater manager has constructed a program that appeals to them.<sup>102</sup> Claims like Rathbun’s suggest that the specific qualities and conventions that live performance might offer the bill was not a concern for theater managers, and that a film program, when properly designed, could entertain or at least mollify an audience just as well as live entertainment.

This belief in the universal appeal of films and the balanced film program above all other forms of entertainment eventually formed the bedrock rhetoric for the studio system’s “straight picture” movement (the focus of chapter 4) which began during the late 1920s, and which aimed to shift as much exhibition revenue discreetly back toward film production. For the meantime, however, this rhetoric did not reach the mainstream. Programming live performance even in a motion picture theater was considered a viable option, despite the continuation of some noticeable industrial and discursive separation between vaudeville, motion picture exhibition, film production, and the formats of live performance until the late 1910s and early 1920s.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Andre Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction: From Kinematography to Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Charles Musser, “Towards a History of Theatrical Culture,” in *Screen Culture: History and Textuality*, ed. John Fullerton (London: John Libbey, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction*; Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 381–88; Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Robert Allen, “The Movies in Vaudeville: Historical Context of the Movies as Popular Entertainment,” in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Janet Staiger, “Seeing Stars,” in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991).



<sup>3</sup> Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno Press, 1980); Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Richard Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and the "Movie-Mad" Audience, 1910-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

Domitor, "the international society for the study of early cinema," also ends its purview in 1915 for the same reason. Abel has recently expanded this research into the mid-1920s through an examination of exhibition practices in Detroit, Michigan from 1916-1925.

<sup>4</sup> I couple this information with seating capacities as well as audience numbers, where available.

<sup>5</sup> Other factors include the expansion of the railroads and immigration (diverse audiences).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 295-8; M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 5-7. For a discussion of "highbrow" and lowbrow entertainment in relation to vaudeville see, Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 77-9. For a relatively contemporaneous discussion of the term "big-time" vaudeville see, "Big Time," *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Robert W Snyder, *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., *Show Biz: From Vaude to Video* (New York: Doubleday, 1953); John E. DiMaggio, *Vaudeville U.S.A.* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973). Monod, *Vaudeville*, 149-216.

<sup>8</sup> For more examples see, Anthony Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); David Monod, "Types of Acts," *Vaudeville America* (website), accessed April 25, 2022, <http://vaudevilleamerica.org/type-of-acts/>; Joe Bigelow, "Those M.C. Days," *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 195. Wayne Keyser, "Vaudeville Lingo Dictionary," *Ballycast* (blog), January 16, 2019, <https://ballycast.com/?p=3708>. Monod's otherwise excellent list does not always list the period specific name for an act.

<sup>9</sup> Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 238-40; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 18; Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 21-2.

<sup>10</sup> Snyder, *The Voice of the City*; Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., *Show Biz: From Vaude to Video* (New York: Doubleday, 1953).

<sup>11</sup> For the most comprehensive list of vaudeville performers see, Slide, *Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Rose, *The Agency: William Morris and the Hidden History of Show Business* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 13-4; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 205-7, 247-75; Green and Laurie, *Show Biz*, 373-7; Snyder, *The Voice of the City*, 88; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 198.

<sup>13</sup> Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 239-42, 246-8; Allen, *Vaudeville and Film*, 230-50.

<sup>14</sup> These conclusions stem from research into the vaudeville managers' reports located in the Keith/Albee Collection at the University of Iowa Special Collections and Archives. Pertinent

examples include: Earl V. Allen, Scenic Theater, Pawtucket, Rhode Island, September 27, 1921, The Keith/Albee Collection, University of Iowa Special Collections and Archives, Iowa City, Iowa; C.E. Barns, Philadelphia, November 18, 1907, The Keith/Albee Collection; Carl D. Lothrop, Boston, January 4, 1909, The Keith/Albee Collection; H. A. Daniels, Philadelphia, May 8, 1905, The Keith/Albee Collection. For more information on the collection and their implications on film and theater history see, Michael Slowik, "Documents of Performance: Keith-Albee Managers' Reports," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 39, no. 2 (2012): 93–103; Michael Slowik, "Film Exhibition in Vaudeville: What We Learn from Keith-Albee Managers' Reports," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 39, no. 2 (2012): 73–92; M. Alison Kibler, "The Keith/Albee Collection: The Vaudeville Industry, 1894-1935," *Books at Iowa* 56, no. 1 (1992): 7–24.

<sup>15</sup> Slowik, "Film Exhibition in Vaudeville," 84.

<sup>16</sup> Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 21-4; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 5, 194-5.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Gevinson, "Vaudeville," in *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel (London: Routledge, 2005), 672–76; Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915* (New York: McFarland, 2015), 53; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 187-210; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 238-40; Green and Laurie, *Showbiz*; "The Hopeless Independents," *Variety*, December 30, 1925, 17; "End of Indies Approaches with Speed," *Variety*, January 1, 1930, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Prill, "The 'Small Time' King," *The Theatre Magazine* 19, no. 157 (1914): 145.

<sup>19</sup> Steven J Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> "Year in Small Time," *Variety*, June 2, 1926, 23; "Year in Vaudeville," *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 17; "Year in Vaudeville," *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 21; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240-8; Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 17-21; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Allen, *Vaudeville and Film*, 298; Rose, *The Agency*, 13-4. Rose claims that 10,000 vaudeville theaters were in operation during the early 1920s, but this is unverifiable and seems unlikely based on the evidence supplied in this chapter.

<sup>22</sup> 2,050 theaters was the largest estimation published in *Variety*. Joe Schoenfeld, "The Vanishing Headliner," *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 200.

<sup>23</sup> *The Film Daily* estimated 20,500 theaters operated in the United States in 1928 and 1929. "List of Theatres," *The Film Daily Year Book 1927* (New York: Film Daily, 1928), 513; "Vital Facts and Nutshell Statistics," *The Film Daily Year Book 1928* (New York: Film Daily, 1929), 3. Other sources estimate that there 15,000 American theaters in 1914 and 16,250 in 1938. John B Rathbun, *Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting*. (Chicago: Charles C. Thompson Company, 1914), preface; Frank H Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1938), 29. A more exact number could be attained by collecting and tabulating the data from *Variety*'s "Bills Next Week in Vaudeville Theaters," which they published from December 4, 1909 to January 6, 1926 when *Variety* changed their policy to

reporting presentations and vaudeville together under the title “Presentations-Bills.” The name of this column changed several times between then and 1929, when the “Variety Bills” was adopted and remained until the 1950s.

<sup>24</sup>Athelia Knight, “He Paved the Way for T.O.B.A.,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 15, no. 2 (1987): 153–81; Errol Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 207-15; Nadine George-Graves, *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender and Class in African American Theater 1900-1940* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Green and Laurie, *Showbiz*, 270-2; “The Hopeless Independents,” *Variety*, December 30, 1925, 17; “End of Indies Approaches with Speed,” *Variety*, January 1, 1930, 36; “7 Acts, Piano, M.C.—\$25,” *Variety*, May 9, 1932, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Mae West, *Goodness Had Nothing to Do with It: The Autobiography* (New York: World Distributors, 1962), 21, 59; Marybeth Hamilton, “When I’m Bad, I’m Better”: *Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 137; Arthur Wertheim and Barbara Bair, *The Papers of Will Rogers: From Vaudeville to Broadway: September 1908-August 1915* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 157, 362; Robert S. Bader, *Four of the Three Musketeers: The Marx Brothers on Stage* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016); Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, *Jack Benny and the Golden Age of American Radio Comedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 3, 5, 15-16, 21, 23-7, 29, 31, 57, 92-4, 221, 290, 312. Fans of Jack Benny have constructed a database of his tours of the coffee and cake circuit. “Vaudeville Bookings Database 1911 to 1932,” *Jack Benny 39* (website), accessed April 25, 2022, <https://www.jackbenny39.com/index.php/vaudeville-database-1911-to-1932/>

<sup>27</sup> These statistics includes many different years because circuit data is not available for every circuit in the same years.

<sup>28</sup> Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240-2; Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 18. This was up from forty-seven in 1921, and would eventually grow to 125 at what point.

<sup>29</sup> “Keith-Albee Circuit,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1927* (New York: Film Daily, 1927), 658; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 241.

<sup>30</sup> “Fox Theatres Corp.,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 654-5; “Fox Theatres Corp.,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1928* (New York: Film Daily, 1928), 688; “Poli Theatrical Enterprises,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 665; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240-2. For more on the Poli circuit, see Kathryn J. Oberdeck, *The Evangelist and the Impresario: Religion, Entertainment, and Cultural Politics in America, 1884-1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> I use “control” to distinguish between theaters under contractual obligation (i.e. affiliation) with a circuit or booking office but owned by a separate company or individual. The major bookings offices controlled (or at least influenced) the bookings at a far larger number of theaters than it owned.

<sup>32</sup> “Orpheum Circuit, Inc.,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 700; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 244-7.

<sup>33</sup> “Greetings to the Motion Picture Industry and Vaudeville Profession,” *Variety*, December 30, 1925, 129; “West Coast Theaters, Inc.,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 909. By 1926 the circuit reached 150.

<sup>34</sup> For example, the Bert Levey Vaudeville Circuit had an impressive seventy booking offices across the country, but I have yet to find evidence of the number of theaters which it booked. “Bert Levey Circuit of Vaudeville Theatres,” *Variety*, December 30, 1925, 207.

<sup>35</sup> Rose, *The Agency*, 39. As I discuss in the next chapter, by 1925 the big time circuits had largely adopted the programming format of the small time circuits.

<sup>36</sup> Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 158.

<sup>37</sup> “Booking Agencies, ‘Vaude’ & Presentation,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 749-52. From its 1927 edition to its 1929, *The Film Daily* published a list of vaudeville booking agencies in its yearbook.

<sup>38</sup> “Censor Board Standards,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1925* (New York: Film Daily, 1925), 349. By 1926, Birmingham added five theaters, but none of them were categorized as “vaudeville” theaters. No information exists that explain the specifications underlying these categorizations.

<sup>39</sup> The survey reported its results in percentages. These 599 theaters constituted 5.99% of surveyed theaters.

<sup>40</sup> “Statistics of the Motion Picture Industry,” *Wid’s Film Year Book 1922-1923* (New York: Wid’s Films and Film Folk, 1923), 231-4, 241. For more information on this survey see, “Facts and Figures,” *Motion Picture News*, November 18, 1922, 1; “Statistics,” *Motion Picture News*, June 19, 1922, 3117.

<sup>41</sup> “Cinema Club Report,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1922-1923*, 383.

<sup>42</sup> For the theaters without vaudeville, the average manager reported the breakdown as follows: feature: 68%, short subjects: 17%, music: 15%. In theaters with vaudeville, the survey indicated the percentages “reduced proportionality.” This would make the breakdown roughly as follows: feature: 45.56% vaudeville: 33%, short subjects: 11.39%, music: 10.05%.

<sup>43</sup> Rathbun, *Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting*, 117.

<sup>44</sup> “City Ordinances,” *Wid’s Year Book 1920* (New York: Wid’s Films and Film Folk, 1923), 319-27. These cities included: Lansing, Michigan; Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Seattle, Washington; Tacoma, Washington; and Charleston, West Virginia. Most cities charged a flat rate for these licenses, a few, though, determined the fee based on the seating capacity of the theater.

<sup>45</sup> “City Ordinances,” *Wid’s Year Book 1920*, 315. Charleston was one of the few cities to have different fees for different lengths of licenses, such as ones lasting only six months, three months, and one week. The intervals seemingly made it cheaper for temporary, seasonal, or itinerant entertainment spaces to operate.

<sup>46</sup> These cities include: St. Paul, Minnesota; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Haverhill, Massachusetts; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Joplin, Missouri; Dallas, Texas; and Columbia, South Carolina;

<sup>47</sup> Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 21-24.

<sup>48</sup> Slowik, "Film Exhibition in Vaudeville," 73-6; Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 2-6; Snyder, *Voice of the City*, 56.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Abel, "Patchwork Maps of Moviegoing, 1911-1913," in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert Clyde Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007); Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 2-4.

<sup>50</sup> Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Snyder, *Voice of the City*, 45, 56, 62-3, 106-19

<sup>52</sup> Snyder, *Voice of the City*, 106.

<sup>53</sup> Judith Thissen, "Next Year at the Moving Pictures: Cinema and Social Change in the Jewish Community," in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert Clyde Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007); Judith Thissen, "Film and Vaudeville on New York's Lower East Side," in *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, ed. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 42-56.

<sup>54</sup> Jennifer Mooney, *Irish Stereotypes in Vaudeville, 1865-1905* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Snyder, *Voice of the City*, 45-56, 111-9.

<sup>55</sup> M. Alison Kibler, *Censoring Racial Ridicule: Irish, Jewish, and African American Struggles over Race and Representation, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: University North Carolina Press, 2015), 5-6, 23-8; Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 5-7, 24-40; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 251-3.

<sup>56</sup> Snyder, *Voice of the City*, xvi, 24; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 12-3, 224-5. To Snyder, this "circularity" between individuals, the performances, and the cultural industry prevalent in vaudeville disappears with the dissolution of the big-time vaudeville theaters, bills consisting of a majority of live acts (as opposed to one with more film), and the growing domination of theaters run by film studios—what many have called the "death of vaudeville." In turn, according to Snyder, vaudeville was replaced with a comparatively "passive...mass culture" in the form of cinema and later television. With vaudeville's "disappearance" in New York, we are told, the local spirit was replaced with a homogeneity similar to one Theodor Adorno attributes to contemporary cultural industries: "The vaudeville days are gone...They are there to remind us of the possibilities for vitality, openness, and genial subversion when theatres resound with the spirit of the streets of New York." With this conception of vaudeville, one tied inextricably to the intimacy of the theatrical text (i.e. the performance) and its viewers, the entertainment form could not possibly survive past the 1930s when cinema had finally pacified its audience. David Monod's recent study is more skeptical of any real connection between the audience and the performers, his study corroborates that circularity was widely believed in and highly influential on the marketing and content of acts. While the concept of circularity comes from Snyder, the insight about the microphones is mine. Many claimed the growing size and capacity of theaters necessitated microphones. See, "Interview with Al Rinker about Vaudeville," interview by Anthony Slide, Transcript, Undated, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts

and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California; Joe Laurie, Jr., “At the Wake,” *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 192; Joe Bigelow, “Those M.C. Days,” *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 195;

<sup>57</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 224-5.

<sup>58</sup> These estimates account for all theaters named “Orpheum” in the United States. The 1928 *Film Daily Year Book* lists all theater capacities. I removed any theater in this list built after 1925, as well as any Orpheum theaters I knew were not owned by the Orpheum circuit using another list in the 1928 *Film Daily Yearbook*. This research also revealed some theaters with rather complicated ownership histories. For example, the Orpheum Theater in Oakland, California, had 3700 seats, but was built by Fox in 1923. When Orpheum acquired the theater from Fox is currently unknown. “Orpheum Circuit, Inc.,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 700; “Theaters: A Complete List of Over 20,000 Motion Picture Theaters Operating in the United States,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 545-679.

<sup>59</sup> “Palace Theater,” *Marquee: The Journal of the Theatre Historical Society* 25 (1993): 13.

<sup>60</sup> For examples of this approach see, Abel, *Motor City Movies*, 43, 161; Box 2 and Box 3, Hoblitzelle Interstate Theater Circuit Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 48-54. For discussions about the connections between prologues and specific films see, Matthew Solomon, *The Gold Rush* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 69; Maya Barzilai, *Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 22-3, 69-73, 88-97, 248; Ross Melnick, *American Showman: Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908-1935* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 13-20. Cynthia Marie Erb, *Tracking King Kong: A Hollywood Icon in World Culture* (Wayne State University Press, 2009), 43-57.

<sup>62</sup> Phil Wagner, “‘An America Not Quite Mechanized’: Fanchon and Marco, Inc. Perform Modernity,” *Film History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 251-3.

<sup>63</sup> Henry B. Aldridge, “The Role of the Stage Show in Film Exhibition: The Case of Detroit’s Capitol Theatre,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 66-71; Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace* (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), 211; Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 51, 217; Harold Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), 298-9.

Franklin proposes these as example topics for presentations in his book.

<sup>64</sup> While some also credit the origin of presentations to Roxy, others assign it to Sid Grauman. Determining the origin of presentations thus requires further primary research. One suspects it would involve the influence of theatrical revues (like *Ziegfeld’s Follies*) which grew in popularity in the United States starting in the first decade of the 1900s.

<sup>65</sup>“The Development of Presentations,” *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 509; “Trends in Stage Shows,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 29; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 52; Wagner, ““An America Not Quite Mechanized.”

<sup>66</sup> Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, 48,147-52; Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres*, 110-5. Franklin’s taxonomy of theater size is relative here. Ricketson’s later discussion of live performance and theater size indicated that the largest of De Luxe theaters had around 200 total employees (not just those responsible for live performance).

<sup>67</sup> See appendix B for a summary of a live production schedule for the manager of a deluxe theater with a staff of two hundred that produced its own weekly stage shows, published in 1938.

<sup>68</sup> An exception to this appears to be the Balaban and Katz Circuit (B&K), which sometimes distributed presentations across its theaters in its Chicago-based circuit. How often B&K presentations circulated or stayed at one theater until 1920, though, is currently unclear. Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 50-3.

<sup>69</sup> The next chapter evidences efforts for even small theaters to produce more modest presentations during the early 1920s. This helped presentations become far more prevalent in the mid-1920s, then earlier in the decade.

<sup>70</sup> “Statistics of the Motion Picture Industry,” *Wid’s Film Year Book 1922-1923*, 231-2.

<sup>71</sup> “Picture Bills,” *Variety*, December 30, 1925, 21. *Variety* ran this as a separate section from its vaudeville bookings until March 1926 when it concluded that “picture bills are running now more like vaudeville,” and merged the listings. In other words, by the 1926 *Variety* believed the previous distinctions between vaudeville and presentations had collapsed. This supports the argument I extend in the next chapter.

<sup>72</sup> Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, 297-8.

<sup>73</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 43-51. Another example, albeit of a single theater and not an entire chain, is the State Lake Theater in Chicago.

<sup>74</sup> Balaban & Katz Corporation, *The Fundamentals of Balaban & Katz Theatre Management* (Chicago: Balaban & Katz Corporation, 1926), 54. The importance of the feature film to B&K circuit should not be underestimated, however. Despite their acceptance of lower quality films, they still believed that the feature films were “the main attractions in [their] program.” As Balaban and Katz explained to theater managers in its corporate manual, “As motion picture exhibitors, your primary attention is centered upon the film portion of your program.” Stage shows were not disregarded, however, as the same manual calls stage shows “the high lights [sic] of our weekly performances.”

<sup>75</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 40-4.

<sup>76</sup> Some movie palaces, such as the Radio City Music Hall, were completed as late as 1932 but Hollywood understood this as exceptional at the time. As discussed in chapter 3, the film industry had largely disavowed building movie palaces by 1928, feeling that they had already oversaturated urban markets.

<sup>77</sup> For examples of the democratic rhetoric surrounding movie palaces, Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, 21-36, 325-332; “Opening Night Program – The Michigan Theater,” Ann Arbor: Butterfield Theaters, 1928, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; “The Pride of Dallas [Opening night program for the Majestic Theater],” Dallas: Interstate Theaters, 1921, Box 13, Hoblitzelle Interstate Theatre Circuit Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas; Abel, *Motor City Movie Culture*, 84-135.

<sup>78</sup> Kia Afra, *The Hollywood Trust: Trade Associations and the Rise of the Studio System* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 203-34.

<sup>79</sup> Langston Hughes, “Here to Yonder,” *The Chicago Defender*, September 23, 1944, 12; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 157-63. Unless an incident of racial segregation in movie theaters was reported by a local or Black newspaper, it is difficult to determine the prevalence of it. Richard Abel notes similar difficulty accessing the extent of legal or illegal segregation in Detroit. Richard Abel, *Motor City Movie Culture*, 268-70. In New York City, at least, poet Langston Hughes reported that downtown movie palaces sometimes barred admission or enforced seating-based segregation until the late silent age. See chapter 5 for a longer discussion of segregation in movie palaces.

<sup>80</sup> Steven J Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 31-2, 187-94; Jeffrey Klenotic, “‘Four Hours of Hootin’ and Hollerin’” Moviegoing and Everyday Life Outside the Movie Palace,” in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Robert C Allen, Richard Maltby, and Melvyn Stokes (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008); Jeffrey Klenotic, “From Mom-and-Pop to Paramount-Publix: Selling the Community on the Benefits of National Theater Chains,” in *Watching Films: New Perspectives on Movie-Going, Exhibition and Reception*, ed. Albert Moran and Karina Aveyard (Chicago: Intellect, 2013), 189–208.

<sup>81</sup> Wagner, “‘An America Not Quite Mechanized;” Melnick, *American Showman*, 345-85. Roxy’s presentations, for example, sometimes presented Christian themes and other times Jewish themes, among other variations and themes.

<sup>82</sup> While Grauman fit the “Eastern” style as conceived by F&M, Grauman staged his presentations almost exclusively in the Los Angeles area.

<sup>83</sup> Wagner, “‘An America Not Quite Mechanized,” 252-3.

<sup>84</sup> Wagner is unclear whether F&M’s “Ideas” fit with a paradigm of cultural uplift. Toward the end of the essay he contrasts Roxy’s “project of cultural uplift” with F&M’s allegories of “mass audience’s participation in popular modernity.” Elsewhere, Wagner argues that Fox Theater’s interest in Ideas for their deluxe theaters stemmed from the distinction garnered from the presentations.

<sup>85</sup> Wagner, “‘An America Not Quite Mechanized,” 257.

<sup>86</sup> Year in Small Time,” *Variety*, 2; “Detroit Bills Goslin as ‘Public Hero No. 1,’ Aids ‘Chan’-Cab to Wow 36G.” *Variety*, October 16, 1935, 11; “Lindbergh Super-Attraction for Personal Appearances,” *Variety*, May 25, 1927, 1. Vaudeville agents even approached people related to



the 1932 kidnapping of Lindbergh's son to tour vaudeville theaters. At least one person involved in the trial, Jafski Condon, toured the circuits in New York. "Vaude 'Snatching,'" *Billboard*, January 19, 1935, 13; "Jafski Condon Makes Payless Appearances," August 24, 1935, 15.

<sup>87</sup> Gwendolyn Waltz, "Half Real-Half Reel: Alternation Format Stage-and-Screen Hybrids," in *A Companion to Early Cinema*, ed. André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac, and Santiago Hidalgo (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 360; Giorgio Bertellini, *Italy in Early American Cinema: Race, Landscape, and the Picturesque* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 205-235. For another example, see critic Dorothy Day's coverage on Harry Carey's visit to a Des Moines theater in 1919. Richard Abel, *Movie Mavens: US Newspaper Women Take On the Movies, 1914-1923* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 163.

<sup>88</sup> Green and Laurie, Jr., *Show Biz*, 373.

<sup>89</sup> I suspect a primary reason for this was that these publications were less concerned with exhibition until the vertical integration of the major Hollywood studios. In 1924 and 1925, the purchasing and building theater chains became widespread for these companies.

<sup>90</sup> "Independent Exchanges: What Pictures they Handle," *Wid's Film Year Book 1922-1923*, 207-24; "Independent Exchanges – What They Handle," *Wid's Year Book 1920*, 150-2; "Independent Exchanges – What They Handle," *Wid's Year Book 1921* (New York: Wid's Films and Film Folk, 1921), 382-92.

<sup>91</sup> "Film Trading and Building: Picture Theatre Looked Set for 3 Divisions," *Variety*, December 30, 1925, 3, 192.

<sup>92</sup> "Variety Acts Not A Violation," *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 792.

<sup>93</sup> I am again referencing here to Andre Gaudreault's concept of intermediality.

<sup>94</sup> For an example of more mainstream discourse *supporting* the combination of film and variety theater see, Abel, *Movie Mavens*, 101-2.

<sup>95</sup> Peter Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 49-51. Luke McKernan, "Motography," *The Bioscope* (website), accessed April 25, 2022, <https://thebioscope.net/2010/02/09/motography/>.

<sup>96</sup> Rathbun, *Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting*, preface.

<sup>97</sup> Rathbun, *Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting*, 113.

<sup>98</sup> For more information on illustrated songs see, Richard Abel, "The Most American of Attractions, the Illustrated Song," in *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel and Rick Altman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 143-55; Richard Abel, "Reframing the Vaudeville/Moving Picture Debate with Illustrated Songs," in *The Tenth Muse: Cinema and Other Arts*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima and Laura Vichi (Udine: Forum, 2001), 473-84.

<sup>99</sup> Rathbun, *Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting*, 113.

<sup>100</sup> Rathbun, *Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting*, 113.

<sup>101</sup> Rathbun, *Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting*, 113.

<sup>102</sup> Of course, he assumed that films properly fitted to the tastes of his local audience always existed in ready supply.

## Chapter 2

### **Hollywood's Big Six: Media Conglomeration, Vertical Integration, and the Rise of the Variety Palace (1915 to 1929)**

“There are no lines of limitations to vaudeville now. It is in what are known as vaudeville houses; it's in musical and comedy productions; it's even in a dramatic piece here and there, and more so than all the others combined, it's in the picture houses.”<sup>1</sup>

- *Variety*, January 4, 1928

“From 1926 to 1929—those were happy days. The gold rush period of the stage show business; more acts working and more theatres open than at any time before or since. Higher salaries and bigger audience than variety entertainment ever enjoyed.”<sup>2</sup>

- Joe Bigelow, January 1, 1936.

Knowing the initial industrial separation of vaudeville and the movie industry, as well as the differences between vaudeville formats established in chapter one is crucial to understanding both the rise of live performance alongside motion picture theaters, and the widespread confusion over the “death” of vaudeville and live performance in the late 1920s. All of the types and formats of variety performance and theatrical venues (big time and small time, vaudeville and presentations, vaudeville theater and movie theater, vaudeville corporation and film company) that I established in the previous chapter remained operative with fairly distinct

meanings into the early 1920s. However, as this chapter demonstrates, these concepts gradually began to overlap throughout the late 1910s and early 1920s, a process which happened unevenly and at different times across corporations and formats. Distinctions between small-time and big-time vaudeville had already significantly blurred by the early 1920s. By the mid 1920s, however, all of these distinctions between theater types, live performance formats, and corporations began to collapse entirely.

I propose that principal changes occurring in vaudeville and the motion picture industry during the 1920s be understood not as decline, but as a loss of identity (i.e. loss of distinction). Big-time vaudeville's primary strategy to mitigate competition from the small-time and growing regional and national theater chains was that of "emulation and assimilation," resulting in an industry of theaters that no longer fit traditional definitions of big time or small time.<sup>3</sup> Vaudeville scholars describe this pejoratively as playing watered-down versions of vaudeville including a bill of three to five live acts interspersed with a feature film and shorts. This format went by many names: combination policy, pop vaudeville, and vaudefilm, and may have even resembled a presentation depending on the showmanship involved. When they are not ignored, vaudeville histories mark the domination of these programs as the final stage in the death of vaudeville, leading to the ultimate domination of the film-only program.<sup>4</sup>

Marking this period as the death of vaudeville is only accurate if one is invested, as almost all vaudeville historians have been, in a history of variety entertainment as defined solely as straight, big-time vaudeville. Big-time vaudeville, always a small fraction of the total industry, did all but disappear during this period, with less than six theaters operating under this policy by the late 1920s.<sup>5</sup> However, in carefully tracing the decline of one format of variety theater, no one has properly established the rise of other formats. As I show, other forms of variety performance,

hybrid formats of vaudeville and presentations, shown alongside motion pictures rose to new heights even during the rise of the so-called film studios.

By embracing the newfound centrality of hybrid formats of variety performance playing along with motion pictures, I reframe the “death” of vaudeville in the 1920s as a period of identity blurring spurred by wide-spread conglomeration between media industries. Mergers signaled the end of big-time vaudeville, but at the same time also marked what could be called a “golden age” of American variety theater, with a significant boom both in the prevalence of live acts used alongside movies and in the revenue of the variety performance industry. During the early and mid-1920s, the distinctions between a film company and a vaudeville corporation continually dissolved. Beginning around 1919, but intensifying between 1924 and 1929, vertically and horizontally integrated “movie” studios emerged, all heavily investing in film production, theater acquisition, *and* programming and producing live performance.

While RKO’s formation from the merger of the Keith-Albee and Orpheum vaudeville circuits with other media entities serves as a reminder of its connection and commitment to live performance, I argue that it was neither unique nor the most prominent. By 1929, five other vertically and horizontally integrated companies, Paramount, Loew’s, Fox, Warner Bros., and Universal, emerged after waves of conglomeration and acquisitions with vaudeville and theater circuits dedicated to showcasing live acts. Each of these “big-six” studios—to borrow the language often used to describe vertically integrated Hollywood studios—subsequently encouraged and facilitated the bookings of vaudeville and/or presentations in its own and affiliated theaters by investing in booking personnel and sometimes in production infrastructure, together spending nearly one-third the nation’s film production budget on live acts. Paramount and Fox (through F&M) even appear to have booked more live acts than RKO. In this sense,

RKO is actually a representative studio of the late 1920s rather than an anomaly. Far from simply film companies, the studios were multimedia conglomerates dedicated not only to entertainment onscreen or over the air, but also on the stages of their growing chains of specially equipped theaters.

The rise of live performance alongside movie theaters represented a genuine interest by what are usually called “film” studios in live performance’s capacity for prestige and profit, from both corporate executives and individual theater managers. However, corporate competition for large chains of palatial theaters united movies and stage acts most directly during this period. Though sometimes called movie palaces—which I have also done until now—even at the time of their construction, they had many names including “deluxe” or even “super” theaters.<sup>6</sup> Such names better reflect their original core concept to provide high quality experiences created from a combination of entertainment, amenities, decor, and architecture at a low price. Though almost all palatial theaters, even those owned by vaudeville corporations, played some films, they were not necessarily (and in the 1920s rarely) the central attraction, which was rather live entertainment and music, most often orchestral music but sometimes could be jazz. In turn, I would propose a more appropriate term, one less misleading to contemporary readers, for these theaters: “variety palaces.” The term “palace” keeps the emphasis on the grandeur of architecture, amenities, and overall experience, while also acknowledging that the theaters and their managers achieved this experience through a *variety* of elements, including often *variety theatrical entertainment* in the form of presentations, prologues, and vaudeville.

Through this revisionist history, we learn that the vertical integration of the industry (i.e. the acquisition of theater circuits) was not simply about guaranteeing venues to distribute films, it also was increasingly to exhibit live acts. In the process, variety live performance integrated

within the corporate structures of the Hollywood studios and played within theaters of what we usually call the motion picture industry.

### **Vaudeville's Identity Loss**

By the mid-1920s, big-time vaudeville lost its leading position in American entertainment. It also lost much of its unique identity, one divorced from film, catering to a middle-upper class audience, and as the only showcase of top-tier live talent. This process began in the mid-1910s, as it faced an onslaught of competition from entertainment forms (both live and recorded) which bypassed the big-time's monopoly over stars and absorbed its market share in all directions. With emulation and assimilation as the big-time's main, reactionary business strategies, by the mid-1920s, the former big-time corporations resembled all the other vertically integrated corporations with multimedia entertainment playing on its circuits.

### *Small-Time Vaudeville*

For much of its early existence from the 1890s to the early 1910s, big-time circuits like Keith, Albee (combined in 1908 to form Keith-Albee) and Orpheum did not consider small-time vaudeville as competition. They had little shared territory, with big-time circuits centered in downtowns or commercial centers of major cities, or on major streets in middle-class neighborhoods, while most small-time circuits were located squarely in residential neighborhoods outside of city centers; they targeted different classes of customers, with one selling luxury and prestige and the other selling habitual, inexpensive leisure; the big-time also relished in its near monopoly over stars, thanks to the influence of the United Booking Office (UBO), its blacklists, and its willingness to pay the highest salaries. In addition, while small-time

vaudeville represented ninety-percent of all vaudeville theaters, it was a fractured system of very small chains and individually owned theaters. Therefore, it lacked the economies of scale enjoyed by the interconnected big-time cartels.<sup>7</sup>

While these factors minimized competition from most successful chains until the early 1910s, like the Poli, Proctor, and Percy Williams, the big-time's well-trodden strategy did not work as well for new circuits: the Loew's and Fox (both largely east of Chicago) circuits, or the Pantages circuit (largely west of Chicago).<sup>8</sup> Overtime, these "big small-time" corporations built sizable circuits through a careful combination of emulation and market differentiation. These small-time circuits spatially encroached on the big-time's territories, building and buying theaters either on the edges of neighborhoods near the city or even some in downtown areas. Now close enough to share a market, Loew's, Pantages, and Fox aimed their wares at a mass audience, by offering comparatively inexpensive admission. Of course, making money while maintaining low admission required low overhead. To do this, programs at big small-time, like all small-time theaters, largely lacked stars, which they could neither afford nor access because of big-time blacklists. They also increasingly relied on booking films, which were inexpensive compared to live acts, and reduced the number of live acts they needed. Their reliance on films intensified with the proliferation of features, with the average number of acts on two to three hour-long bills increasingly shortened to between three and five.<sup>9</sup>

By 1912, the big-small time had proved themselves a serious threat to the big-time's success and business model. At this point, tickets sales in the Keith circuit's balconies began to noticeably decline. At around fifty cents (just over \$14 in 2022), these were some of the cheapest seats in the house and were known for rowdy, working-class patrons that big-time owners including Albee claimed to despise.<sup>10</sup> However, the loss of even these one hundred to two

hundred seats exposed a critical vulnerability. Big-time vaudeville operated at extremely thin profit margins, in part because of the hefty expenses for star talent, requiring them to average forty percent capacity across its shows. The average vaudeville theaters in cities like Detroit, New York, and Indianapolis averaged fifty to sixty-percent capacity from 1911 to 1914.<sup>11</sup> The difference between this threshold was an average of only one hundred mid-priced tickets, roughly the capacity of the balconies. As working-class urban audiences left big-time for cheaper, nearby alternatives, profits dwindled. Big-time theaters initially responded by doubling down on its star-centered approach, promoting its stars more aggressively in hopes of bringing audiences back. This made little difference, and profits of the big-time circuits from 1912 to 1915 fell below fifty-percent of 1910 to 1912 totals of around \$150,000 per year (over \$4,000,000 in 2022). Still in denial about its small-time competition and their mass market methods, big-time owners and the UBO blamed inflated performer salaries for declining profits. In 1914, the big-time chains cut salaries by fifteen percent and instituted salary caps of \$500 dollars per week per performer for all but the biggest stars. In addition to benefiting the big small time chains, this further assimilated vaudeville. Wage cuts made some of big-time vaudeville's staple acts in the range that Loew's, Fox, and Pantages could at least occasionally afford. Loew's, in particular, also occasionally attracted star performers through other incentives. In addition to matching, and sometimes surpassing, weekly salaries paid by Keith-Albee, they offered some former big time performers up to a thirty week route, with fewer unpaid weeks off in between stops.<sup>12</sup>

Even as early as 1912, entertainment critics noticed the small-time vaudeville of Loew's, Fox, and Pantages increasingly resembled its bigger counterparts. *Billboard* wrote: "and so, a little each day, is the small time encroaching on the preserves of its bigger brother. There are



many shows playing at popular prices today that can only be distinguished from those at a higher admission scale by the absence of the big-salaried headliner.”<sup>13</sup> Now with some star bookings, by 1915, Marcus Loew could even more confidently quip that his theaters now had “no difference except price” from those of the cartel’s.<sup>14</sup> With a growing number of star bookings and a steadily growing chain of urban theaters, the differences between big-time vaudeville and the major small-time chains had begun to blur.

Loew’s quip, however, would soon become reality. With their hand forced by slumping profits, the Keith-Albee and Orpheum circuits initiated an emulation strategy of their own as early as 1915, which would increasingly turn all of their big-time vaudeville into a small-time format; returning all vaudeville to a mass market commodity affordable across classes as it had been before the proliferation of big-time policies in the late 1880s and early 1890s.<sup>15</sup> Only now, all vaudeville increasingly came with a steady use of films and fewer live acts. Starting in one of its smaller theaters in Dayton, Ohio, Keith-Albee and the theater’s manager abandoned the big-time format, instituting in its place a small-time policy in price-scale and program. The Keith-Albee circuit called this “family time.”<sup>16</sup> This experiment included a five to twenty-five cent price scale and a shortened bill of three to five live acts accompanied by more films. Over the next couple of years, more big-time theaters adopted this strategy, even prestigious theaters like B.F. Keith Theater in Boston quickly did so.<sup>17</sup>

Competition between the big small-time Pantages circuit and the big time Orpheum, with theaters largely in and west of Chicago, had the same result, albeit a few years later. On March 17, 1919, Orpheum opened up the State-Lake Theater, a lavish 2,766-seat theater in Chicago, which initiated the circuit’s plan to own a chain of “Junior Orpheums.”<sup>18</sup> All Junior Orpheum theaters adopted a small-time booking format consisting of three to five vaudeville acts (of which

no more than one was a star) and one to two films, accompanied by a symphony orchestra in the pit, all for tickets as low as fifteen cents to a maximum of thirty-five cents (\$2.44 to \$5.69 in 2022).<sup>19</sup> While the booking format remained consistent across Keith-Albee's family-time and Orpheum's Junior theaters, the number of shows per day and admission prices could vary across circuits and individual theaters. Former big-time theaters now operating with a small-time policy might have three to five shows per day and have ticket prices as low as five cents or as high as seventy-five cents.<sup>20</sup> Some of these theater managers continued to call or market these theaters as "big-time" vaudeville theater, but this remained such in name alone with nothing in its policy or pricing to differentiate it from small-time theaters.<sup>21</sup>

By the late 1910s, many of the big small-time theaters were larger and more immaculate than even the most prestigious big-time theaters, even if they did not book as many stars. One anonymous Keith-Albee manager admitted this under oath during a 1919 Federal Trade Commission investigation into the monopolistic practices of the Vaudeville Managers' Protective Association.<sup>22</sup> At first, the manager confidently defended a strict, albeit growingly antiquated, difference between big-time and small time theaters, likely to convince the Commission that the big time cartels did not deter competition in the vaudeville market. When Prosecutor Maurice Goodman asked how the manager's theater compared to its Loew's competitor in Baltimore, however, he admitted that these long-standing differences no longer applied to the "big" small-time. The manager replied that the Loew's in Baltimore was "more modern in that it has more modern conveniences. Our [*sic*] is a comparatively small theater," and that it (along with the neighboring Garden Theater, a big-small time theater booked by the Amalgamated vaudeville circuit) was essentially built for "use as a high class vaudeville theater," as was any of the growing number of "small time theatre[s] of the size, seating 1800 or

more.”<sup>23</sup> All that Loew’s and similar theaters needed to become a big time theater, the manager admitted, was to change its policy from three shows per day to two and then spend “five or six thousand dollars a week” for star performers instead of the usual “\$1,500 or \$1,600 as now.”<sup>24</sup> However reluctant the big time was to admit it, there was no hiding the fact that big-small time encroached on its market. Such testimony likely contributed to the Commission’s decision that the cartels were not violating antitrust laws.<sup>25</sup> The big small-time had found grounds to not only compete, but even succeed in the entertainment industry.

However reluctantly the vaudeville cartels adopted small time bills, the policy reinvigorated the “big-time” companies’ bottom lines. Vaudeville, across its increasingly indeterminate distinctions, recovered under small-time conditions between 1916 and 1920, with 1919 likely the most profitable year that big-time vaudeville corporations ever had. Sellout crowds and attendance records abounded. Even during the flu pandemic in 1919, the State-Lake sold out every show on the day after Christmas, selling 11,000 seats. Near sold out shows happened so regularly that season that State-Lake sold 3.7 million tickets that year. By 1924, Orpheum’s flagship theater earned an annual profit of \$600,000 to \$700,000 (around \$9.5 to \$11 million in 2022).<sup>26</sup> The theater’s success made it a symbol of the now dominant big small-time booking format, with the trade press regularly dubbing the small-time format the “State-Lake Policy,” despite the theater being a fairly late adopter.<sup>27</sup>

### *Revues*

Big-time also faced competition at both ends of the mass entertainment spectrum from revues and movie palace presentations. Originally a nineteenth century French entertainment in which performers parodied events and shows (often from the past year), the Casino Theater

(New York City) staged the first American revue in 1894, titled *Passing Show*.<sup>28</sup> The subsequent prevalence of revues after its New York premiere was in part the result of the so-called “vaudeville wars.” Through blacklists and other monopolistic practices, the big-time cartels kept both legitimate theater entrepreneurs like the Shuberts, and Klaw and Erlanger (as well as talent agencies like William Morris) from successfully creating their own vaudeville circuits.<sup>29</sup> These family-owned companies responded by producing revues. Big time corporations did not originally consider revues competition, so these entrepreneurs could tour them in their legitimate theaters without interference. Some American revues continued to adhere to the year-end summary format, but, like *Passing Show*, many did not. What united all revues was its method of production, presentation, and a loose commitment to narrative. Unlike vaudeville which was essentially a compilation of disparate acts booked separately, revues had a narrative, or at least a unifying theme, many with characters, interconnected musical numbers written for the show, and even dialogue. A team of writers, producers, and directors also coordinated the whole production. While revues had notoriously inconsequential storylines, they came to be valued largely for their settings and costumes and their dazzling choreography anchored in both the precision of female chorus dancers and the visual pleasure of their objectification.<sup>30</sup>

Revue competed with big time vaudeville in two substantial ways. While revues differed in their focus on narrative, they shared a talent pool and heavily utilized and marketed stars. Take, for example, the *Ziegfeld Follies*, the most famous American revue. *Ziegfeld Follies* regularly poached some of vaudeville’s biggest, recurring performers thanks to high salaries and the prestige of the name. From 1909 to 1916 this included Nora Bayes, Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice, W.C. Fields, Eddie Cantor, Bert Williams, and Will Rogers, among others. Revues also weakened big-time’s place as the premiere place for high-class entertainment. Admission costs

for revues averaged two times that of the Keith-Ablee or Orpheum circuit, and tickets near the front of the stage could reach twenty dollars (more than \$543 in 2022). As a result, revues inflated the salaries of the stars on which the big time depended, as well as attracted the highest spending audiences in urban leisure. Eventually, vaudeville responded with its usual strategy of emulation. Despite having antithetical production process, starting around 1915, the big-time circuits established revue production units, including musicians, costume and set designers, and choreographers, and distributed them around its theaters. The cost of competing was significant, however, as revues cost as much as \$10,000 per week to stage on average, a high cost for an industry already facing competition from all directions.<sup>31</sup>

### *Movie Palaces and Presentations*

Big-time vaudeville's emulation of revue style entertainment is not only attributable to the rise in theatrical revues. Vaudeville's competition against, and collaboration with, motion picture theaters has been well established into the mid-1910s. At this point, movies had become the more popular entertainment form. As early as 1910, one study in New York City estimated that more than double the number of people regularly attended movies (fifty-one percent, presumably in any venue, including small-time vaudeville), than attended a "vaudeville" theater (just over twenty-four percent).<sup>32</sup> Another report in Boston in 1909 also showed that twice as many patrons attended movies than vaudeville.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, the big-time cartels did not consider motion picture theaters direct competition. During cinema's early years, movies were largely considered low-brow, working class entertainment, and the upper-middle class market which the big-time targeted did not yet frequent movies.<sup>34</sup> More importantly, there was little financial competition between the two media forms at this point. Both the initial expansion of the

American film industry and that of the big time vaudeville circuits, roughly between 1905 and 1912, happened simultaneously, without affecting either's widespread profitability. This appears true even on a city level. Despite movies far outdrawing big-time vaudeville in Boston, 1909 saw no reduction in the cartel's profits in the city.<sup>35</sup>

The rise and boom of the so-called motion picture palaces, starting around 1913, also located in the same heavily trafficked and accessible urban centers as big-time theaters, started the movie industry into an obvious competitor for combination entertainment (i.e. a period term for a bill consisting of stage and screen acts). Anchored in luxurious architecture, amenities, services, and entertainment (including top quality motion pictures, music, *and* often presentations) at inexpensive prices, movie palaces aimed to cut across cultural distinctions, unifying a cross-class audience in a single venue. Presentations were to revues what the big small-time vaudeville circuits were to big-time vaudeville. They shared the revue's emphasis on loose narratives or themes (which, for the prologue-iteration of presentations, narratively tied in or emulated the film) with elaborate choreography, decor, and costumes, (and often the objectification of female dancers). In contrast, however, presentations rarely incorporated star performers through most of their early history, and their tickets were exponentially cheaper than revues.

Though scholars have not quantified the movie palaces' effect on the finances of the big-time cartels in the same way they have for the big small-time, their impact has been understood since their origin. One of the earliest, and the most influential movie palaces, the Strand, opened in 1914 on the corner of Broadway and Forty-Seventh street, across the street from Keith-Albee's flagship Palace Theater, which also housed their corporate offices. Managed by Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel, and offering feature films, shorts, and a revue style presentation with a concert

orchestra on one of the largest stages in New York City at the time, the Strand reportedly immediately attracted crowds away from the Palace Theater. Roxy's next several Broadway-area movie palaces, the Rialto (1916) and its sister the Rivoli (1917), reportedly had the same effect.<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that while both the Rialto and the Rivoli had stages designed to showcase live orchestra concerts, the stages were not large enough to accommodate presentations.<sup>37</sup> So while live performance was still a contributing factor in movie palaces's competition with big-time, it was not exclusively presentations themselves in the early years. The examples of the Rialto and the Rivoli rightly lead one to question when the most famous early movie palaces, like the Strand and those designed and directed by Sid Grauman, featuring elaborate presentations and prologues, became representative. Some evidence indicates that the majority of movie palaces built until 1920 did not have large enough stages to feature presentations.<sup>38</sup> When builders and owners adjusted their strategies to embrace stage entertainment, contemporary histories acknowledge picture palace presentations as one of the major driving forces in big-time's loss of identity.<sup>39</sup> As *Variety* founder Sime Silverman wrote in 1928:

That big time neglected to recognize the on-rush of picture houses with their slowly developing stage shows on top of pictures in big capacity houses at a relatively small admission, was another fatal step leading toward big time's decline. Not only would big time's biggest executives refuse to accept that picture house business meant any more than possible opposition to small time, but one of the biggest men in big time direction [Albee] repeatedly uttered the stupid comment to the effect that the present picture business is but a passing fancy with the public.<sup>40</sup>

In short, as the use of stage entertainment grew and matured, the palace's massive size facilitated economies of scale that big time could not match with its smaller theaters and expensive stars.<sup>41</sup>

### *The Rise of the Combination Policy*

With the rise of the combination policy (an even more common term for the State-Lake policy) came the decline of big-time vaudeville. By 1920 the prevalence of big-time theaters decreased by roughly sixty-three percent, with only sixty American theaters still operating under this policy.<sup>42</sup> This would continue to decrease throughout the decade with the Keith-Albee circuit operating only twenty-eight, two-a-day theaters by 1924, replacing them with vaudefilm. By 1926, this number fell sharply again to twelve and with the Orpheum circuit only adding five more to the national total. Realizing the big-time format's limited days, *Variety* wrote in June 1926, "should small time quicken its pace during the new year or even keep up its present sprightly gait the time is not far distant when all vaudeville once again will be just vaudeville."<sup>43</sup> As expected, the trend did not slow. "There is but one vaudeville now—Continuous Vaudeville [another term for small-time or combination policy operating with a mass market approach with multiple shows daily]. That's how it commenced and that's how it is finishing," *Variety* announced in December 1926.<sup>44</sup> At this time, only six big-time theaters operated east of the Mississippi. But half of them could not "survive the picture [theater] opposition in prices, performances, entertainment or theatres."<sup>45</sup> Finally by the end of 1927, only the iconic Palace Theater retained big-time policies for the Keith-Albee circuit, and only two other big-time vaudeville theaters operated east of the Mississippi river. An additional seven big time theaters operated west of Chicago and in Canada. At the same time the big time cartels adopted the format, almost all small-time theaters utilized the "pop" format popularized by Loew's, Fox, and Pantages. Nearly all vaudeville was now identical in format, and by 1927, terms previously differentiating types of vaudeville (e.g. pop, small-time, State-Lake policy) disappeared with the form increasingly known as vaudefilm.<sup>46</sup>



Quantifying combination policies during the decline of the big-time is difficult. In an era of industrial hybridity, it is difficult to tell from a distance how many theaters continued to book live acts across the country.<sup>47</sup> Trade press lists of theaters by “type” (e.g. vaudeville, motion-picture, etc.) in each city and city theater directories organized by taxonomy, which had been fairly reliable during the first half of the 1910s, became highly questionable starting in the late 1910s and continuing throughout the 1920s, as more and more theaters booked motion pictures alongside stage acts.<sup>48</sup> So while some scholarship stresses the declining numbers of theaters considered “vaudeville” to argue for the disappearance of variety entertainment and the rise of cinema, those numbers only prove the decline of big-time, straight vaudeville, for which the category of “vaudeville” most obviously described. The more appropriate question, how many theaters booked live acts with film, is only attainable through detailed city-specific studies of programming.<sup>49</sup> In one such study of Detroit between 1916 and 1925, film historian Richard Abel found that, increasingly after World War I, a majority of theaters both in the major metropolitan center and the neighborhood theaters programmed live acts. The differences between them were largely those of scale. The prestigious, palatial theaters both in the neighborhoods and in the city centers tended to stage or host presentations in the style of Roxy or Grauman, while smaller neighborhood theaters more commonly utilized a vaudeville-style combination policy.<sup>50</sup> At least in Detroit, by 1920 its theaters had already been flooded by hybrid forms of live acts. Very few qualified as “vaudeville” theaters by usual definitions, but the city witnessed the decline of big time vaudeville, not the divorcement of live acts from urban theatrical entertainment.

*The Palace Boom, Vertical Integration, Wall Street, and the Over-seating Problem*

By the late 1910s and early 1920s, the distinctions between previously separate entertainment formats and market strategies in major cities were well on their way to collapsing. An overwhelming majority of theaters with live performance operated according to a mass market policy and also played movies, charging under a dollar for admission and most well under that. All vaudeville corporations could and did book star appearances, as did movie palaces, and the entertainment presented on stage could take the format of a revue or vaudeville, even though more movie palaces still relied more on presentations (with vaudeville theaters the inverse).

As the industry unified as variety theatrical entertainment, vaudeville corporations and regional movie theater chains turned their full attention to competing in another arena: large chains of palatial theaters. The vogue for variety palaces during the late 1910s and 1920s was due to both interrelated and sometimes contradictory logics, one economies of scale and the other cultural uplift. Variety palaces sought to attract a mass, cross-class audience through accessible locations and by keeping ticket costs low enough for even working class patrons. They provided high quality amenities and attractions that aimed to attract middle and upper class audiences, which had previously not attended movies *en masse*, by competing for the prestige usually accorded to the legitimate theater and big-time vaudeville. Achieving this with low admission prices, as well as the growing costs of film rental and operating expenses, required theaters to have large capacities.<sup>51</sup> However, variety palaces stopped being sound business strategies in their overabundance and over-emphasis on grandeur (what some called their vanity), which often motivated critiques they were more akin to white elephants than effective investments.<sup>52</sup> Vaudeville corporations, regional theater chains, and later the Hollywood studios

designed theaters—sometimes with the help of famous architects—that were inspired by actual palaces, either classical European or exoticized, orientalist, imbued with gold, marble, famous paintings, and crystal chandeliers.<sup>53</sup> In short, independent theater owners, regional chains, and later national, studio-controlled, chains competed not just for exhibition space and real estate, but also for prestige and luxury which inflated their cost sometimes beyond utility. Though, with theater admission and chains' profits rising for most of the 1920s, it hardly seemed consequential at the time. The studios, for example, saw no financial issues with building variety palaces until 1928, and it led many of them to bankruptcy and financial ruin during the Depression.

Competition for palatial urban theaters began with the big small-time's original encroachment of the big-time cartels' markets. One of the defining differences between big-time circuits like Keith-Albee and its small-time counterparts was the quality of its theaters, which was based on the extravagance of their décor, architecture design, and amenities. As part of their upsell strategy big-time theaters matched the opulence of legitimate theaters, with maximum capacities reaching around 1,000 to 1,700 seats.<sup>54</sup> In contrast, the quality and size of small-time theaters ranged wildly, but they tended to be the antithesis of big-time in that they were considered by many to be “rowdy,” “dirty,” and “broken bottle places.”<sup>55</sup> Loew's, Fox, and Pantages's strategies to compete with the big time cartel's involved collapsing that distinction, as they had done with theater locations. They built new theaters or expanded previously existing ones that trumped the scale and opulence of their big-time predecessors. On average these theaters tended to house 1,500 to 3,000 patrons, but some reached over 4,000 by the late 1910s. Their decor and architecture also rivaled that of the big-time. One strategy for accomplishing this, used by Loew's in some of its first theaters, was to lease or buy former opera houses or legitimate theaters which had been designed to cater to middle and upper class audiences.<sup>56</sup>

Pantages, in contrast, largely built even their earliest palaces. Working primarily with Scottish architect Benjamin Priteca from 1911, most Pantages theaters were designed in the “Pantages Greek” style, “1,300 to 2,000 seat venues with white terra cotta exteriors and opulent interiors featuring triple-domed ceilings, plush carpets, crystal chandeliers, and gaudy smoking lounges.”<sup>57</sup> In 1919, construction began on seven theaters in Brooklyn owned by small-time companies, all 2,000 to 4,000 seats. By 1921, with a circuit of one hundred twenty seven lavish theaters in twelve states, Loew’s now commissioned famous architects to construct its theaters. That same year renowned architect Thomas Lamb designed Loew’s new flagship Broadway theater, the State, with a capacity of 3,327.<sup>58</sup>

The big-time cartels did not immediately challenge the small-time’s theater acquisition campaign. But as the gradual adoption of small-time policies boosted vaudeville’s revenues and profits from 1916 to 1919, the cartels felt increasingly compelled to build and renovate theaters. The onrush began in 1919, when the Keith-Albee circuit opened a new theater in Providence, Rhode Island.<sup>59</sup> It then began to tear down, reconstruct, renovate, plan, or build new palaces across the Midwest and South.<sup>60</sup> The Orpheum circuit had equally aggressive plans for expansion. After the addition of the highly successful State-Lake Theater, it began plans around 1919/1920 for new theaters in San Francisco, Oakland, Kansas City, Minneapolis, and three in Los Angeles.<sup>61</sup>

When the Hollywood studios began vertically integrating, the competition for and construction of movie palaces intensified.<sup>62</sup> By and large, regional theater chains, including the Associated, Balaban & Katz, Stanley, Sheas, Saenger, Skouras, West Coast, Piccadilly, Saxe, Harry Crandell, Finkelstein and Rubin, Blank, Kunsky, Strand, Schine, Hostettler, Fabian, Rowland and Clark, Turner & Dahnken, and Northwest, were responsible for the bulk of first-

run theater construction and acquisition before the start of the 1920s, other than those efforts by quasi-national vaudeville corporations.<sup>63</sup> Independent proprietors also played a part in movie palace construction until the late 1910s. But their contributions appear to have been subsumed by growing regional (and soon national) chains in 1919. In New York City, for example, Broadway's remarkable 5,300 seat Capitol Theater (the largest in the world at the time) was the final independently owned movie palace constructed on the famous street, and perhaps in the United States.<sup>64</sup>

The domination of these regional chains began to change around 1917 as a result of a feud between Paramount, then a film production and distribution company, and the newly formed First National Exhibitors' Circuit. Tired of accepting Paramount's block-booking and blind-buying policies, some of the nation's largest regional theater chains banded together to form First National, forming its own production department so its theaters no longer needed to rely on Paramount films. The circuit's formation led Paramount to mobilize a response that would come to define Hollywood's vertical integration and place nearly the entire first-run market under the studios' corporate umbrellas. With ten million dollars in capital from the Wall Street investment firm Kuhn & Loeb, Paramount began acquiring regional theater chains throughout the country (and Canada).<sup>65</sup> By 1921, Paramount had quickly compiled a theater circuit of over 300 theaters, comparable to First National's holdings. Many of Paramount's theaters were first-run theaters, including flagship movie palaces which set the bar for live performance and live music: Rialto and Rivoli in New York—managed by Hugo Riesenfeld, Roxy's former apprentice—and Sid Grauman's Million Dollar Theater in Los Angeles.

Other studios did not immediately share the fervor generated by the feuding studios or the vaudeville corporations. Almost all theater acquisition by the major corporations during the late

teens and early 1920s was by Paramount and First National, followed by Loew's. Other theaters were added due to construction by the regional circuits, and the vaudeville corporations of Pantages, Keith-Albee, Orpheum, and to a lesser extent Fox. Still, palatial theaters did not make up a considerable portion of the exhibition space at this point.<sup>66</sup> Even in 1921, movie palaces with at least 1,000 seats--whether studio owned, part of regional chains, or independently owned and operated – made up only about ten percent of United States' estimated 17,824 theaters, and less than one percent of the total had seating capacities over 2,000.<sup>67</sup> By 1923 this was changing, however. Regional theater chains spent an estimated one-hundred million dollars in 1923 and 1924 on theater construction, by which time the *Film Daily* believed there was at least one five-hundred-thousand to one million dollar theater in every large city in the nation.<sup>68</sup>

As the 1920s continued, many independent exhibitors and small chains felt muscled out by the studios and regional chains by means of construction and consolidation. The situation only worsened for these exhibitors, especially in major cities, as Hollywood and vaudeville increasingly intertwined with Wall Street and its economic logics. Paramount's successful collaboration with Kuhn & Loeb to acquire theaters encouraged Loew's to do the same in 1924, securing sixty-five million dollars to acquire not only Goldwyn Pictures (merging it with Metro Pictures to form MGM), but also a slew of theaters and theaters chains from New York and the Midwest, to the Rocky Mountains, and Los Angeles. While Loew's itself never owned more than two hundred theaters (and in late 1926 owned one hundred forty-four), the merger left it affiliated with fifty other theater chains consisting of five hundred theaters.<sup>69</sup>

As examples of the possible successes of large-scale vertical integration, Paramount, First National, and Loew's proved to Wall Street and the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of American (MPPDA, Hollywood's liaison to Wall Street), that film entertainment could be run

like any other American big-business in which profits could be fairly regularized not only through mass-production, but principally through securing or constructing guaranteed outlets for its products.<sup>70</sup> In turn, around 1924 or 1925, theater acquisition and/or affiliation essentially became a requirement for Wall Street investment in a particular studio, catalyzing a frenetic first wave of studio acquisitions primarily consisting of production-distribution from late 1924 to 1926. From late 1924 to the end of 1925, *Film Daily* reported that Fox, First National, PDC, Universal, and Paramount had each acquired or started building more than 100 theaters, with Warner Bros., Loew's, Columbia, United Artists, and Film Booking Office building or acquiring twenty or fewer theaters each that year. 1926 saw similar trends. With the help of an estimated \$84.7 million dollars (\$1.3 billion dollars in 2022) in stock offerings and capital investment, all ten of the American major film companies were vertically integrated to varying degrees by the end of 1926 with most of the money funneled toward exhibition with plans for continued expansion.<sup>71</sup>

During this time, Wall Street investment in theater acquisition, construction, and corporate mergers also helped dissolve some of the final distinctions between vaudeville corporations and the Hollywood studios. Before the late 1910s and early 1920s, all vaudeville companies were closed corporations and not "modern" big business enterprises. They were owned by individuals or a group of partners, and had no public stock or major outside investments with only some cash reserve. When a vaudeville corporation invested two to five million dollars into building a theater, as Keith-Albee did when it constructed the Palace Theater in Cleveland (opened in 1922), they severely taxed their cash reserves or required a more traditional commercial bank loan.<sup>72</sup> To mitigate this financial strain and continue expanding its theatrical holdings, in 1919 Orpheum sought the help of Wall Street at the same time that

Paramount and First National propagated the approach.<sup>73</sup> Orpheum, like Loew's, continued to call on Wall Street throughout the 1920s, but especially after the national frenzy for theaters began half way through the decade. Keith-Albee, the most financially conservative vaudeville corporation, kept its company closed much longer, but also eventually joined the rest of the industry in 1926.<sup>74</sup>

Keith-Albee's decision to open its company to the opportunities (and outside influences) afforded by Wall Street was not simply about theater expansion but also vertical integration. Big time vaudeville corporations, like all late comers to film exhibition, had the lowest priority over new film offerings of all first run theaters, which put their theaters at a significant disadvantage as they increasingly utilized combination policies.<sup>75</sup> In contrast, as earlier adopters, Loew's, Fox, Pantages, and many regional theater chains reaped the benefits of long standing relationships with producers and distributors. Despite these close relationships, even many of these companies vertically integrated to guarantee access to films. Fox was one of the earliest companies to vertically integrate in 1915, and Loew's followed suit in 1919 when it acquired Metro Pictures Corporation, before expanding even further when it formed MGM in 1924 after acquiring Goldwyn Picture and Louis B Mayer Films. Small-time theaters also benefited from cross-media promotion afforded by its priority over film choice. Stars hoping to promote their films would choose small time vaudeville theaters for personal appearance tours, instead of appearing in big time vaudeville, because it allowed them to market to audiences more likely to see their films, perhaps even in the same venue.<sup>76</sup> While Keith-Albee attempted to acquire some stake in film production before the mid-1920s, with the backing of Wall Street funds and producer-distributors actively looking to expand their theater network, it finally achieved this goal. In May 1926, Keith-Albee acquired a fifty-percent stake in PDC, which gave the former guaranteed first-



run access to films, and the latter guaranteed outlets in the circuit's 114 first-run theaters in twenty-five states and sixty-eight cities. Keith-Albee's access to films increased further when PDC merged with Pathé Exchange later that year.<sup>77</sup>

Not everyone in the industry believed that vertical integration and widespread theater acquisition were beneficial for the economic prosperity of the entertainment industry. Some feared that metropolitan markets neared the problem of "overbuilding" or "overseating," in which the supply of available seats outweighed demand.<sup>78</sup> Such claims were especially popular with independent exhibitors who felt victimized by Hollywood's growing theater monopoly, who were unable to keep up with the quantity and quality of chain theaters, and/or believed that their own acquisition was inevitable. They hoped their loud cries could catch the attention of the Antitrust Division of the Department of Justice, who was already investigating Paramount's block booking/blind buying practices and Hollywood's film rental contracts in general.<sup>79</sup> By 1926, concerns of supply surpassing demand intensified so much that it became a common concern among trade press critics who were not primarily motivated by concerns for independent exhibitors.

The studios and vaudeville corporations paid no attention to doomsaying about overbuilding and overseating. With huge influxes of capital and competitive fervor to build theater circuits, studios continued to affiliate, acquire, and even build theaters at an even intensifying pace from 1925 to 1928. *Architectural Forum* estimated that in 1926 alone studios, vaudeville corporations, and regional chains (increasingly acquired or affiliated with studios) spent more than \$135 million dollars (just under \$2.1 billion dollars in 2022) to construct 967 entertainment venues, and they would spend another \$200 million dollars on new theater construction in 1927. Most of these venues, according to *The Wall Street Journal*, were 1,000 to

5,000 seat venues, “able to put on a more elaborate show [with live performance and music], drawing customers from a wider radius [than ‘old style’ neighborhood theaters] with its superior attractions.”<sup>80</sup> During this time, the vertically integrated circuits and (soon to be acquired) regional circuits built variety palaces in nearly every major metropolitan area, including Ann Arbor (Michigan), Austin, Canton (Ohio), Chicago, Cleveland, Columbus, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, New York, Detroit, Pittsburgh, New Orleans, Oakland, and Utica (New York), just to name a few, with prestigious galas and special live performances welcoming their inaugural patrons. Keith-Albee alone built thirty-seven theaters during 1926 and 1927, spending twenty million in 1926 to build seventeen theaters in thirteen cities. Fox was also particularly aggressive in building mega-theaters, combined with connected hotels and business districts, with more than 4,000 seats, Fox constructed such theaters in Detroit, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Brooklyn, Atlanta, Kansas City, and St. Louis. Collectively, these theater complexes cost somewhere between thirteen and twenty million, and the huge investment in building and acquisition placed Fox Theaters in an impressive twenty-five major markets. Rothafel also opened the lavish, 6,250 seat Roxy Theater in New York, which was intended to be the flagship theater in Roxy’s planned circuit of theaters, all of which would program presentations.<sup>81</sup> Grauman’s famous Chinese Theater in Los Angeles also opened the same year. Other major circuit acquisitions included Paramount’s purchase of Balaban and Katz (with 250 theaters), Warner Bros.’s controlling stakes in the Piccadilly circuit in 1925, and then the 250-theater Stanley circuit in 1928, Fox’s purchase of Poli Theaters in New England, and in 1926 Universal’s purchase of the Schine and Hostettler circuits.<sup>82</sup> Under the newly formed Universal Chain Theaters Corporation, the circuit purchased the theaters controlled by the Sears Circuit and Capitol Enterprises, mostly located in Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Nebraska. FBO also continued to expand its theater circuit. In 1926,

under the control of new president Joseph P. Kennedy, FBO planned to invest comparably large amounts of money in production and theater acquisition (\$10 million and \$7.5 million respectively). Also in that year, Loew's invested ten million dollars in New England alone to build a series of variety palaces in already saturated markets.<sup>83</sup>

During the latter half of the 1920s, the studios proved what *Variety* foresaw in January 1926: "Nothing is too big for the picture business to go after in the theatrical line; nothing is too big for it to take in, whether a circuit of picture theaters, a circuit of legitimate theaters or a circuit of vaudeville theaters."<sup>84</sup> By the end of the decade, Paramount, Warner Bros (which acquired the bulk of First National's Theaters), Fox, Loew's, and the vaudeville corporations alone had acquired or built almost 3,000 theaters, just under one-fifth of the total theaters in the United States. More crucial for their monopolies, they owned nearly three hundred to four hundred first-run theaters in cities with over 100,000 people.<sup>85</sup> Most pertinent to my argument, by 1926, the previous distinctions separating a film company and one in vaudeville collapsed further, as both unified and merged through collaboration (with each other and Wall Street) and competition, into collective of vertically integrated companies acquiring sizable chains of variety palaces.

### *Business as Usual: The Formation of KAO and RKO*

At the end of 1927, Keith-Albee and Orpheum circuits merged.<sup>86</sup> This event is usually explained in vaudeville histories as two failing companies concocting a last-ditch effort for survival.<sup>87</sup> To call either company a failure, however, ignores the dominant logic of multimedia conglomeration and vertical integration which I have established above. Through the merger Keith-Albee, a vertically integrated company showing mid-tier films from PDC and Pathé,

acquired more theatrical venues. In exchange, Orpheum achieved vertical integration through this merger.<sup>88</sup>

The formation of KAO put the vaudeville corporations another step closer to an intimate relationship with the film industry.<sup>89</sup> But, more simply, it was business as usual for the mid-1920s: a vertically integrated company, Keith-Albee, simply acquired the medium sized Orpheum circuit. The resulting KAO circuit, which owned two hundred twenty one theaters and leased one-hundred more, was still smaller than the major circuits, like Paramount, Fox, and First National, leading some critics in the industry to deem the merger inconsequential.<sup>90</sup> More conglomeration was thus necessary if the former vaudeville corporations were to compete. Indeed, KAO tried on several occasions to acquire other chains after its creation.<sup>91</sup> Whether KAO was not willing to pay the price of the other studios, or whether they could not get the proper funding is unclear, but they were clearly motivated to have as large and as geographically diverse theater holdings as the majors. In other words, they were not failing companies shriveling into oblivion, they were just struggling to expand as quickly as their competitors.

The most consequential merger in big-time vaudeville, and where some vaudeville histories end (furthering the notion that movies supplanted live performance in the late 1920s), happened less than a year after the formation of KAO. On October 18, 1928, KAO merged with the already vertically integrated (but smaller) FBO as well as Radio Corporation of America (RCA) to form a holding company named Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), a prototypical multimedia conglomerate with theater holdings, radio (NBC), sound amplification and sound film technology, and three production companies FBO, PDC, and Pathé. These diversified \$80 million dollars in assets made RKO instantly competitive with other conglomerates through a combination of radio, sound film, and, of course, variety performance with an expanded circuit

of 423 theaters.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, as film historian Richard Jewell explains in his two-volume history of the company, RKO aimed to create a “giant entertainment octopus” with tentacles in all the media industries including “vaudeville shows.”<sup>93</sup>

The formation of RKO neither disrupted KAO’s use of live performance nor had any immediate consequences on vaudeville or the variety entertainment industry.<sup>94</sup> Bookings did not decrease, and the continuing decline of the big-time format far preceded the studio’s conglomeration so the continued adoption of combination policies was expected. In fact, the company maintained an explicit commitment to the vaudefilm. Even in early 1930, RKO’s first president Hiram Brown, a former CEO of United States Leather Company (an original company in the Dow Jones) reaffirmed his company’s dedication not only to preserving, but also expanding the use of live performance in combination policies with films:

Radio-Keith-Orpheum is in the business of providing entertainment, in the form of motion pictures and vaudeville, to the patrons of our own theatres in the United States and Canada and to the patrons of those other theatres, in this country and elsewhere throughout the world, who exhibit Radio Pictures or who book their vaudeville shows through our organization [...] For vaudeville, a field where RKO is the undisputed leader, we have compiled an extensive campaign of development. Substantial, attractive amusement by the human on the RKO stages is a big part of our objectives. RKO accepts the obligations which accompany the vaudeville leadership. Our position will be maintained and our vaudeville will ever be superior, the RKO brand.<sup>95</sup>

RKO made only one change to KAO’s vaudeville system which promoted greater efficiency and saved money by targeting the bloated and corrupt conventions left from Keith-Albee’s organization.<sup>96</sup> RKO reduced the number of vaudeville booking agents the company employed.<sup>97</sup> This move in no way intended to reduce the use of live acts, but instead intended to “promote efficiency” in a system that even fellow agents said had “too many agents [...] clogging up the booking floors,” the result of Albee’s cronyism.<sup>98</sup> Further casualties of RKO’s targeted removal of Albee’s corruption included firing most of KAO’s executives, including several of Albee’s

family members, as well as talent agents, booking agents, and act producers who accepted bribes.<sup>99</sup> It also discontinued KAO's paper, *Vaudeville News*, which others in the industry had complained was less a trade press and more a house organ for its parent company.<sup>100</sup> RKO was not targeting live performance at all, but it did want to rectify the blacklists, nepotism, and overall wrongdoing of the former industry leader to continue in their multimedia conglomerate. Further supporting this claim, RKO concurrently expanded its theater and vaudeville holdings by purchasing including the Proctor Circuit and Orpheum's West Coast competitor, Pantages.<sup>101</sup>

### **The Rise of Variety Entertainment in the Variety Palace**

Industrial histories of film focus on the formation of the film industry and center their narrative around vertically integrated studios that offered increasingly standardized film entertainment. For vaudeville histories, this narrative is used to discuss the seeming decline of the industry as the film industry supposedly subsumed and consumed its theaters. Instead of presenting it as a rise or fall narrative for either industry, my argument instead has highlighted the shrinking disparities between these formerly more distinct corporations. These similarities are further accentuated when we take the studios and vaudeville corporations' mutual investment in variety live performance into account. Indeed, all the other studios shared in RKO's pursuit of vertical integration and large theater circuits. They also aspired to be "octopus" corporations with a tentacle competing for and with live acts.

Instead of marking the end of live performance, multimedia conglomeration and the identity loss of big time vaudeville fostered the apex of live performance in motion picture theaters, what one of vaudeville's earliest historians and one of *Variety's* head vaudeville critics, Joe Laurie Jr. called "the gold rush period" (epigraph).<sup>102</sup> All of the vertically integrated studios

were invested in live performance. Contrary to scholars like Monod, the widespread adoption of the small-time hybrid format and widespread vertical integration did not lead to theater managers converting their theaters to cinema-only theaters.<sup>103</sup> The cause for this—a combination of the economic logics of vertical integration, coupled with campaigns favoring film production, shifting corporate culture, opportunism, and restrictive distribution contracts— will be explained in the next chapter. Instead, the format thrived, and for a moment stood as a defining feature of most prestigious theaters and Hollywood studios' holdings.

Like RKO, when the other studios merged with regional and quasi-national theater circuits, they also agglomerated into the business of vaudeville, presentations, and prologues. Stanley Theaters (acquired first by Paramount, then part of First National, and then permanently part of Warner Bros.) offered its own touring and/or in-house presentations complete with a fifty-piece orchestra.<sup>104</sup> Since 1923, the circuit also had an exclusive contract with Keith-Albee to furnish any vaudeville acts/bills. As a result, Warner Bros. theaters also came under contract with RKO's booking service and any of its theaters wishing to book vaudeville had a contractual obligation to use RKO's booking agents.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, when Fox acquired West Coast Theaters it also controlled and left intact West Coast's vaudeville division. In the acquisition, Fox also absorbed a contract with F&M to book presentations exclusively to Fox theaters.<sup>106</sup>

Stage shows became an indispensable part of palatial theater entertainment during the early 1920s. As mentioned earlier, before around 1919 or 1920 only the most famous palatial theaters (not including those owned by a vaudeville corporation) programmed live acts, though most still showcased orchestra music. One report even indicated that a “large number” of palatial theaters built before 1920 not only did not show stage acts, but were built without stages at all.<sup>107</sup> Literally, these theaters were “movie palaces,” centered primarily on celluloid entertainment.

While terms like “movie/motion picture palace,” “picture house/palace,” originally devised in the 1910s continued to be used to describe similarly sized venues throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, they departed from signifying a singular medium in the early 1920s. Some credit the Capitol Theater for this change, bringing stage and screen in collaboration in nearly all major urban theaters. Opening in 1919, the Capitol, under the management of Roxy, pioneered the variety palace model that would dominate in the 1920s, which, as *The New York Times* recognized, “depended even less than its predecessors—the Strand, the Rialto, and the Rivoli—upon the screen alone.”<sup>108</sup> For low, mass market prices, audiences enjoyed a multimedia, luxurious experience where stage talent and spectacle, architectural quality, and music distracted critical and spectatorial attention away from feature films. The result was an undeniable success.<sup>109</sup>

Even with the Capitol’s influential example, theaters did not begin showing live performances consistently during the early 1920s. But it was growing, albeit unevenly. In June 1919, First National created a nation-wide circuit to distribute and share prologues and presentations.<sup>110</sup> Paramount (then Famous Players-Lasky) organized its own rival prologue circuit in early 1920. Originally, Paramount’s grand plan to surpass its rival involved trying to hire Sid Grauman to produce prologues that premiered in Los Angeles before touring Paramount’s growing theater chain.<sup>111</sup> But the great showman declined and continued to work independently. By 1919, nearly all theaters in Detroit at least featured live performance occasionally, ranging from inexpensive amateur vaudeville to full-scale presentations at Kunsky’s variety palaces.<sup>112</sup> Conversely, in early 1922, only ten of Cleveland’s sixty-seven theaters showed live acts.<sup>113</sup>



However, by the mid-1920s, efforts to expand live performance became more unified across circuits. For example, In July 1924, a sizable number of managers of Midwest theaters formed a group dedicated to “exchanging ideas and hunches on general showmanship problems.”<sup>114</sup> Members included managers of some of the Midwest’s prominent chains, including Kunsky, Saxe, and Skouras, and one manager from Loew’s. The remainder of the members were managers of large independent theaters, like the Circle in Indianapolis. The group’s first topic was the art and commerce of producing in-house presentations, focusing especially on directorial decisions such as arranging the stage and lights, tying them into the feature film (i.e., make it a prologue), and determining the length of the musical and dance numbers. They even adopted a group bulletin that would keep fellow members updated on what the “associate member in a neighboring town is doing with presentations,” and planned to sell and exchange backdrops, scenery, and decor to help each other reduce overhead.<sup>115</sup> Of notable absence from this group of Midwestern managers was a member of the Balaban and Katz circuit. However, since the Chicago-based circuit already had well-known and established in-house presentations, it likely did not feel the need to participate and share its trade secrets with aspiring neophytes. Efforts such as these to improve the quality of stage presentations were not lost on even the form’s most famous artist, Roxy. In summarizing the industry in 1924, Rothafel told the *Film Daily*, “I look to see [the next year as] one of the best years we have had in some time [...] exhibitors are stepping forward and giving the public better presentations.”<sup>116</sup>

At the same time commitments to theater acquisition became a prerequisite for Wall Street investment in the Hollywood studios, owners and builders of variety palaces believed that programming stage entertainment was a prerequisite to success in urban markets. The feature film was only a secondary concern. This is evident by examining the changing norms of theater

design and construction, as they developed from the period before 1920 when palatial theaters did not always feature stages. In summarizing the trends of theater construction, an article in December 1925 by *Variety*'s film department (separate from the department that covered vaudeville and other variety theatrical entertainment) organized metropolitan theaters into three categories: around 5,000 seats, approximately 2,500 seats, and roughly 1,000 to 500 seats. While most obviously organized around capacity, the delineations were justified largely by their reliance on stage entertainment. Other than the latter category (1,000 to 500 seats), designated for theaters using reserved seating to show motion pictures only, the other two, according to *Variety*, had to have stages to accommodate their "two main subjects": in-person presentation of stars (i.e. "names") and presentations.<sup>117</sup> The absence of a category for theaters with capacities between 2,500 and 1,000 was likewise due to the view that such theaters were too large to regularly fill by showing only films, but also too small to facilitate a combination policy at prices accessible for a mass audience. "What will become of those theaters under 2,500; also that large number of picture theaters built over here as late as five years ago without stage room?" *Variety* asked rhetorically to set up its answer, "the larger houses [with stages] will swallow them up."<sup>118</sup> Even in the paper's film section, the flagship theaters that studios raced to acquire and build were hardly only places to screen films, but also to showcase variety palaces' principal form of entertainment: stage attractions. By 1928, actors even noted that most of the dressing rooms and "backstage conditions" of variety palaces owned by the studios "were just as pleasant if not more so," than those of the big time vaudeville theaters.<sup>119</sup> So called movie palaces invested not only in the public facing stage, but also by accommodating and "lur[ing]" talent through high class amenities designated only for them.<sup>120</sup>

By the end of 1925, so many variety palaces booked live acts that *Variety* reported there existed “endless picture circuit time” to the surprise of both “film men” and vaudeville agents.<sup>121</sup> Paramount, with its nearly seven hundred theaters, seemed particularly invigorated to expand its use of stage attractions, perhaps because Sam Katz, a longtime proponent of form at the recently acquired Balaban and Katz circuit, now ran the Paramount-Publix Theater division. This enthusiasm and support for presentations and prologues even emanated from Paramount’s comptroller, Richard Saunders, who published an article in the *Film Daily Year Book* outlining the company’s plans for 1926. While one might expect Saunders’ job would have made him the least likely supporter of the cost intensive stage entertainment and theater building, his article demonstrates how ingrained the connection between stage entertainment, palatial theaters, and the overall studio-supported goal of cultural uplift.<sup>122</sup>

To show the more expensive picture in proper form, with fitting prologue, adequate music and impressive surroundings, the small theater became passe in seating capacity, stage room and general appearance. Veritable palaces of marble and bronze, both here and abroad. Expert showmen are developing tabloid reviews [i.e. revues and presentations] and choice spectacles! [...] all these mean the investment of immense sums in theater construction. Corporations of considerable size seem the only means of carrying out such enterprises on so elaborate a scale.<sup>123</sup>

Paramount’s investment in and use of live performance in 1926 matched the scale Saunders had described. Paramount employed *both* a presentation department *and* a “road shows and vaudeville” department, and at the beginning of the year, the former alone required 150 to 300 performers for just its five units that toured palaces in New York, Boston, Buffalo, and Chicago.<sup>124</sup> Other Paramount presentations toured “all key points [of the country],” according to the *Film Daily*.<sup>125</sup> The circuit even had plans to expand further, creating “an almost endless circuit of continuous work for units.”<sup>126</sup> By fall, Paramount planned to create a new production studio for presentations next to its Famous Players studio in Long Island, where the studios’ team

of directors, producers, set and costume designers could work and units could rehearse before touring the country. Paramount also set in motion a plan to program better and more presentations and prologues in its growing international theater holdings, installing larger orchestras, “better music[...]more beautiful settings and surroundings” in its theaters in London, Paris, Berlin, Stockholm, Sydney, Buenos Aires, Amsterdam, Melbourne, Tokyo, and other major cities.<sup>127</sup>

Paramount also sought out star talent to anchor both presentations and vaudefilm in its theaters, offering long contracts and enormous salaries. Paul Whiteman, the “King of Jazz,” turned down a three-year contract worth over one million dollars (\$15.6 million in 2022) to tour Paramount theaters. Paramount’s contract required he perform exclusive engagements though, and Whiteman wanted to test demand in the wide-open market, where he believed he could earn around two-thousand dollars more per show than the roughly nine-thousand dollars on average per week that Paramount offered him. Whiteman’s confidence that he could secure a higher salary at other theaters again shows the widespread availability of work for stage acts, and the enormous capital spent on this kind of entertainment across the industry.<sup>128</sup>

Whiteman’s enormous salary not only suggests the serious investment studios placed in live performers at this time, but hints at a growing problem. As more and more variety palaces programmed vaudefilm or presentations and bid for the same performers, salaries greatly inflated and priced small theaters out of live acts. As *Variety* wrote, “when the picture [theater] business commences to talk money, whether salaries or for anything else, [everything else] in the show business sounds small.”<sup>129</sup> The now nearly non-existent distinction on star bookings between circuits and theaters that were previously classified as big-time, small-time, or movie palaces, *Variety* noted, had “created a sense of competition for demand acts. Turns have been selling to

the highest bidder regardless of classification [of the theater].”<sup>130</sup> Most of this inflation though was the result of the studio theaters’ economies of scale. Given their variety palaces had larger seating capacities than most of those made by former vaudeville corporations, studio theater managers were willing to pay thirty to ninety percent more than even the remaining big time theaters. Another, later report estimated that salaries for second tier headliners (as opposed to cross media stars) increased by three hundred to six hundred percent under these competitive conditions.<sup>131</sup> But while this was a problem for the theaters’ bottom line, it meant higher salaries for performers who welcomed the changes and the competition.

Other studios matched Paramount’s fervor for live acts, starting similar initiatives to improve the overall “presentation” of theatrical exhibition.<sup>132</sup> Again, Roxy voiced the vogue shared by the studios when he summarized 1925 and predicted changes to the industry in 1926: “The time is here and will be more so in another year to give entertainment that will be a new composite style of showmanship that will employ a new kind of stagecraft, new lighting and a service heretofore undreamed of. All this together, for a price that will be within the reach of every pocketbook.”<sup>133</sup> Roxy couldn't have been more correct. 1926 marked the greatest use and investment in live performance to date. In January 1927, Jack Alicoate, lead editor of the *Film Daily*, proclaimed presentations the defining feature of 1926 for the entire film industry, and an integral part of the studios’ strategy for chains of palatial theaters:

The coming year will see great strides in the matter of presentations. The idea is firmly established. Its significance as a permanent auxiliary to modern picture entertainment cannot be overlooked. The day of the super theater is at hand. Tremendous houses exist everywhere. Many more, involving millions are in the course of construction. The small theater, especially in urban communities, must fight for its existence. The chain idea is growing. The thought is practical and sound. Greater chains are being formed, perhaps to be absorbed later by larger ones. The small independent exhibitor must look to larger interests as a matter of self-protection.<sup>134</sup>

Executives from the First National and Keith-Albee circuits echoed Alicoate in the same issue.<sup>135</sup> Even E. F. Albee, for example, celebrated the industry's emphasis on uplift and prestige and its consequent increase in variety entertainment produced by the studios and regional chains (as it meant bookings for his office), even if he also took the opportunity to bemoan how it had inextricably intertwined motion pictures into vaudeville, "The gradual but inevitable introduction of pretentious film features with vaudeville, and the induction of stellar vaudeville talent into motion picture houses, have combined to align a wholly new, vast, and responsible public made up of entertainment-seeking people who know and want the best."<sup>136</sup> Even executives in production and exhibition at MGM (including Louis B. Mayer) and Pathé hailed the industry's emphasis on live acts.<sup>137</sup> Arthur Rousseau, an exchange office manager for Pathé wrote, "Exhibitors all over the world, are trying to increase the drawing power of their programs with prologues, vaudeville acts, and short subjects of outstanding merit."<sup>138</sup>

Indeed, the industry had much to celebrate. Fox, for example, had already begun planning stage shows for 1926 as early as October of 1925.<sup>139</sup> Likewise, Fanchon and Marco increased their bookings to three hundred different theaters in 1926, and Paramount-Publix increased their presentation department to 26 units, which toured a different circuit theater every week.<sup>140</sup> Loew's massive investment in live acts made its founder appear to be a hypocrite. A series of quotations from Marcus Loew in the early 1920s are often cited by contemporary media histories as evidence of a permanent shift for Loew's and other small-time vaudeville corporations from vaudeville to motion pictures. Trade press articles at the time also circulated variations of these quotations, including: "I have never seen a vaudeville show in any of my theaters, but I have never allowed a picture to be shown that I did not first see" and "it's the picture that draws and the vaudeville fills in."<sup>141</sup> Even if this was true at the time, it was no longer the case by early

1927 when Loew's utilized live acts in at least 114 of its 144 theaters.<sup>142</sup> *Variety* cited Loew's famous words only to point out how far from the truth they seemed now when the circuit drew audiences with both top tier stage acts and films, "And now the Loew's Circuit is paying more for its vaudeville acts than the big time ever paid and is playing brands of better pictures than the big time's pop houses find themselves able to buy."<sup>143</sup>

The use of presentations continued to expand. Thirty-five companies in six states from coast to coast now advertised as "presentation bookers," hoping to partner with theaters and circuits in their regions.<sup>144</sup> To further chronicle this development and help others program live acts and stage presentations, *The Film Daily* created a new department with its own dedicated editor charged with following all "forms of stage presentations."<sup>145</sup> As his first act as "Presentation Editor" of the paper, Arthur W. Eddy created a regular feature titled "Present-O-Grams." In support of the "nation-wide" interest in presentations, this section shared ideas and sometimes detailed instructions supplied by exhibitors from around the country on how to stage and promote live acts. Though it focused primarily on presentations and prologues, Eddy's section of the paper also covered vaudefilm and personal appearances.<sup>146</sup>

Even United Artists (UA), a studio rarely remembered for having a short-lived theater chain, developed a multi-million dollar plan which explicitly linked theater construction to investment in live acts. Before 1926, United Artists could barely claim to be vertically integrated, as it only owned one theater, the Liberty in Seattle. However, in October 1927, the studio agreed to a plan between Loew's, Sid Grauman, and William Morris to create a "national presentation circuit" with "United Artists theaters as [the] nucleus."<sup>147</sup> Twelve of the twenty Loew's theaters using presentations agreed to join the circuit. By November, this nucleus finally had its core when United Artists purchased Grauman's Egyptian Theater in Los Angeles where

UA would produce these presentations, and by the end of the year the studio announced plans to build a chain of twenty “de luxe” theaters for presentations and movies.<sup>148</sup>

Performers, of course, welcomed the increased competition. For them, the studio-supported boom brought increased salaries and increased opportunity, which freed many of them from the constrictive blacklists and monopolies of vaudeville. “The picture theater opened up a new era,” *Variety* wrote in late 1926, for “the actor [who] had been manacled [by vaudeville].”<sup>149</sup> The only downside some performers mentioned was that they missed the tight organization of big-time vaudeville in which a performer or agent only needed to work with the United Booking Office. Bookings with new circuits tended to be “haphazard” and decentralized by comparison. But the consistent “wave of bookings” made up for the lack of industrial organization, which many felt would develop over time.<sup>150</sup> Another 1928 article estimated that the studio’s variety palaces expanded the market for live acts sixfold, increasing work and pay for established players and creating spaces for new acts. As *Variety* explained “Where there were in the former times one vaudeville theatre playing acts, there are now six picture houses playing acts. Some are playing the same acts that appeared in the vaudeville houses. But picture houses are playing many acts that have never yet played in vaudeville theatres.”<sup>151</sup> By 1926, an estimated 2,000 theaters regularly used live acts for vaudefilm, presentations, or prologues. This meant that 500 to 1,000 *more* theaters now booked stage entertainment than there were vaudeville theaters at their height. These 2,000 theaters required 6,500 acts per week, and found, “more work than they could use” according to Joe Bigelow, one of the editors of *Variety*’s vaudeville section.

Ironically, the apex of live performance in movie theaters also involved widely reported joblessness of some vaudevillians.<sup>152</sup> However, these vaudevillians had trouble finding work at this time for two reasons. While the number of venues and performance opportunities actually



increased during this time, the ubiquity of the combination policy could, in theory, reduce the available slots for live acts in a given week. Compared to the usual six to eight acts on a big-time bill, combination policies typically booked three to five acts, filling the remainder of the bill with shorts and feature films.<sup>153</sup> Most of the joblessness, however, stemmed from problems tied to longstanding booking practices and the continued reliance on blacklists. Almost all reports of lost jobs centered on the Keith-Albee circuit—which infamously employed a blacklist against performers who worked for its competitors—suggesting that lack of employment was a circuit-specific problem and did not represent the entire variety business. For example, in 1927 right before its merger with Orpheum, Keith-Albee listed 2,000 acts under its purview. Three hundred of the acts received bookings from the circuit year-round and seven hundred received booking offers from a half to a quarter of a year. Of the remaining 1,000 acts, half were listed as unemployed and another five hundred had reportedly left vaudeville.<sup>154</sup>

As one of the longest holdovers of the big-time format, the magnitude of unemployment in the Keith-Albee circuit is partly the result of theaters adopting combination policies. Fewer big time bills meant the circuit needed fewer performers overall. But it was also the result of Keith-Albee's specific policies regarding performers and agents. As variety palaces across the country increasingly demanded stage entertainment and needed performers, Keith-Albee acts hypothetically (and in many cases) did fill this need. But they also faced unique barriers and risks, particularly related to the blacklists. If an act chose to perform at another variety palace outside of the circuit, they may never be able to return. As a result, some performers chose what they thought was temporary unemployment with Keith-Albee over leaving the circuit.<sup>155</sup> Lastly (as discussed in more detail in chapter 4), some circuits, including Keith-Albee, had a list of agents with whom they specifically contracted to work. In turn, agents could not sell their acts

outside of the circuit. While at one time exclusive rights with Keith-Ablee promised long tours, it now meant joblessness for many in its circle trapped in its limited circuit, even as the opportunities abounded in neighboring variety palaces controlled by the studios.

Despite the growing cost of star salaries, stage acts continued to pay dividends for theaters, breaking local and national box-office records.<sup>156</sup> A vaudefilm-style show starring the Duncan Sisters, a comic duo who sometimes performed a blackface routine as Topsy and Eva from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, at the Los Angeles Orpheum earned a record \$44,000 dollars (over \$678,000 in 2022) for a theater of 2,200 after nearly selling out every show in a grueling schedule of six shows per day the week before Christmas.<sup>157</sup>

Delineation between forms of live performance (vaudeville, revues, and presentations) and types of theaters (vaudeville and picture palaces) remained operative in extreme cases. In mid-1926, *Variety* began publishing reviews of presentations and units separate from vaudefilm and straight vaudeville (“Film House Reviews” for the former and “Vaudeville House Reviews” for the latter.<sup>158</sup>) In practice, however, categorizing the stage entertainment is quite difficult and most programs resembled a hybrid form of vaudefilm and presentations. As *Variety* noted as early as December 1926: “With the picture theater obliging the vaudeville house to the same playing policy, pictures and acts or acts and pictures, vaudeville otherwise is being dissipated, circulated, spread about, in and between and elsewhere, until often it is almost unrecognizable, no matter where seen.”<sup>159</sup> In the same issue, *Variety* acknowledged this by unifying its previously separate weekly listings of bills at “picture theaters” and vaudeville circuits under the title “Presentation - bills.”<sup>160</sup> Most trade journals referred to theaters owned/operated by the big small time now largely as picture theaters, which simply meant they were palace theaters whose use of live performance was more developed, and more or less resembled presentations even if it

used a vaudeville format. Around 1927, vaudefilm became a common term, replacing less common terms like “pop” vaudeville.<sup>161</sup> In early 1928, the term *vaudeville* (when itself became shorthand for variety entertainment as a whole), was not necessarily tied to certain companies or modes of booking. *Variety* wrote, “the vaudeville of today as referred to in common and generally, means vaudeville acts, more fluent than ever. There are no lines of limitations to vaudeville now. It is in what are known as vaudeville houses; it’s in musical and comedy productions [i.e. revues or presentations] [...] and more so than all the others combined it’s in the picture houses.”<sup>162</sup>

The confluence of vaudeville and presentations is further shown in an article presumably written by William Morris, the head of the eponymous talent agency, in early 1927. Morris writes that “in order to meet the demand for presentation acts, many headliners from the vaudeville field were recruited.”<sup>163</sup> Morris presents three categories of presentations in operation:

[First:] presentation acts, a troupe of girls, three or four specialty turns and suitable scenery built around one general theme or motive. The second, favored by Louis K. Sidney [head of Loew’s live performance division] (although he’s wise enough showman to accept no one permanent policy) is a program of excellent entertaining acts along with a big picture, adding just enough production to each act to differentiate it from vaudeville. The third, a program that always adds zest to a theater season and sometimes acts as a tonic, the booking of the big drawing cards [i.e. personal appearances of star].<sup>164</sup>

The latter two categories pulled directly from the vaudeville formula. Morris even describes Loew’s presentations as a form of small-time vaudeville with higher production values, by which he means they used scenery, lights, and perhaps costumes when traditional vaudeville rarely used them. Morris’s final category (he cites the Strand (Warner Bros.) and the Capitol (Loew’s) as exemplars) was headlined by a cross media star (his examples include bandleaders Paul Whiteman and Vincent Lopez and dancer Gilda Gray), but the shows still largely preserved the structure of vaudeville, with distinct acts performing before the headliners, though sometimes the

acts would perform a final number together as demanded by the theater.<sup>165</sup> Only Morris's first category resembled the iconic form of presentations and revues organized around a theme and/or narrative. But even he reduces it to a glorified vaudeville show by mentioning that it contained "three or four specialty turns," suggesting they relied on disparate acts like vaudeville but unified with a loose theme.<sup>166</sup>

### **Business Expansion during the Sound Era: 1927, 1928 and Early 1929**

The year 1927, the beginning of the mainstream adoption of synchronized sound, is often cited as the final coup de grâce for live performance and vaudeville. But what the debut of sound initiated was simply the *claim* from the film industry that sound cinema could and was replacing live acts. This did not represent the reality in urban theaters. In fact, the apex of live performance continued to develop even during the transition to synchronized sound.<sup>167</sup> For some critics, 1927 actually epitomized the pinnacle of stage entertainment over films. One critic wrote, "No longer is the theater a mere place in which to view a motion picture...Instead it is more of a place of entertainment and a club combined."<sup>168</sup> In *Variety's* overview of the motion picture industry in 1927, the writers acknowledged, however reluctantly, that stage entertainment had overshadowed feature films in urban markets, writing that the feature film was "sidetracked or clouded here and there by the upgrowing stage presentation."<sup>169</sup>

The ongoing dominance of live acts, which even a film critic could not ignore, is evident in presented data. Each year *Variety* tracked the weekly programs and grosses of at least sixty theaters in thirteen major markets (including New York, Kansas City, Washington D.C., San Francisco, St. Louis, Portland, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, and Baltimore) from all the major chains and some independents. Of the sixty-theaters

tracked in 1927, forty theaters, including at least one in all thirteen markets, programmed vaudeville, presentations, and/or personal appearances (alongside movies) at least once, and most included them every week.<sup>170</sup>

Indeed, the practice thrived throughout the country without widespread antagonism, dominating other forms of entertainment even during the dawn of synchronized sound. The premiere and subsequent run of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) at the Warners' Theater in New York is often depicted as an overwhelming success which began the mainstream adoption of synchronized sound and marked the decline of live performance. However, the Warners' Theater had smaller business and audiences than the far more successful surrounding theaters which used live performance.<sup>171</sup> *Variety's* tracing of theater revenue in 1927 reveals that the Roxy, the Paramount, the Capitol, and even Warner Bros. own Strand Theater outperformed the Warners' Theater by up to two to five times utilizing combination policies, corroborating Donald Crafton's argument that claims of *The Jazz Singer's* box-office success are inflated.<sup>172</sup> Still, when analyzing comparative revenue by seat, *The Jazz Singer* performed well, just not as well as these mega palaces with presentations and vaudeville. The Warner's Theater was comparatively small, only holding 1,380 seats compared to the Strand (2,900), the Capitol (5,450) the Paramount (4,000), and the Roxy (6,250). Still, it earned \$16.08 per seat, which was only slightly less than the Paramount (\$17.50), the Capitol (\$17.48) and Roxy (\$16.30). We can only speculate if *The Jazz Singer* could have sold enough tickets in these larger venues. However, it is unlikely given the theater charged two to five times more per ticket (\$1.50 to \$2.00) than these other venues, prices that resembled the dying big time vaudeville theaters. What is clear was that theaters that used live performance generated the bulk of the top theater revenue in 1927, with almost all of the top sixty grossing theaters (which together grossed over \$53 million dollars) used live acts, of

which the flagship Roxy, Capitol, and Paramount theaters earned more than ten million of that (nearly twenty-percent.)<sup>173</sup>

Other studios also entered the booking competition at the end of 1927. More than one hundred theaters owned by Universal (about half of their total circuit, which included many more small, rural theaters than other studios) booked vaudefilm or presentations, with various theater managers working with bookers from Keith-Albee or independent agents to fill their bills.<sup>174</sup> In order to centralize booking, reap the standard five-percent booking fee, and otherwise “supply vaudeville and presentation material to its theaters,” Universal created the Chain Vaudeville Agency.<sup>175</sup> Led by Williams Stephens, a former booker for the relatively small Gus Sun agency, the agency offered its services to theaters not owned or affiliated by Universal and encouraged all but those “far-away spots” owned by Universal to book through its office.<sup>176</sup> Universal’s efforts further corroborate the findings of a report presented in the fall 1927 convention of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers (SMPE), which found that “most modern movie palaces present a program which is a combination of motion pictures and vaudeville, or specialties, requiring effects of ‘atmosphere’ similar to those used in the legitimate theater.”<sup>177</sup>

Of course, as many scholars have noted, the mainstream adoption of sound did not arrive overnight, and it involved a long transition which started in 1926 and continued through 1929.<sup>178</sup> But live performance continued to grow in urban exhibition during this time. By the beginning of 1928, *Variety* deemed knowledge of *both film and stage* attractions as an essential quality for any studio executive who operated at least two-hundred fifty theaters, and they must be as concerned with the “high salaries for stage attractions” as they are “high rentals for films.”<sup>179</sup> The paper also reprinted this claim in early 1930. The booking offices of the major conglomerates also facilitated stage acts in theaters outside of their chains. In January 1928, the “big four”

vaudeville bookers (Paramount, Fox/F&M, Loew's, KAO) also booked acts in at least one hundred independent "smaller pictures houses" that had newly embraced vaudeville and/or presentations in the past year.<sup>180</sup> In total, the entire industry spent an estimated one million dollars per week (more than fifteen million dollars in 2022) to employ five thousand performers (appearing in 2,000 acts), not including dancers (the most prevalent performers), with the largest employers of talent being KAO, Fanchon and Marco, Paramount-Publix, and Loew's.<sup>181</sup> To further assist the increasing number of theaters to book live talent, the *Film Daily Yearbook* now published a list of booking agencies for "vaude" and "presentations" in nineteen states.<sup>182</sup>

Plenty of other signs suggested the viability of live performance even in the age of sound. Warner Bros.'s late entry into the business, for example, demonstrates the continuing attraction of live shows to studios. Warner Bros.'s recent acquisition of First National came with control of the Stanley Corporation, the largest theater member of First National at 231 theaters. At the time of the acquisition, at least forty-three of Stanley's theaters used live performance. Ten of these theaters used presentations booked through the Acme Booking Agency, a small booking agency owned by Stanley which acted as an intermediary between presentation producers. The remainder of the theaters utilized a vaudefilm policy booked through Keith-Albee-Orpheum (KAO), RKO's booking agency. Sometime before December 1928, however, Warner Bros. began plans to eliminate Stanley's deal with KAO to build its own theatrical booking agency which would continue vaudefilm in at least the theaters that had already used KAO. Eventually named the Artists Bureau, Warner Bros. intended it to make them even more competitive in multiple branches of the industry by emulating RKO by "taking in all branches of show business," meaning the agency would help book talent for its talkies, radio, and live performance.<sup>183</sup> The creation of the Artists Bureau—which continued operation into the 1950s—

almost two years after the premiere of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) indicates that the company was not in fact antagonistic toward all live performance, and that its efforts to pioneer and implement synchronized sound happened in parallel with its investment in live performance. Indeed, Warner Bros. prioritized competition even if that meant investing in a media format that was less efficient than synch-sound, and live performance remained critical component of a competitive studio even during this moment of immense transition.<sup>184</sup>

Other important signs of live performance's viability existed outside of Warner Bros. In 1928, Fanchon and Marco officially incorporated and expanded its business across the country. Before, the presentation factory had largely booked theaters west of the Rocky Mountains because they partnered with the West Coast Theaters, which booked live acts in just under two hundred of its theaters from Vancouver to San Diego. One expansion, in December 1928, included booking thirty new theaters in the Midwest.<sup>185</sup> Even more consequentially, Fox's acquisition of West Coast Theaters expanded F&M's business all the way to the East Coast, providing the sister-brother team booking time in the studio's ever-growing theater chain of around five hundred theaters. Though the merger was ratified early in 1928, by the end of the year the unification was complete and formally tied F&M to the fastest growing studio to date.

Though the use of live performance stayed the same in some organizations and expanded in others, some expressed concern that talkies would displace stage acts. But in late 1928, it was only an anxiety, and not a proven threat. Loew's theaters managers, for example, worried that they would lose their live acts by spring 1929, "in favor of a possible switch to all-sound policies."<sup>186</sup> However even they admitted that the studio had taken no action "that might point, even indirectly, to a projected change in the [current] policies."<sup>187</sup> In fact, Loew's told their booking agents to keep bookings in all theaters currently using the policy three weeks in advance



and continued to book “new and unknown” acts.<sup>188</sup> They were not, however, booking any single act to any tour longer than three weeks.

An article about the Pantages Circuit written in December 1928 provides another example of the growing anxiety that synchronized sound would displace live performance:

The rumors are flying all around, the Pantages office has not yet lost any of its houses to all-sound policies. With most of them wired and nothing forthcoming at this late time in the line of definite info. on policy changes, it is believed by those in close touch with affairs that vaudeville will be safe in this sector for at least several months.<sup>189</sup>

In other words, despite fears of a partial loss of stage time, the Pantages circuit, which by late 1928 had twenty-five theaters in fifteen states and three Canadian provinces as well as three live performance booking agencies in as many states, continued to book live acts in all of its theaters. Like Loew’s, however, the company refrained from making any long-term commitments. Circuit managers and booking agents made contingency plans, unsure of what their circuit would decide. Contracts offered to acts only guaranteed fourteen-week tours and extensions would be considered only at the end of this term. Indeed, Pantages theaters, like most of the urban industry, made no changes over the next months.

Even many theaters which tried replacing “real” vaudeville with canned shows (i.e. recorded vaudeville acts) had returned to using live acts, and other circuits expanded their use of vaudeville even after some of their theaters temporarily switched to sound pictures exclusively. The Comerford Circuit, owner of the Amalgamated Vaudeville Agency, had seventy-five theaters using live acts, and only four of their theaters dropped stage shows in 1928 in favor of exclusive sound motion picture showings. In 1929, the circuit had new plans to expand its combination policies. Frank Walker, Vice-President of the chain, said in an interview that the “public does not seem to be satisfied with an all-canned fare,” and though sound “broaden[ed] the appeal of feature films” it did not “encroach on vaudeville’s long-claimed territory.”<sup>190</sup>

Walker coupled this statement with an announcement that live acts would likely return to the four theaters from which they were previously dropped and also would be added to the soon-to-be completed 3,500 seat movie palace in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

Some trade articles indicate that Walker and the Comerford Circuit's actions were generally followed by other theaters and circuits. *Variety* noted that managers, even those that had already adopted a straight sound-policy, were beginning to lose their enthusiasm for synchronized sound, especially as a substitute for live acts. Managers noted that, in addition to complaints against the general "absence of stage attractions," the acoustics in most theaters, including movie palaces, were built without sound amplification in mind and created lackluster soundscapes. Furthermore, the adoption of sound technology involved even more overhead costs than the live acts they were imagined to replace. This led to a "definite trend toward taking back acts in houses that had been using all-sound features the last several months."<sup>191</sup> These managers' complaints should remind one of the material and architectural realities of variety palaces which privileged live performance even over the novelty of sound.<sup>192</sup> To some, synchronized sound was not a welcome and exciting novelty, it was an expensive intruder in a performance space audiovisually designed to showcase stage acts. Their absence was missed.<sup>193</sup>

At the end of 1928, Hollywood studios' ambitions to persist with variety entertainment remained virtually unaffected by the early transition to sound. *Variety* believed the requirements for chain operators had not changed after years into the sound revolution and that circuit managers still needed to know every element of the theater business including "screen and stage."<sup>194</sup> The article reaffirmed that operators must know "the booking of stage attractions, knowing that end as well as the screen booking end, with the knowledge of prices of each, where to place and how to cut."<sup>195</sup> In short, theater operators needed to know all of the business of their

studios which continued to include live acts and films. Into 1929, *Variety* and *Billboard* reported no significant decline in live performance bookings. Some theaters had abandoned stage acts for a straight sound policy, but many others that had already been wired for sound, and those that would soon do so, continued to book stage shows without discussion that they were mutually exclusive. Even new theaters adopted combination policies, suggesting it was not seen as outmoded even in theaters without a long history of the approach. Together, the urban media landscape remained virtually unchanged. *Variety* continued to report two full pages of bills every week.<sup>196</sup> These programs included Warner Bros., RKO, Fox, Paramount, and Loew's theaters, as well as those from still operating smaller chains of vaudeville circuits including Proctor, Interstate, Pantages, and Association.

### **The Campaign Against Live Acts**

Despite little evidence that the transition to sound negatively affected the use of live performance in urban motion picture theaters into early 1929, the coverage of synchronized sound in motion picture trade publications began manufacturing the idea that Warner Bros.'s innovation had displaced live performance. Starting in its 1929 edition (published early that year), *The Film Daily Yearbook*, which had dedicated a noteworthy amount of space to covering and debating the widespread use of live performance for several years, no longer included any significant discussion of any variety live performance. Instead, their articles hailed its decline. One in particular, "The Onrush of Sound," interrupts its retelling of Warner Bros.'s development of the Vitaphone to make a series of assertions that sound had already replaced live performance, including: "Warner continued to blaze the trail. They systematically built up their library of short acts, continuing their excursions into other fields for the shorts which were to sound the virtual

death knell of high cost presentations;” “Many were agreed that mounting overhead caused by presentations should be curtailed, but were at a loss as to how best to bring this about, seemingly not realizing that the speeding of sound development offered a solution;” “Presentations, it was predicted, would go into the discard in favor of the new form of entertainment spreading like wildfire throughout the country;” and lastly that “The novelty of the all-dialogue film, accepted with open arms by the public, intensified the demand for talker talent, with Vitaphone and Movietone shorts clicking everywhere and fast replacing presentations.”<sup>197</sup>

As hyperbolic as these claims seem, they corresponded in message and intensity with other discourse in the industry in 1928. *The Film Daily*, in May 1928, announced a “New Era Dawns,” that sound film was replacing vaudeville (which lacked quality) and presentations, (which were too expensive):

On everybody’s lips these days there is one major topic; sound film, their present, their future and their niche in the entertainment scheme of tomorrow. *Presentations may have served their purpose, but it is a serious question if their usefulness is not rapidly expiring. The next innovation appears to be sound films. Many of them will be bad, many of them good, but most of them will be far better than the vaudeville junk that trips over the boards of de luxe theaters all over the country today* [emphasis theirs].<sup>198</sup>

Collectively, this discourse misleadingly suggested that live performance was declining across the industry, but its primary purpose appears to be convincing exhibitors that sound offered a viable middle-ground in cost and quality between the presentations and vaudeville.

Ironically, the 1929 *Film Daily Year Book* also published accounts that live acts were still a widespread and established practice in the industry, including an updated list of vaudeville and presentation booking agencies.<sup>199</sup> Both the Spring and Fall 1929 Society of Motion Picture Engineers symposia featured reports that indicated that motion picture companies remained interested in live performance, as well as vaudeville circuits in cinema. One paper studied the “relation of the vaudeville act to the motion picture program,” while the second reported on the

discovery by “one vaudeville circuit” of the “superior” position for the motion picture screen, which it argued should have the “smallest possible border” and be placed downstage “well in front of the [stage] background.”<sup>200</sup>

As widespread as this displacement narrative became in 1928, the immediate effects of the technology on live performance were quite limited. However, the economic costs of implementing sound had a comparatively deep effect on theaters outside of urban centers. While talking pictures led to no sizable, widespread changes or disruptions in bookings in urban areas well into 1929, the situation was not the same for small theaters outside of metropolitan areas. Though they received little attention by the trade press, some reports indicate that they dropped live acts at a much higher rate because they could not afford to book them and wire their theaters simultaneously.<sup>201</sup> Having to choose, many managers of small, rural choose to invest in standardized, sound pictures.

## **Conclusion**

Urban theater managers, however, did not adhere to this common narrative. As late as 1929, the variety entertainment industry enjoyed a new level of prosperity under the studio system never before achieved. But many in the variety theater knew early on that industrial assimilation and vertical integration came with inherent risks. *Variety* forewarned this as early as January 1927, in its annual summary of the variety entertainment industry:

If the picture exhibition business finds a stage substitute for its present variety performance, just where vaudeville will go or what will become of it is as problematical as was the unsteady and unhealthy rise of vaudeville when in the wobbly grip of the big time monopoly. That vaudeville has had to follow pictures, obliged to ape it and forced to take lessons from it in theatre building and operation have been a hardy blows [*sic*] to the acquired vanity of the vaudeville magnates.<sup>202</sup>

In other words, vaudeville had traded one monopoly for another more potentially dangerous one. The big-time circuits had stunted and controlled the industry through blacklists, but at least they were unequivocally dedicated to live acts. But now, variety theater needed the studios, as it could not remain at this scale without utilizing the urban theaters Hollywood now largely controlled. As a result, variety entertainment and its theater managers were highly susceptible to the film industries' policies, corporate culture, and business strategies. For the moment though, the major studios matched big-time vaudeville's enthusiasm for live acts. So much so that *Variety's* writer only feared that another form of stage entertainment may displace vaudeville, and not the feature film or the double bill. This belief suggests just how committed the studios were to forms of live performance at this time. The writer cannot believe a situation in which studio chain theaters do not have stage acts, even if they can imagine it not being a form of variety theater. At this time, the risk of joining the studio system seemed worth it. The industry enjoyed only benefits.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Year in Vaudeville, *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 17.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Bigelow, “Those M.C. Days,” *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 195.

<sup>3</sup> David Monod, *Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment, 1890–1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 223.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Allen, “The Movies in Vaudeville: Historical Context of the Movies as Popular Entertainment,” in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 80-2; Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film, 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 298-303; A. Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 200-5; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 16, 225.

<sup>5</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 17; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240-8, 274-80. Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., *Show Biz: From Vaude to Video* (New York: Doubleday, 1953), 268-71.

<sup>6</sup> Harold Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), 30-2; “Big Loew Campaign,” *Billboard*, November 30, 1929, 9; “Year in Pictures,” *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 7; Industry insiders often spelled deluxe: “de luxe.”

<sup>7</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 17; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240-8. Nicholas Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies: Popular Musicians and Mass Entertainment in American Culture, 1870-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 21-35. In this chapter, I adopt David Monod’s use of the word cartel as a reminder of the corporations’ infamous use of unscrupulous methods to maintain their monopolies.

<sup>8</sup> Monod suggests Fox had more trouble with the cartel’s monopolistic practices than Pantages or Loew’s, but does not explain why. One hypothesis is that they had a smaller chain of theaters (27) than Loew’s and Pantages, and thus could not exercise economies of scale to the same degree.

<sup>9</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 190-200; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240-8, 250-61; Monod claims that, by 1921, two thirds of all Loew’s theaters played only films. This claim is unsupported, however.

<sup>10</sup> Internal documents, like the managers reports, show that Keith-Albee actually carefully catered their bills to these patrons, despite blaming them for disrupting big-time’s goal of promoting vaudeville as a family and female friendly venue. Michael Slowik, “Documents of Performance: Keith-Albee Managers’ Reports,” *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 39, no. 2 (2012): 93–103; Michael Slowik, “Film Exhibition in Vaudeville: What We Learn from Keith-Albee Managers’ Reports,” *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 39, no. 2 (2012): 73–92; M. Alison Kibler, “The Keith/Albee Collection: The Vaudeville Industry, 1894-1935,” *Books at Iowa* 56, no. 1 (1992): 7–24; Kibler, *Rank Ladies*, 21-4.

<sup>11</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 194-5.

<sup>12</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 190-201; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240-8.

<sup>13</sup> Charles F. Pope, "Small Time Vaudeville Today," *Billboard*, December 14, 1912, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 195.

<sup>15</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 17-8, 196-7. During this time, vaudeville split into the big-time and small-time policies.

<sup>16</sup> It remains unclear if this experiment remained a two-a-day format or whether or it had more shows to more closely replicate the small-time format.

<sup>17</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 190-201; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240-57; Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Like the State-Lake, most Junior Orpheum theaters were named after their cross streets. Martin Beck, "Theater and Stars," *Los Angeles Evening Express*, April 9, 1920, 29.

<sup>19</sup> The Orpheum Circuit originally imagined its junior circuit as a training circuit for performers that would feed into the big-time. As such, salaries were generally lower than that on the big-time, with most program costing \$2,500 to 5,000 total. Technically, Orpheum had theaters between junior and big-time, called "intermediate class." Figuring out the distinction between this tier of theater requires more research. "Orpheum has Big Year Ahead," *Billboard*, August 7, 1926, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 190-201; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240-8.

<sup>21</sup> For example, during the 1920s the Majestic Theater (Dallas) plastered "big-time" on its marquee but showed five shows daily. Likewise, the B.F. Keith Orpheum Theatre (Brooklyn, New York) switched to a "continuous big-time policy." "Majestic Theater," Box 22, Hoblitzelle Interstate Theatre Circuit Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas; "Keith-Albee Materials," Box AT4, American Cinema Theater Collection, Harry Ransom Center.

<sup>22</sup> Federal Trade Commission, *Federal Trade Commission vs. Vaudeville Managers' Protective Association* No. 128, volumes 15-19 (New York: Galt & Williams). While the manager is anonymous in the record, he mentions in his testimony that he is the manager of the Maryland Theater in Baltimore, which is affiliated, but not owned by the Keith-Albee circuit.

<sup>23</sup> Federal Trade Commission, 2907.

<sup>24</sup> Federal Trade Commission, 2908.

<sup>25</sup> "Federal Trade Decision Week's Most Discussed Topic," *Variety*, April 9, 1920, 5, 21.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that, while many big-time theaters suffered losses during this time, Keith Albee's flagship did not. Green and Laurie, *Show Biz*, 271.

<sup>27</sup> Anthony Slide, *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012). Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 244-8; Green and Laurie, *Show Biz*, 269. The State-Lake policy had several meanings, though, it was most commonly a short hand for the small-time format using stars and films. In the Orpheum circuit, the widespread adoption of the junior policy involved an internal coup of board members in support of combination policies over an



old guard of big-time supporters. This mirrored the circumstances that would lead to Albee's downfall as leader of the Keith-Albee circuit, and its conglomeration into RKO.

<sup>28</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 213-7.

<sup>29</sup> Frank Rose, *The Agency: William Morris and the Hidden History of Show Business* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 14-30; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 242-4.

<sup>30</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 213-7; Phil Wagner, "'An America Not Quite Mechanized': Fanchon and Marco, Inc. Perform Modernity," *Film History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 251-67.

<sup>31</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 213-7. Green and Laurie Jr., *Show Biz*, 269-71, 373, 433-6.

<sup>32</sup> Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 254-5.

<sup>33</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 188.

<sup>34</sup> Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 188.

<sup>36</sup> Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 252-8; Ross Melnick, *American Showman: Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908-1935* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 118-39.

<sup>37</sup> In 1926, management of the Rivoli redesigned the theater in order to include a big enough stage for presentations. John Belton, "The Rivoli," in *70mm*, no. 59 (1999); Preston J. Kaufmann, *Encyclopedia of the American Theatre Organ* (Pasadena: Showcase Publications, 1995), 66-7, 392, 404.

<sup>38</sup> Sime Silverman, "Film Trading and Building: Picture Theatre Looked Set for 3 Divisions," *Variety*, December 30, 1925, 3, 192.

<sup>39</sup> Bigelow, "Those M.C. Days," 195; Joe Laurie, Jr., "At the Wake," *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 192; "Year in Vaudeville," *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 17; "Year in Vaudeville," *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Sime Silverman, "Big Time," *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 16.

<sup>41</sup> William Paul, *When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 84-5, 111-7, 216-8; Ross Melnick, *American Showman: Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908-1935* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 113-39; Ross Melnick and Andreas Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theaters* (St. Paul (MN): MBI, 2004), 25-39; Henry B. Aldridge, "The Role of the Stage Show in Film Exhibition: The Case of Detroit's Capitol Theatre," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 66-71; Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace* (New York: Bramhall House, 1961), 211; Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 40-4, 51, 217; Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 48-54.

<sup>42</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 190-1; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240-8, 252-3. *Vaudeville Wars* cites the number of theaters using big-time vaudeville in 1919 to be as few as fifty. This contradiction does not change the point that the format was undeniably declining.

<sup>43</sup> “Year in Small Time,” *Variety*, June 2, 1926, 23.

<sup>44</sup> “Year in Vaudeville,” 21.

<sup>45</sup> “Year in Vaudeville,” 21.

<sup>46</sup> “Year in Small Time,” *Variety*, June 2, 1926, 23; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 189; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240-8. The term “vaudeville” also continued to be common after 1927, but could have varying meanings. Sometimes it was used interchangeably with vaudefilm, while at others it still referred to previous iterations of the big-time format in decline.

<sup>47</sup> Though Monod uses trade press lists and theater directors to demonstrate the decline of vaudeville, he also admits that, “how many theaters in these cities offered a pop mix of movies and variety remains unclear.” Monod, *Vaudeville*, 190.

<sup>48</sup> Examples include *The Julius Cahn-Gus Hill Theatrical Guide and Moving Picture Directory for 1897-98, 1900-01, 1905-06, 1912-13, 1919-20*; Rowland Haynes, *Recreation Survey: Detroit, Michigan* (Detroit: Detroit Board of Commerce, 1913), 47; Francis North, *Indianapolis Recreation Survey* (Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, 1914), 44.

<sup>49</sup> This can be harder to determine when taking into account that some theaters only booked live acts on the weekends, for example.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Abel, *Motor City Movie Culture, 1916-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 84-135.

<sup>51</sup> Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 13-20.

<sup>52</sup> Not all variety palaces can be said to be at the same level of spendthrift. Some used faux materials or recycled designs originally designed for other theaters. Douglas Gomery, “Towards a History of Film Exhibition: The Case of the Picture Palace,” in *Film: Historical-Theoretical Speculations* (Pleasantville (NY): Redgrave Publishing Company, 1977), 17–24; Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made American: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), 149-52; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 47-9; Vincent Astor, “Recycled Rapp and Rapp,” *Marquee* 51, no. 1 (2019): 10-9.

<sup>53</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 47-9; Melnick and Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures*, 40-7, 56-75. For detailed examinations of grandeur in specific theaters see: “Michigan Theatre,” *Marquee*, no. 22 (1995); Irvin R. Glazer, *The Earle Theatre* (Chicago, Theatre Historical Society, 1986), 1-40; “The Uptown Theatre, Chicago,” *Marquee* 49, no. 3 (2017): 7-31; “Toledo Paramount,” *Marquee*, no 19 (1992).

<sup>54</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 12. Some vaudeville scholars, including Monod, use this average to argue that vaudeville theaters were “large,” presumably when comparing their capacities to the average movie or legitimate theater. But this relative term is hard to apply when comparing it to the size of movie palaces, or even the size of the palaces that big-time circuits began built during the late 1910s and 1920s.

<sup>55</sup> “How he Runs 127 Theatres: Loew Discusses Movie Methods, Developed Since he Started Work at the Age of Six,” *New York Times*, September 4, 1921, 60.

<sup>56</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 192-4. Loew’s first theater, which he renamed the Royal (indicating its uplift aspirations), was formerly operated by theatrical entrepreneur Oscar Hammerstein (father to the composer), and expanded it to accommodate 2,000 seats. In 1913, Loew also leased the Metropolitan Opera House in Philadelphia, another Hammerstein theater, this one grander and more lavish than the first.

<sup>57</sup> Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 244-8.

<sup>58</sup> Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 192-5. Some scholarship provides contradicting quantities of theaters controlled by Loew’s. Wertheim, for example cites on 47 in 1921. The State Theater was reportedly the first one-million dollar theater on Broadway (a cost of over \$15 million today in 2021). Lamb designed the State in the “Adams” style, a neoclassical, international style of design used for upper-middle class residences and buildings.

<sup>59</sup> During 1919, construction began on three other 2,000 to 4,000 owned by big-time circuits, but it is unclear which one.

<sup>60</sup> Keith-Albee tore down and reconstructed its theater in Cincinnati, and began plans for theaters in Atlanta, Dayton, Columbus, Indianapolis, Richmond, Syracuse, Richmond, and three 3,000 seat theaters in Cleveland. More research is needed to determine which of these theaters opened with small-time policies or big-time. When Keith-Albee’s Palace Theater in Cleveland opened in 1922, for example, it did not begin with a State-Lake policy, which it only adopted later.

<sup>61</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 190-201; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 240-8. The State-Lake was designed in the French Renaissance style by architect Gustave Alvert Lansburgh. Several of these new theaters would also be Lansburgh’s design.

<sup>62</sup> Melnick and Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures*, 40. Before 1920, the vertical integration of film production, distribution, and exhibition was not a new phenomenon in either the global or domestic motion picture industries. In France, Gaumont and Pathé began the practice in the 1900s. In the United States, companies such as Vitagraph, Famous Players, Universal, and the Triangle Film Corporation acquired or leased individual theaters between 1914 and 1916 to screen their films exclusively. The largest, and often forgotten example, of American vertical integration before the late 1910s was Fox, which started Fox Film Corporation in 1915 to supply its circuit of around twenty theaters.

<sup>63</sup> Kia Afra, *The Hollywood Trust: Trade Associations and the Rise of the Studio System* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 205; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 34-44. Abel, *Motor City Movies*, 76-83. Some other regional chains which also began during this period and continued to build after the early 1920s include the Kunsky and the Butterfield circuits.

<sup>64</sup> Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*, 203-34; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 34-44; Melnick and Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures*, 35-47. While this made First National the first vertically integrated corporation with sizable theater holdings (and many first run theaters), its corporate hierarchy did not resemble what would come to define the other studios. The corporation had no single

figurehead with widespread authority, and each theater chain maintained relative autonomy. As a result, control of the studio was decentralized among the chain leaders.

<sup>65</sup> Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*, 203-34; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 34-40, 59-66; Melnick and Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures*, 40-7, 56-75. In 1920 alone, it purchased at least a controlling interest in Lynch Enterprises in the South, Stanley Company in Pennsylvania, New England Theaters in the Northeast, and the Saenger Amusement in New Orleans.

<sup>66</sup> One unsourced, though frequently cited, statistic online claims that independent owners, regional chains, vaudeville chains constructed 4,000 movie palaces from 1916 to 1920.

<sup>67</sup> Melnick and Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures*, 46.

<sup>68</sup> "Stock Fluctuations in 1925," *Film Daily*, January 4, 1926, 4; "Says 7 Major Units Buy Interest in 669 Theaters since September '24," *Film Daily*, January 8, 1926, 1.

<sup>69</sup> "Loew's Inc.," *Film Daily Year Book 1927* (New York: Film Daily, 1927), 660; Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*, 205.

<sup>70</sup> For breakdown of the companies' profits, see Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*, 204. It is important that note that the logic also dictated that while producer-distributors were to own these circuits, they had to retain a level of autonomy from the parent. This tactic, premised on maintained somewhat separate through cooperative companies, prevented (for a time) accusations of monopolistic action, and mitigated some financial risk by spreading costs and assets across companies.

<sup>71</sup> "Says 7 Major Units Buy Interest in 669 Theaters since September '24," *Film Daily*, 1; Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*, 205; These stocks and capital were underwritten by Lehman Bros., Merrill Lynch & Co., S.W. Strauss & Co, and many other investment firms.

<sup>72</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 199-201; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 241. Some reports price the Palace's construction at five million and others at two million. Two million seems more in line with the cost of similar sized variety palaces.

<sup>73</sup> In 1919 Orpheum became a publicly traded company to raise ten million dollars to build new theaters. That same year, Loew's offered a twenty million dollar stock offering managed by J. P. Morgan to acquire and build theaters. These initial stock offerings caused problems during the brief depression of 1920-21, but they recouped using a variety of techniques. For example, Orpheum adapted most of its big-time, straight-vaudeville theaters to combination policies and cut costs by reducing the salaries of live acts.

<sup>74</sup> Monod, *Vaudeville*, 4, 199-201; Afra, *Hollywood Trust*, 205, 211-2. At this time, Keith-Albee secured six million dollars in bonds from Dillon, Read, & Co., Lehman Bros., and Bankers Trust Co.

<sup>75</sup> Another example is Balaban and Katz, which relied heavily on live performance for that reason.

<sup>76</sup> Of course, stars even more regularly appeared in so called movie palaces which also regularly showcased their films.

<sup>77</sup> Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 258-61; Afra, *Hollywood Trust*, 220-1.

<sup>78</sup> “Mergers,” *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 15; Kim R. Holston, *Movie Roadshows: A History and Filmography of Reserved-Seat Limited Showings, 1911-1973* (London: McFarland, 2012), 121; David Balaban, *The Chicago Movie Palaces of Balaban and Katz* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 72; James E. Combs, *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship* (London: Routledge, 2013), 197; Tino Balio, *The American Film Industry* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 347; Afra, *Hollywood Trust*, 206, 216. No exact definition of overseating was proposed at the time, but they were later. During the 1950s, as television and white flight changed leisure patterns particularly in American cities, long time theater executive Frank H. Ricketson proposed the rule of thumb of 1,000 seats per 10,000 citizens. So a city of 500,000 people should have theaters with a total seating capacity of 50,000.

<sup>79</sup> On the other hand, some (presumably those in the studios) argued that its mergers and affiliations helped deter overseating as they could stop or at least limit competitive building in a particular area, as in the case of Balaban and Katz’s acquisition of its Chicago competitor Lubliner and Trinz in 1925, right before Paramount acquired the entire B&K circuit. But there is no evidence that this deterred other building or acquisition in the 1920s, especially because city centers were one of the few places studios did compete with each other to varying degrees. For more on how the MPPDA pacified these concerns in the 1920s, see Richard Maltby, “The Standard Exhibition Contract and the Unwritten History of the Classical Hollywood Cinema,” *Film History* 25, no. 1/2 (2013): 138–53.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in *The Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 802.

<sup>81</sup> However, the Roxy was the only theater built in the circuit, as Fox squashed plans for the circuit when it acquired control of Roxy Theaters

<sup>82</sup> Universal used financing from Dillon, Read, & Company. Universal had previously had an affiliation with these circuits before the purchase.

<sup>83</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 59-63; Melnick and Fuches, *Cinema Treasures*, 40-7, 56-75; Afra, *Hollywood Trust*, 203-34; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 263-5; Monod, *Vaudeville*, 199-201.

<sup>84</sup> Silverman, “Film Trading and Building,” 192.

<sup>85</sup> Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 26; Mae D. Huettig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry: A Study of Industrial Organization* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 33-7, 77-83.

<sup>86</sup> KAO officially incorporated on January 28, 1928, they merged under one stock primarily underwritten by Lehman Brothers.

<sup>87</sup> Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 252-3, 262-4; Richard B Jewell, *RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan Is Born* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 8-19.

<sup>88</sup> Some evidence even suggests that Orpheum had sought mergers with other vertically integrated studios before settling with its fellow member from the vaudeville cartel. The B.F. Keith Corporation did not constitute the entirety of the Keith-Albee circuit. It was a subsidiary of the larger organization that controlled 30 of its theaters.

<sup>89</sup> In other words, the merger in no way signaled the end of live performance. In using this story as evidence of vaudeville's death narrative, scholars also point to the circuits' declining net income as an indication of the corporations' (and vaudeville's) demise. The B. F. Keith Corporation (a subsidiary of the Keith-Albee circuit) reported a \$761,832 net income in the first half of 1927, compared to \$853,110 during the same time in 1926. This \$90,000 difference (\$1.4 million dollars in 2021) was by no means inconsequential. However, the circuit as a whole still earned a profit even at this lower revenue. Orpheum's drop in revenue was more substantial, declining from \$2.1 to \$1.1 million from 1925 to 1927, though it also continued to earn profits. Together the circuits earned an impressive \$3.8 million in 1926, which was just more than half of Loew's and Paramount's profits for the year. These numbers instead indicate that the circuit was not expanding as fast as its competitors (who had better films too) and consequently found their markets under pressure. After all, the Keith-Albee and Orpheum merger resulted in a circuit of just over two hundred theaters (with others affiliated and not owned by the circuit). This paled in comparison to the circuits of roughly 700 or more theaters that Paramount, Fox, and Warner Bros. would soon achieve. While the new KAO circuit's theater assets resembled Loew's in quantity, the films they received from PDC and Pathé hardly resembled MGM's. This is usually the explanation for Loew's high profits despite its small theater holdings.

<sup>90</sup> "Keith-Albee Circuit," *Film Daily Year Book 1927* (New York: Film Daily, 1927): 658; "Orpheum Circuit," *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 664.

<sup>91</sup> "Keith-Albee Circuit," *Film Daily Year Book 1928* (New York: Film Daily, 1928): 766-7. In addition to an attempted acquisition of the humble Poli Circuit, KAO tried several such large scale mergers in 1927 that could have made them larger than Fox and Warner Bros combined. On December 9, KAO sought a deal to purchase West Coast Theaters, which Fox eventually bought for more money. A week later, negotiations to purchase the more than two hundred Stanley Theaters fell through, which Warner Bros. would purchase in less than a year.

<sup>92</sup> "Keith-Albee Circuit," *Film Daily Year Book 1928* (New York: Film Daily, 1928): 693-701.

<sup>93</sup> Jewel, *RKO*, 23.

<sup>94</sup> The only change that could be claimed as a noticeable, negative change for the industry is that, according to historian Arthur Wertheim, RKO's first president Joseph P. Kennedy eliminated KAO's live performance production office. However, this change was either temporary or never happened. As I chart in the next chapter, RKO did not eliminate this department until around 1932 or 1933. Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 267-70.

<sup>95</sup> Hiram S. Brown, "The Theatre as a Business," *Variety*, January 8, 1930, 4. For more on Brown's positive attitude toward vaudeville see, "Brown is Determined Vaudeville Shall Stay," *Variety*, November 23, 1929, 11; "Brown's Definite Plan of Intact K-A-O Shows," *Billboard*, January 19, 1929, 10.

<sup>96</sup> This change is sometimes misunderstood as part of the decline of live performance at RKO and a sign the corporation wished to eliminate the entertainment. Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 267-70.

<sup>97</sup> “RKO Bookers-Agents Out,” *Variety*, November 20, 1929, 43; “Second Godfrey Cleanup Ousts 13 RKO Agents,” March 30, 1929, 35.

<sup>98</sup> “Strong Report Keith’s Intends to Materially Cut Down on Agents,” *Variety*, January 16, 1929, 31. Agents in favor of these cuts believed RKO could operate its vaudeville booking office with fifteen agents and their assistants, but RKO only initially reduced the department from fifty-three agents to twenty-five.

<sup>99</sup> The formation of RKO removed prominent members of vaudeville’s old guard from power, including longtime leader Edward Albee. Other leaders of vaudeville, including Proctor and Loew, died during the late 1920s. The loss of power and/or death of these figures have marked the climax, or even the conclusion, of some vaudeville histories, suggesting that the eventual decline of live performance was the result of a lack of support at the top. Such a claim ignores the fact that these leaders had themselves initiated or at least accepted a vertical integration strategy, and more importantly that the new organizations were *not* antagonistic, but embraced live performance. Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 274-9.

<sup>100</sup> “‘Vaudeville News’ Suspended after 10 Years – Useless Expense to N.V.A.” *Variety*, June 19, 1929, 45; Neal Gabler, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 38-9. Green and Laurie, Jr., *Show Biz*, 375; Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 267-8.

<sup>101</sup> Stanley W. Prenosil, “Hiram S. Brown,” *Variety*, January 8, 1930, 6; Joseph Plunkett, “Why RKO Celebrates,” *Variety*, January 8, 1930, 6.

<sup>102</sup> *Variety* estimated that this apex included around 2,000 urban theaters using vaudefilm. Bigelow, “Those M.C. Days,” 195.

<sup>103</sup> Monod calls this hybrid format “pop vaudeville” throughout his book.

<sup>104</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 39.

<sup>105</sup> “RKO Will Not Book Part of Warner Houses—Leaving Keith’s Next Week,” *Variety*, January 1, 1930, 35; “RKO-Warner Relations Will be Dropped Soon,” *Billboard*, January 11, 1930, 10.

<sup>106</sup> Wagner, “‘An America Not Quite Mechanized,’” 251–67; Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, 299-301. The only exception was Loew’s, who did not acquire or conglomerate any circuits with centralized live performance divisions. But it is an irrelevant exception given Loew’s was already one of the most established vaudeville circuits.

<sup>107</sup> Silverman, “Film Trading and Building,” 3.

<sup>108</sup> “Capitol Theater Opens to Throng,” *New York Times*, October 25, 1919, 14.

<sup>109</sup> Melnick, *American Showman*, 184-90; Melnick and Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures*, 40-7.

<sup>110</sup> “The Year in Headlines,” *Wid’s Year Book 1920* (New York: Wid’s Films and Film Folk Inc., 1920), 93.

<sup>111</sup> “Plan Prologue Circuit,” Grauman May Stage Acts for Famous Players Films,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 1920, 119.

<sup>112</sup> Abel, *Motor City Movie Culture*, 84-135.

<sup>113</sup> “Cinema Club Report,” *Film Year Book 1922-1923* (New York: Wid’s Films and Film Folk, Inc., 1923), 383.

<sup>114</sup> “Exhibitors to Exchange Ideas,” *Film Year Book 1925* (New York: *The Film Daily*, 1925), 332.

<sup>115</sup> “Exhibitors to Exchange Ideas,” 332.

<sup>116</sup> Samuel Rothafel, “Better Pictures Coming,” *Film Year Book 1925*, 371.

<sup>117</sup> Silverman, “Film Trading and Building,” 192. The writer does mention the feature film as a program in these theaters, but even the syntax of the sentence suggests its secondary status on the bill. “Names or Presentations are the two main subjects for picture house entertainment (plus the feature film).” The article uses Balaban and Katz Theaters in Chicago as examples of both approaches.

<sup>118</sup> Silverman, “Film Trading and Building,” 192.

<sup>119</sup> “A Year in Vaudeville,” 17.

<sup>120</sup> “A Year in Vaudeville,” 17. A 1929 article in *Billboard* suggests that the dressing rooms and other conditions and amenities for actors were nicer in movie palaces than in many legitimate theaters. The author also notes that movie theater also effected their routes, and the company would try to avoid competition, even by taking a very inefficient route. “Conditions on the Road,” *Billboard*, February 23, 1929, 3, 9.

<sup>121</sup> “Endless Picture Circuit Time; Vaudevillians Turn to Films,” *Variety*, December 30, 1925, 3, 202.

<sup>122</sup> Having Paramount’s lead account pen the article was also a strategic move to make the cost intensive endeavors appear economically justified to investors.

<sup>123</sup> Richard Saunders, “The Financial Progress of the M.P. Industry in 1925,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1925*, 17.

<sup>124</sup> “Paramount Theaters Corp.,” *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 665; “Endless Picture Circuit Time,” 202; *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 804.

<sup>125</sup> 1925 in Headlines,” *Film Daily Year Book*, 465.

<sup>126</sup> “Endless Picture Circuit Time; Vaudevillians Turn to Films,” 3, 202.

<sup>127</sup> E. E. Shauer, “The March of Events Abroad,” *Film Daily Year Book 1926*, 825. For more on Hollywood’s international variety palaces see, Ross Melnick, *Hollywood’s Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power Around the World* (Columbia University Press, 2022).

<sup>128</sup> “Inside Stuff on Vaudeville,” *Variety*, December 30, 1925, 32; “Whiteman with Publix for All Season,” *Variety*, July 28, 1926, 4.

<sup>129</sup> “Inside Stuff on Vaudeville,” *Variety*, December 30, 1925, 32. This quote resembled another one from *Variety* about the studio’s mammoth investment in theater circuits. “Nothing is too big for the picture business to go after in the theatrical line; nothing is too big for it to take in, whether a circuit of picture theaters, a circuit of legitimate theatres, or a circuit of vaudeville theatres.” *Film Trading and Building*,” 192.



- <sup>130</sup> “Year in Small Time,” *Variety*, June 2, 1926, 23; Year in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 21; “Picture House Stage Bookings,” *Variety*, November 30, 1927, 45.
- <sup>131</sup> “Year in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 17.
- <sup>132</sup> Fox, Balaban and Katz, and the Stanley Theater circuit published a very similar uplift manifesto to Paramount’s in the same issue of *Film Daily*.
- <sup>133</sup> Samuel Rothafel, “Roxy’s Ideas,” *Film Daily Year Book 1926*, 738.
- <sup>134</sup> Jack Alicoate, “Past and Future,” *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, C.
- <sup>135</sup> E. F. Albee, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 412; Robert Lieber, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 411.
- <sup>136</sup> E. F. Albee, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 412.
- <sup>137</sup> Louis B. Mayer, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 415; Elmer Pearson, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 413.
- <sup>138</sup> Arthur Rousseau, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 921.
- <sup>139</sup> “1925 Headlines,” *Film Daily Year Book 1926*, 465; Winfield R. Sheehan, “Fox Prepared,” *Film Daily Year Book 1926*, 738. As mentioned in the previous chapter, generally theaters planned their stage shows three weeks ahead of schedule, so Fox’s extra planning indicate a significant departure for the norm.
- <sup>140</sup> “1927 in Headlines,” *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 811.
- <sup>141</sup> “Year in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 21; Marcus Loew, “The Motion Picture and Vaudeville,” in Joseph P. Kennedy, ed., *The Story of the Films* (Chicago: A.W. Shaw, 1927), 285-300.
- <sup>142</sup> “Louis Sidney Promoted,” *Billboard*, June 26, 1926, 18.
- <sup>143</sup> “Year in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 21.
- <sup>144</sup> “Presentation Bookers,” *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 508.
- <sup>145</sup> “Present-O-Grams,” *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 509. The department also penned two special articles on presentation building for another new series “Know Your Own Industry”, one aimed at creating them for a range of localities, and the other aimed helping “small town houses meeting the problem presented by the spread of presentations. These articles appeared in the *Film Daily* on June 20 and December 5, 1926.
- <sup>146</sup> For examples see, Arthur W. Eddy, “Developments in Presentations,” *The Film Daily*, August 1, 1926, 9; Charles F. Hynes, “Presentations,” *The Film Daily*, September 18, 1927, 12. By September 1927, Charles F. Hynes took over as editor, followed by Jack Harrower in 1928.
- <sup>147</sup> “1927 in Headlines,” *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 811.
- <sup>148</sup> “1927 in Headlines,” *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 812; “United Artists Corp.,” *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 905.
- <sup>149</sup> “Year in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 21.
- <sup>150</sup> “Year in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 21.
- <sup>151</sup> “Year in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 17.

<sup>152</sup> Dominant narratives of vaudeville's death utilize this early joblessness as evidence of a very premature decline. Some scholars cite this as evidence that the mid-1920s marks the beginning of the end for live performance, misinterpreting unemployment as a reflection on the number of venues utilizing combination policies and, more broadly, as a barometer on the health of the industry.

<sup>153</sup> This could result in a negative total overall, as it would require twice as many venues to compensate for the reduction of acts. This explanation is largely hypothetical, however, and was never a widely cited explanation.

<sup>154</sup> Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars*, 252-4.

<sup>155</sup> "Year in Vaudeville," *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 17; "Inside Stuff of Vaudeville," *Variety*, April 14, 1926, 8; J.J. Murdock, "Actors' Equity Survey of Vaudeville Conditions," *Billboard*, February 16, 1924, 13, 18.

<sup>156</sup> "Year in Small Time," *Variety*, June 2, 1926, 23; Lichter's Record Makers at Strand Theater, Milwaukee," *Variety*, January 16, 1926, 12; Raboid Still Breaking Records," *Billboard*, July 23, 1927, 10; Nick Lucas Breaking Interstate Records," *Billboard*, Jul 23, 1927, 12.

<sup>157</sup> "Duncan Girls' National Record in 2,200-Seat L.A. House \$44,000," *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 11. Reviews indicate that the duo did not perform in blackface this week.

<sup>158</sup> *Variety* did not begin its "Film House Reviews" section until April 28, 1926, suggesting the prevalence of variety palaces using live performance had grown so large it necessitated its own section. This separation last until 1933 when *Variety* united them until the heading "House Reviews."

<sup>159</sup> "Year in Vaudeville," *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 21.

<sup>160</sup> "Presentations—Bills," *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 26-7, 38.

<sup>161</sup> This conclusion utilizes the Project Arclight system in the Media History Digital Library, which tracks the appearances of words or terms across the Library's nearly two million pages of material. For more on this project see, Charles R. Acland and Eric Hoyt, *The Arclight Guidebook to Media History and the Digital Humanities* (Sussex: Reframe Books, 2016).

<sup>162</sup> "Year in Vaudeville," *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 17.

<sup>163</sup> William Morris, Sr., "The Development of Presentations," *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 509.

<sup>164</sup> Morris, Sr., "The Development of Presentations," 509.

<sup>165</sup> This point is also evidenced by production papers of the Capitol Theater housed at the Theater Historical Society. "Capitol Stage Shows," Boxes 084-270 thru 084-284, Stage Show Collection, Theater Historical Society, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

<sup>166</sup> Morris, Sr., "The Development of Presentations," 509.

<sup>167</sup> Phil Wagner makes this same argument, but only uses a single company, F&M, as evidence. My evidence expands the argument nation and industry-wide. Wagner, "An America Not Quite Mechanized," 251-2.

<sup>168</sup> “The ‘Movie’ Theater Up-To-Date, *Scientific American*, December 1927, 516. For similar sentiments see, Llyod Lewis, “The De Luxe Picture Palace,” *The New Republic*, March 27, 1929, 176; George Mitchell, “Magic of the Picture Palaces,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1927, X7.

<sup>169</sup> “Year in Pictures,” *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 7. The rest of the quote reads: “[but it] has still remained the picture otherwise. It’s the main drawing card for thousands of theaters, for millions of people, and probably always will be. Before the picture came into its earned prominence, the stage presentation under other disguises, such as vaudeville, revue, burlesque and tabloid, did not draw comparatively. Therefore, it must have been and must be the picture still [*sic*].” The article is part of a growing discourse (discussed later in the chapter) that attempted to dismiss the rise of stage entertainment as a historical anomaly and fad, and posit cinema’s ascendancy in the industry of multimedia conglomerates. The author specifically claims that part of rise of stage entertainment is the result overproduction of mediocre feature films.

<sup>170</sup> “Variety’s Box-Office Figures, [reprinted in] *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 833-56. Earlier iterations of this list (in 1926 and 1927 for example) are inconsistent about listing whether or not a theater utilized live performance, even if other sources confirm it did. The change to include it in the data against suggests the growing importance of live performance in the industry.

<sup>171</sup> *The Jazz Singer* never earned as much in a single week as *Don Juan* during their respective premieres, according to the *Variety* database. “Variety’s Box-Office Figures, [reprinted in] *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 862; “Variety’s Box-Office Figures, [reprinted in] *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 849.

<sup>172</sup> Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema’s Transition to Sound, 1926-1931* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 108-14.

<sup>173</sup> “66 Houses Gross \$53,096, 369,” *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 7.

<sup>174</sup> Universal Theaters also worked with Western Vaudeville office (largely an arm of the Orpheum circuit) and the Bert Levy agency.

<sup>175</sup> “Universal Creates Agency to Book Vaude-Film Houses,” *Billboard*, December 24, 1927, 6.

<sup>176</sup> “Universal Creates Agency to Book Vaude-Film Houses,” 6.

<sup>177</sup> “Technical Progress in 1927: Report of the Fall, 1927, Convention of the Society of M.P. Engineers,” *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 860; J. H. Kurlander, *Transactions S.M.P.E.*, no. 30, 188-207.

<sup>178</sup> Douglas Gomery, *The Coming of Sound* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1, 87; Paul Young, “Synchronized Sound Comes to the Cinema,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). Douglas Gomery dates, for example, the sound era beginning in 1928

<sup>179</sup> “Chain Operators—How Many?,” *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 11. The “big four” was an industry phrase which mirrored the more well-known “big five” Hollywood studios.

<sup>180</sup> Edba, “Independent Vaudeville,” *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 18. The article mentions how theaters that used presentations learned how to manage them from flagship theaters in New York City.

- <sup>181</sup> “Trend of Stage Shows,” *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 29. This data was reprinted from the *Exhibitors Herald*. I have yet to find the original article.
- <sup>182</sup> “Booking Agencies, ‘Vaude’ & Presentations,” *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 749-52.
- <sup>183</sup> “Warner-Stanley Booking Agency Rivaling Keith’s; Over 20 Houses to Start,” *Variety*, December 12, 1928, 35.
- <sup>184</sup> “RKO Will Not Book Part of Warner Houses—Leaving Keith’s Next Week,” *Variety*, January 1, 1930, 35; “RKO-Warner Relations Will be Dropped Soon,” *Billboard*, January 11, 1930, 10.
- <sup>185</sup> “F.&M. ‘Idea’ Coast Unit Coming East for General Bookings Anywhere,” December 12, 1928, 34; Wagner, “An America Not Quite Mechanized,” 255-7. The article is not clear of the exact location of the theaters, just that they were “East” of the Rocky Mountains. This same article describes more of what made them desirable to studios (flat fees)
- <sup>186</sup> “Loew Bookings Still Lethargic; No Indication Given of Trend,” *Billboard*, December 29, 1928, 12. This anxiety was particularly pronounced in the South.
- <sup>187</sup> “Loew Bookings Still Lethargic; No Indication Given of Trend,” 12.
- <sup>188</sup> “Loew Bookings Still Lethargic; No Indication Given of Trend,” 12.
- <sup>189</sup> “Acts Holding Own in Pantages Houses,” *Billboard*, December 29, 1928, 11.
- <sup>190</sup> “Vaude. Chances Good, Walker,” *Billboard*, December 29, 1929, 12.
- <sup>191</sup> “Revival of Vaude. Now Depends on Selling Methods of Bookers,” *Billboard*, December 29, 1928, 10.
- <sup>192</sup> Paul Young, “Synchronized Sound Comes to the Cinema,” 2-3.
- <sup>193</sup> “Talkies Less Harmful to Vaude Than Thought Is Showman’s View,” *Billboard*, December 8, 1928, 14.
- <sup>194</sup> “Chain Operators—How Many?,” *Variety*, December 31, 1930, 11. A chain operator was the head executive in charge of exhibition of large theater chains like the ones that the studios continued to build
- <sup>195</sup> “Chain Operators—How Many?,” *Variety*, December 31, 1930, 11.
- <sup>196</sup> For an example see, “Presentation—Bills,” *Variety*, December 12, 1928, 42-3.
- <sup>197</sup> Charles F. Hynes, “The Onrush of Sound,” *Film Daily Year Book 1929* (New York: The Film Daily, 1929) 484-503. The article also mentions the overbuilding problem, and blame it for lack of interest in sound
- <sup>198</sup> Arthur W. Eddy, “A New Era Dawns,” *The Film Daily*, May 27, 1928, 1, 4.
- <sup>199</sup> “Bookers, Vaudeville and Presentations,” *Film Daily Year Book 1929*, 568.
- <sup>200</sup> “Technical Progress: Spring, 1928, Report Society of M.P. Engineers,” *Film Daily Year Book 1929*, 984; W. Johnson, *Transactions S.M.P.E.*, no. 25, 1926, 44.
- <sup>201</sup> Bigelow, “Those M.C. Days,” 195.
- <sup>202</sup> “Year in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 21.

## Chapter 3

### **Showmanship vs. the Straight Picture Economy: The Imperfect Beginning of Vertical Integration and the Mass Retail System (1925 to 1929)**

“Yet even in the very early period of motion picture exhibition [...] some enterprising exhibitors put an added attraction on the program, such as a singer, a dancing team, or a quartette. The ‘theaters’ were converted stores with a small platform as a stage. As exhibitors found this attraction idea profitable, and as competition increased, two and sometimes three of such acts were added to the program. The form of entertainment finally developed into the picture-vaudeville policy as show to-day, in which the program of five or six acts of variety is shown with a feature motion picture. Although the theaters themselves improved, the same principle of the early days exists—a ‘bargain’ show for the admission price[...] [After] the Rothafel kind of screen presentation resulted, and became the forerunner of the fine motion picture theaters that were subsequently built through the country [...] the music improved, fine organs were added, more elaborate stages were designed and the theater in itself was improved [...] All of this brought about a type of entertainment which blended with motion pictures, and yet because of color, offered a contrast to the screen itself. The result was a program that offered variety.”<sup>1</sup>

- *Harold Franklin, Motion Theater Picture Management, 1927.*

The rising prevalence of live performance during the development of the vertically integrated studio system cannot be explained solely by the logic of Hollywood’s corporate capitalism. Scholarship shows how the studios adopted a mass retail system during the 1920s. Pushed to follow the lead of American retail big business (national department stores, grocery chains, drug stores, gasoline stations) by Wall Street bankers and the MPPDA (the Hollywood studios’ liaison with Wall Street), the studios gradually implemented strategies in line with the methods of “scientific” management for chain stores across production, distribution, and

exhibition. These included centralized accounting, economies of scale, product standardization, strict divisions of labor with centralized decision-making, and a hierarchy of managers who toed party lines, among others.<sup>2</sup>

For the exhibition sector, Wall Street and the MPPDA deemed no element more important than vertical integration. According to corporate, monopolistic logic, amassing sizable theater chains guaranteed outlets for cinematic productions which specialized in exhibition and marketing, allowing for coordinated runs with national and regional advertising. Theoretically these factors would, and largely did, lead to what the *Wall Street Journal* in 1926 called “stabilization”: bringing consistent revenue, which made stable and predictable production and profits.<sup>3</sup> With the help and support of banks like Lehman Bros. and Merrill Lynch, Paramount, Loew’s, and First National accounted for the bulk of theater acquisitions in the early 1920s. By 1925, however, vertical integration had become an expectation by the MPPDA in order for members to secure Wall Street investments. By 1926, the industry’s producer-distributors (Loew’s, Paramount, First National, Warner Bros. Universal, Fox, Film Booking Office, Producers’ Distribution Company, Columbia, and United Artists) consisted of exclusively vertically integrated companies of varying sizes.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, (as I established in chapter 2) nearly all of these companies and their affiliated theater chains also invested in and utilized vaudeville, presentations, and/or prologues to varying degrees. In fact, to some experts in the field the ideal “theater operator,” a common name for the centralized decision maker over “250, 400, or 750” theaters, required expert knowledge of films *and* stage entertainment.<sup>5</sup> Despite its essential place within the industry in the mid-to-late 1920s, live performance complicated and sometimes contradicted Hollywood and Wall Street’s best laid plans. While plenty of evidence indicates that exhibitors found

presentations and vaudeville profitable, it nevertheless inhibited the full potential of vertical integration by lessening the flow of revenue back through production and distribution of films--Hollywood's so-called principal product. As investment by exhibitors and studio theater chains in variety palaces *and* live performance continued to increase during the late 1920s, a growing number of studio executives--largely those in control of film production--made this point while arguing for the adoption of a "straight picture economy" that would standardize the industry around a single product: celluloid. During the late 1920s, though, this discourse resonated only from a minority of voices, however influential, over film production.

While the economic prosperity of the late 1920s insulated stage programming and its effects on vertical integration (i.e., there was plenty of money to go around), this simple economic explanation of live performance's apex ignores the ability of exhibitors to dictate programming. I argue here that the unusual (in the logic of vertical integration) prevalence of live performance in first run exhibition at this time is largely explained by the corporate culture of exhibition circuits and venues, which continued to value what I call "showmanship," which stemmed from theatrical precedents including the circus and vaudeville. I intentionally repurpose this term from the gendered discourse of the period. A showman, by the definition of the studio system and vaudeville corporations, exhibited stereotypically masculine characteristics. As such, it reflected and reenforced the growing gendered divisions of labor in Hollywood's (as well as vaudeville's before it) corporate reform that increasingly separated women from creative positions in production and exhibition.<sup>6</sup>

I argue that "motion picture" theaters up to 1928 had yet to perfectly internalize and codify the comparatively top-down hierarchy and privileging of film production eventually characteristic of Hollywood's vertical integration. When Hollywood acquired a massive number

of theaters, they also acquired showmanship and live performance circuits. These circuits and their managers maintained showmanship which privileged prestige, providing the best show possible (without privileging a particular medium), and the theater's individual revenue over the collective revenue of its parent company and/or its production arm. In turn, exhibitors' reliance on live performance shows, I contend, showcase the immaturity of vertical integration at this time. Vertical integration could not be achieved solely through the accumulation of exhibition venues, but also required the reform of exhibitors' corporate culture and their values for, and beliefs about, proper entertainment. Put another way, research has focused too much on the accumulation and integration of theatrical circuits and assumed that corporate reform quickly spread down through the managerial system. This did not happen overnight or even by the end of the decade. As discussed in the next chapter, these changes extended into the early and mid-1930s, through much financial turmoil, active campaigning, and eventually through codification and training.

During the 1920s, in contrast, motion picture exhibition had just begun to undergo a social reform typical in other forms of corporate reconstruction.<sup>7</sup> To succeed, this reform needed to dispel longstanding ideas and practices within the industry. Exhibitors and their executives did not see themselves as bookkeepers overseeing comparatively passive outlets for products (which may work better for tangible goods) as the mass retail system dictated, but as proactive and inspired curators of entertainment.<sup>8</sup> As such my focus in this section is not on the circuits' material assets, but on the values, theories, and practices embodied in trade discourse and training manuals that managers and theater circuit executives had regarding programming, and the managerial autonomy they had developed and were recasting under vertical integration and so-called scientific management. This analysis demonstrates that the growing corporate



influences of other mass retail industries and Wall Street combined with movie exhibition's existing managerial systems (inherited from theatrical precedents) created ideal conditions for variety entertainment, and facilitated its rise to new heights. The resulting hybrid managerial system anticipated and accepted live performance as a crucial part of its business model, one that could be used to address local differences and heterogenous audiences *or* be adapted to a Fordist mass production model.

### **The Growing Straight Picture Movement**

Even as the live performance boom continued in theaters across the country during 1927 and 1928, a small, but intense and increasingly united chorus of film executives began publicly dissenting from exhibitors' privileging of variety entertainment. Analyzing this discourse is important to establish how the corporate culture and beliefs in the production sector differed from exhibition, and how these differences insulated and promoted programming live acts despite antagonism from powerful executives. Each year, *The Film Daily Year Book* provided an opportunity for major players in the film industry—especially film producers, but also exhibitors like Roxy—to publish their reflections on the past year and provide a forecast of the year to come. Beginning in the 1927 edition (published early that year), contributors used the space as a forum to debate the merits of live performance.<sup>9</sup> Though most opinions were overwhelmingly positive, several prominent figures used their column as an opportunity to express their view that the industry-wide usage of live performance (which many recognized was connected to their building of deluxe variety palaces) hindered what they argued should be the industry's core product: feature films.<sup>10</sup> Richard Rowland, then general manager of First National's production branch, believed the “tremendously successful” though rapid, and on-going building of deluxe

theaters had brought a “grave question” across the industry. “Whether the motion picture theater is not using vaudeville in the guise of prologues at the expense of the motion picture. In a great many cases these houses in their advertising are playing up their acts and submerging the personality of the feature film which I feel is very bad for the producer, likewise for the theater men.”<sup>11</sup>

Vice President and General Manager of Pathé Exchange, Elmer Pearson, was concerned, in contrast, not about uneven promotion practices, but rather that live performance pulled revenues away from film production. Pearson claimed that those in the industry who called “upon the help of the tremendously expensive presentations, symphony orchestras and elaborate theaters” did not believe that the motion picture “has kept pace” with the rapid needs of the industry. He anticipated, however, as “the present trend throws exhibition and production into closer sympathy with each other [...] the cost of excessive furbelows [will] be made available for film production and thus properly encourage production to fill the apparent need of betterment.” Pearson further contended that the occasional majorly successful film proved that films can meet “every program requirement” of live performance and can lead to “the oblivion of these extraneous makeshifts.”<sup>12</sup> In short, Pearson contended that if the industry followed the tenets of vertical integration by relying solely (or at least primarily) on motion pictures, then film quality would improve and reduce the dependency on live performance.

The third thread of dissent emphasized that promoting live performance as a viable and fashionable programming strategy disserved smaller movie theaters that could not reach the economies of scale required to achieve high-quality productions. This was the main argument of Earle W. Hammons, who contributed to the debate despite being the president of Educational Film Corporation, which had no affiliated theaters and primarily distributed short films (which

suggests that the short film industry also felt financially affected by live performance). Hammons wrote that presentations were appropriate for “the big Broadway house” because they could afford the best talent, whereas the smaller houses compelled to compete could only program “cheap vaudeville” in the guise of “presentations.” In turn, the “average picture theater” should embrace motion pictures, “including the best of short feature pictures” for the best box-office appeal.<sup>13</sup>

These early writings established some of the foundational rhetoric for what variety theater critics called the “straight picture economy,” which major players in the film industry mobilized to discredit live performance (both vaudeville and presentations) and discourage its programming by advocating for the superiority (economic, qualitative, aesthetic, medium specific) of motion pictures.<sup>14</sup> As established in chapter one, the basic rhetoric for these arguments originated at the fringes of the industry starting at least in 1914. The primary business logic, or goal, of the corporate effort during the studio era was to assure that vertical integration worked as Wall Street and the mass-retail system dictated: theater chains as guaranteed outlets for films with revenues funneled back into film production. Pearson’s write-up, in particular, corroborates this argument by envisioning a future for the industry in which exhibition and production work in closer harmony, which meant making the immense amount of outlay on live performance instead redirected to film production. His argument is built on the assumption that, with greater budgets, film producers could make films grand enough films to completely supplant live performances.

Evident from these examples, this rhetoric was not purely focused on financial issues. Aspersion that vaudeville was “cheap” and not suitable for motion picture theaters were common, as was the claim that many presentations were simply cheap vaudeville marketed

misleadingly. In contrast, presentations were other times acknowledged as aesthetically befitting of variety palaces, but criticized for so often leading to film production being under-marketed and/or, even worse, outperformed. This undercut the argumentation of the straight picture economy in that it generated contradictory evidence of the presentation's superiority.<sup>15</sup> To counter this, straight picture rhetoric deemed presentations unnecessarily expensive and revealed inequalities in the location, size, and available capital of theaters (something the film industry did not care about in practice, as their run-zones-clearance system intensified these same inequalities by privileging first-run theaters). Above all, straight picture rhetoric emphasized that *good* films could satisfy the financial and programmatic needs of theaters and their patrons better than any other entertainment form.<sup>16</sup>

This small chorus of voices had very little impact on the use of live performance in the industry which, as we saw earlier, reached its apex in 1927 and 1928 during the very beginning of the sound era. At the beginning of 1928, however, programming live performance had become increasingly polarized in the trade press, with the dissent growing larger and louder. That year's *Film Daily Year Book* once again functioned as a forum for an increasing disparity of opinions, which the paper acknowledged in its section dedicated to the "Trend of Stage Shows," "No development of the past year has created more heated discussion and differences of opinion than the influence of stage acts and presentations on the motion picture theater."<sup>17</sup> Some sections of the yearbook celebrated the immense scale at which live performance (both vaudefilm and presentations) had been integrated into the industry by reprinting statistics first published in *Exhibitors Herald*. Stage shows were used in "over 200 de luxe picture theaters" regularly employing 2,000 acts consisting of 5,000 performers, a number that was even more impressive because it did not account for dancers, perhaps the most numerous performer category. The

salaries and production expenses (agent fees, costumes, decor, musician salary, etc.) cost the industry \$1,000,000 per week, which was just under a third of the total amount of money spent yearly on film production: \$175,000,000. According to one section of *The Film Daily Year Book* which compiled a short list of “Vital Facts and Nutshell Statistics that Amazingly Portray the Greatness of a Tremendous Industry,” the scale at which the “motion picture” industry employed live performance was one of its greatest achievements, instilling prestige and attracting millions of patrons. Above all, the figures showed the studios’ dominance over American entertainment, not just on screen but also the stages.<sup>18</sup>

For others less supportive of the industry’s multimedia purview, however, these same statistics evidenced the overspending in exhibition that they believed should have gone toward film production. Many claims amplified the negative discourse from the year before, especially that live performance signaled the overall gluttony in the exhibition sector that was fit only for exceptional theaters in exceptional urban markets. The head editor of *The Film Daily*, Jack Alicoate, started the discussion on a blunt note, declaring in the very first body paragraph of his editorial on the entire industry that “the presentation orgy has about reached its limit. In the unusual houses like the Roxy, Paramount, Grauman’s Egyptian and the Chicago presentations will continue to play their important part. In the small houses they must be abolished. Sound economics demand.”<sup>19</sup> This principal discourse continued to emphasize that live performance obstructed vertical integration by inhibiting exhibitors from paying top rental prices for films, which was still largely paid in flat fees. Rowland, Pearson, and Hammons were once again the main voices behind this and were now joined by more prominent figures in the industry including Joseph Schenck, then President of United Artists, Al Lichtman, Vice President of United Artists, Samuel Goldwyn, then an independent producer, and Joe Brandt, president of

Columbia Pictures. They contended that stage shows had, in the words of Goldwyn, “become the greatest menace pictures have known.”<sup>20</sup> Hammons echoed this sentiment, calling the ‘presentation’ craze the “important issue holding up the progress of the screen.”<sup>21</sup>

Many of the claims made by the group remained the same from the previous year (calling vaudeville “cheap” and presentations egregiously expensive), but they also more explicitly and with increasing nuance cited vertical integration in their calls for the elimination of live performance. In short, they scapegoated stage shows, arguing that their popularity made less money available for film production and led to many poor films. Goldwyn made this claim the strongest, “Good pictures have stood and can always stand by themselves. But good pictures cost money to make and, with revenue diverted to unworthy ‘presentations,’ the producer has but one alternative, to cheapen his product.”<sup>22</sup> However, if exhibition funneled the “extraneous” cost currently used for stage shows toward production, these studio leaders promised they could produce the highest quality films that would “hold public patronage” just as well as any type of vaudeville or presentation.

To be clear, nowhere do they suggest that stage shows failed to produce large revenues or profits. Rather their point is that the large overhead required to book stage shows left little money for theaters to pay high film rentals. Schenck wrote that vaudeville left “but \$10,000 [in the exhibitor’s budget] for a picture, and if they do pay the \$10,000 they don’t make any profit that week.”<sup>23</sup> Reports from those more sympathetic to stage shows corroborate the uneven revenue sharing between live performance and films in metropolitan theaters. One theater executive sympathetic to stage acts estimated in 1927 that a stage policy cost around 40% of gross receipts, whereas flat-film rental costs less than 15%.<sup>24</sup> Schenck’s suggestion was that if the industry eliminated stage shows, theaters could then afford \$25,000 in film rentals. In short,

these film producers felt cheated by exhibitors who controlled their own programming, at the expense of film. Their argument was sound in the hypothetical logic of vertical integration, which posited harmony between branches. In other words, they argued that exhibition should act as a guaranteed place of revenue for film products, and not necessarily in the theaters' own interests. As Lichtman wrote, "It's trade suicide for these factors not to recognize each other's problems, because each is dependent on the other."<sup>25</sup>

Some voices from the exhibition sector echoed the straight picture rhetoric, even if they did not openly support the elimination of all stage shows. Roxy defended presentations at his Roxy Theater by joining the attack against vaudeville and by suggesting that presentations, when done correctly, aligned with cinema's aesthetic goals: "this is in every sense a picture theater, and all our efforts are pointed toward the fact that everything must be pictorial. At no time will vaudeville or variety have a place in our program. Everything must be a picture, but not necessarily always on celluloid."<sup>26</sup> Roxy's attempt to connect with straight picture arguments by casting blame at "low quality" vaudeville in comparison to his "picturesque" presentations was not matched by the other executives in the forum, who agreed there needed to be greater unison between exhibition and production. This idea was shared even by long time believers in stage show programming. Sam Katz, President of Publix Theaters, the largest American theater circuit with almost seven hundred theaters, which produced and distributed its own presentations, and was one of the founders of Balaban and Katz which anchored their programs in revues and emcee shows, did not mention stage shows at all in his feature, but instead signaled the necessity to prioritize films in exhibition: "As an exhibitor, I base my hopes for the immediate future, and for many months to come, upon the truly remarkable line-up of pictures promised to us by the studios [...] The ascendancy of the motion picture, which for some time past has been seriously

threatened, seems to have been definitely safeguarded through corrective measure taken at the very source--a condition which is bound to stimulate the confidence of the exhibitors."<sup>27</sup> This plan to create better and more film rental revenue required, in Pearson's words, "the crystallization of the view that picture theaters should be for the showing of motion pictures."<sup>28</sup> This would, in theory, involve the studio's divestment of live performance (although the industry would continue to invest for the next several years).<sup>29</sup> "The public wants pictures when it goes to see pictures," Goldwyn wrote, "vaudeville when it goes to see vaudeville. It does not want the two things mixed."<sup>30</sup>

Several of the contributors, including Schenck, Goldwyn, and Lichtman justified this stance through presentations of brief histories of cinema, which posited that motion pictures achieved their "greatest popularity when picture shows consisted only of pictures." Lichtman suggested that film history began with the nickelodeon theater playing only motion pictures. Schenck averred that the palatial theaters now filled with live performance were originally made possible because of cinema-alone. These brief questionable histories, omitting much of cinema's intermedial past, attempted to characterize the current moment as a temporary anomaly and a distraction from which the industry needed to return to its "fundamental principle": motion pictures.<sup>31</sup> Where vaudeville and live performance would be showcased if not in theaters owned or otherwise controlled by the motion picture industry was, of course, not discussed.

Despite the hostile discourse from some of the most powerful people in the industry at the dawn of synchronized sound, the supposed harbinger of live performance's death, the use of live performance did not decline; it actually rose. The only company that made major changes to its plans for live performance was United Artists. By the end of 1927, the company reversed its grand plans to create a nation-wide presentation circuit (chapter 2). But this decision was



motivated more by its failed hopes for a circuit of super variety palaces than on the merits of live performance. By October 1927, United Artists had compiled a circuit of twelve theaters in cities like Los Angeles, New York, Baltimore, and Columbus. The company, however, leased all but the Penn Theater in Pittsburgh, which it built and co-owned with Loew's, and it only began construction of five theaters (one-fifth of its original plan) in cities like Detroit and Denver, which would open later in 1928. All of United Artists theaters were palaces, but they were on the small side, many hovering around the 2,000-seat mark, considered by many in the industry to be too small to afford the elaborate presentations the circuit had planned.<sup>32</sup>

United Artists likely adapted its theater building plan, and transitively abandoned its plans to invest and formalize a commitment to live performance, because of changing industry-wide attitudes toward market saturation (i.e., overbuilding). Economists, trade journal critics, and independent exhibitors had warned the studios and regional chains of “overseating” for years, but only in late 1927 and early 1928 did studio executives admit that they neared this limit (the Great Depression would prove they surpassed it).<sup>33</sup> Many powerful voices vowed in their year-end summaries of 1927 and forecasts for 1928 to end theater building. William Fox called the competition for theater building “complete.”<sup>34</sup> Harold Franklin of West Coast Theaters noted that “the saturation point in new theater building has been reached in many points throughout the country,” while Rowland of First National offered “a word of caution [...] on the rapid acquisition of theater circuits” that large theater circuits can negatively affect companies during difficult economic times.<sup>35</sup> United Artists’ president Schenck took the warning a step further by pointing out how the construction of mega-theaters had created an industry-wide dependency on live performance: “My only apprehension as far as pictures are concerned is due to the short-sighted policy of our exhibitors in building theaters of 5,000 and 6,000 seating capacity. To keep

those theaters full the owners deem it necessary to put in a big, diversified entertainment, consisting of vaudeville with a background of splashy sets and crowds of supers, or chorus girls.”<sup>36</sup> Of course, Schenck could call the rest of the industry short-sighted because his company had planned its theater circuit comparatively late, and was able to adjust when oversaturation could no longer be ignored. Because United Artists had not built its planned theater circuit, it believed it did not need to invest in a centralized live performance circuit and, according to Schenck, could fill its comparatively small variety palaces with motion pictures “without vaudeville embellishment.”<sup>37</sup> To do otherwise, according to Schenck, disserved public stockholders and Wall Street’s strategy for vertical integration:

It is absolutely essential for the producer to receive the highest possible returns in rentals from theaters for his picture, to enable him to remain in business, and if, through an ill-advised policy, the exhibitor squanders a lot of money in the management of his theater, the producer suffers more than anyone else suffers. The feature picture is responsible for the provision of necessary money to build these palatial theaters. The public who owns, through stock subscriptions, most—in fact, all of those theaters—bought the stock on the strength of the theater being a picture theater, and in my opinion, faith has not been kept with the public, as they turn these theaters into vaudeville houses.<sup>38</sup>

Confidently believing that audiences wanted films only, it is not surprising that the theaters United Artists actually built claimed to proudly show “pictures exclusively.”<sup>39</sup> However, even some United Artists theaters continued to use live performance. Of course, Sid Grauman still managed the Egyptian Theater, and continued his trend-setting presentations. But United Artists theater in Pittsburgh, the Penn, also showed both vaudeville and presentations in 1928, in direct opposition to its president's views.<sup>40</sup>

### **Showmanship**

The Egyptian and the Penn are two of many examples of the continued use of live performance in direct opposition to the growing animosity by those in the industry, even

company presidents. The studios' theater circuits had considerable autonomy from its parent and sibling companies, which helps to explain this anomaly. In fact, they were legally separate companies, a decision designed as a measure to keep debts away from the parent company. To a lesser degree, this structure was also adopted in an effort to convince the Federal Trade Commission that the studios were vertically integrated in a way that still encouraged competition between the separate companies in a corporation and thus did not violate anti-trust laws.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, these circuits also granted individual managers considerable autonomy over their individual theaters. I discuss this corporate structure and its effects on the program decision making in detail in the next chapter. For now, this overview should suffice for me to argue another reason live performance thrived during this period: circuits (quasi-separate corporate entities) and their managers operated under a distinguishable, though not antithetical, corporate culture and practice than that of the parent corporations and film production. This showmanship came largely from other theatrical antecedents, including vaudeville, and was especially suited to variety performance's adaptability and performativity.

As music historian Nicholas Gebhardt's study of corporate reform in vaudeville and its effects on performers' relationships with audiences demonstrates, Hollywood's established models for theatrical chains operated according to what I refer here as showmanship. Vaudeville executives built their corporate vision and ideals of show business in part around the mythos of the American showmen, who exuded individual success, thrift, talent, organizational ability, hard work, and self-recognition. At the same time, they idealized leaders who were not completely hierarchical and were willing to observe, relate, and cater to their audience. To vaudeville's corporate forefathers and circuit heads, Keith, Albee, Tony Pastor and F.F. Proctor (and many Americans in general), P.T. Barnum embodied this myth, likely because these executives worked

for the prototypical showman during their early careers.<sup>42</sup> Keith, in particular, cited the circus and Barnum as the foundations of his views about show business, claiming his time there offered “more practical education[...] than the better average of other fields of labor, recreation and enjoyment.”<sup>43</sup> Albee echoed Keith in a separate interview, “the advantages gained which fit a man for later years in business cannot be found in any other calling; the diverse experience which one encounters in traveling with a circus—the novelty, the contact with all classes, the knowledge of the conditions of the country, its finances, its industry.”<sup>44</sup> To Albee and Keith, the circus offered first-hand knowledge about the types of entertainment that attracted heterogeneous audiences, as well as practical business experience on topics like economics and the logistics of show business. As a result, showmanship can be best understood as a result of the collision between this Barnum ethos and an increasingly corporate entertainment culture.

Another important characteristic of showmanship was that it prioritized the entertainment value of the entire program and the total theatrical experience rather than its individual components. Vaudeville’s principal product was the abstract idea of *novelty*, not a particular medium. Of course, for most of its early history this meant live acts, but managers were never averse to films either, which increasingly shared bills with live acts in the 1900s and 1910s. No matter the medium, this system encouraged managers to know their audience and cater an entire experience, from the entrance of the theater to the stage, to them. In addition to novelty, big-time vaudeville valued over all else what a writer for *McClure’s* called in 1923, the “extraordinary romance of big business seasoned with the glamour of the theatrical world.”<sup>45</sup> To Keith, Albee, and their colleagues, showmanship in big-time vaudeville was inseparable from an uplift strategy in which the middle (and lower classes) could enjoy the finest and most glamorous entertainment in palatial theaters.<sup>46</sup>

The idealized individualism of showmanship made it ripe for criticism as Hollywood increasingly adopted a more mass retail model.<sup>47</sup> However, it is not fair to classify the vaudeville system as an unscientific or unmodern business, as arguments that such qualities only emerged with the formation and solidification of the studio system or even regional theater chains imply.<sup>48</sup> This implication is especially problematic when considering that Hollywood was comparatively late to the scientific approaches to business, used by grocery, drug, oil, and other chain stores, all of which were contemporaries of vaudeville. Indeed, vaudeville concurrently adopted and developed components of the modern business methods alongside these other industries.<sup>49</sup> Like its contemporaries, vaudeville utilized economies of scale with large theater circuits, had centralized accounting and management of talent through the United Booking Office (UBO), fast communication, and extensive research files and reports on acts, allowing managers to measure their value based upon specific audiences. Vaudeville also operated with trained managers working under an established, albeit loose, formula of contrast, speed, and diversification. All of which stabilized and rationalized capital accumulation.<sup>50</sup>

Showmanship, as embodied by vaudeville, thus involved a constant tension between scientific business principles and the qualities of the showman. Vaudeville executives, in the words of Gebhardt, unabashedly claimed, “to be merging efficiency and uplift, science and morality, art and entertainment, within a highly integrated bureaucratic structure.”<sup>51</sup> Vaudeville’s reliance on “Great Man” narratives demonstrates this tension. The emphasis on the exceptional abilities of executives in their own self-promotion and contemporaneous biographies helped instill a bureaucratic structure with them at the top (and is similar to the treatment of CEOs in today’s comparatively massive corporations). At the same time, vaudeville’s Great Man

narrative extended, to a lesser degree, to the managers who, under a decentralized booking system, used their own showman qualities to tailor national entertainment to their local audience.

The central tension of showmanship in vaudeville is also evident in the beliefs of mid-level managers. In 1910, Robert Grau, a booking agent for Orpheum's Western Vaudeville Managers Association published *The Business Man in the Amusement World: A Volume of Progress in the Field of the Theater*. Part autobiography and part celebration (and explanation) of vaudeville as a part of the "advancement" of industry, Grau posits that such a modern enterprise requires both showmen qualities and scientific management principles:

As a field for progressive and enterprising young men, modern amusement catering offers opportunities unexcelled by few [...] Organization and capital have reduced the dangerous nature of amusement enterprises, as they stood some 24 to 30 years ago, to what can really be termed a 'Legitimate Business,' with not half as much danger to the cautious and ordinary operator as an ordinary speculation in stocks or real estate.<sup>52</sup>

Overall, Grau credits business tactics such as "efficient methods for 'booking'" over any "great efforts as managers and producers" for vaudeville's success, but the efforts were not mutually exclusive. Showmanship stressed the tenets of big business, while creating room for the "progressive and enterprising young men" in the spirit of Barnum, Albee, Keith, Proctor, Loew, Pantages, and other executives: inspired to know novelty when they see it and create an experience to keep their audiences wanting more.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Chain Store Manager of the 1920s**

According to scholarship on industrial Hollywood, in particular the work of Douglas Gomery, Hollywood's corporate reform of exhibition in the mid-to-late 1920s alleviated the core tensions in showmanship, with corporate culture and practices extinguishing the ethos of the circus and vaudeville.<sup>54</sup> According to Gomery, Paramount-Publix adapted and popularized the

mass-retail strategies of its new president Sam Katz (who took over in 1925) as developed in the Balaban and Katz circuit. Like scientific management of other retail chains, Katz reportedly decentered the role of the theater manager from local entertainment specialist to bookkeeper and centralized the chain's decision-making power in the New York booking office. This office determined the movies and live performances (including their lighting, décor, etc.) shown at all of its theaters. Having no control over bookings, the only local variances allocated to managers was with respect to advertising. These too were based on economy of scale, rather than true control. Managers could select from a pre-arranged group of ads based on their clientele. Publix seemingly codified and proliferated these values and practices by establishing the Publix management school to train managers. In summary, Gomery writes that the Paramount-Publix system hired managers "more for their record keeping, than 'show business' skills."<sup>55</sup> In short, showmanship was seemingly no more. By the mid-1920s (no exact date is given, but Gomery implicitly indicates the system fully functioned by 1927) Paramount had implemented and popularized a new, top-down corporate order which valued service to the centralized, national corporation above all else.

Given what we know about the autonomy and self-confidence bred by showmanship, one should be immediately suspect of claims that corporate reform occurred so quickly and free of conflict. I would argue that, when we look at the values and practices taught to Hollywood's theater chain managers and held by some of Hollywood's most influential and powerful executives in the exhibitions sector, what Gomery describes as the reality of film exhibition in the 1920s, was actually the theoretical, fictitious dream of a Wall Street banker. In other words, Gomery accurately describes the aspirations of Hollywood's corporate reform, but I contend that it was not fully welcomed or implemented during the 1920s. In this section, I argue that theater

executives, even Gomery's own example, the Paramount-Publix management program, actually supported showmanship, with all of its imperfect, hybrid evocation of the mass retail system.

Paramount-Publix opened its management training program, the Publix Theaters Managers School, sometime in 1927 or early 1928. The number of students in each class varied, but by September 1930, the school's ninth cohort graduated as the largest class yet, with thirty-five students. After completing the roughly five-to-six-month program, Paramount-Publix assigned the graduates to management positions at either one of its theaters across the country or in executive positions at the home office in New York City.<sup>56</sup> Almost no primary sources from the program are known to exist, so one cannot determine exactly what practices, values, and lessons the school instilled in its students.<sup>57</sup> Thus, one must rely on evidence surrounding the school to understand its teachings.

Fortunately, one of the program's founders, Harold Franklin, published *Motion Picture Theater Management*, late in 1927. Though Franklin touted this as the first manual for the growing motion picture exhibition industry, his claim needs further qualification. As we saw in chapter one, at least one book on the management of motion picture theaters preceded Franklin's by more than a decade.<sup>58</sup> It is thus more accurate to say that *Motion Picture Theater Management* was the first publicly available book-length treatment of exhibition that reflects the methods of national theater chains housed within the vertically integrated, Hollywood multimedia conglomerates. The two leaders of Balaban and Katz (shortly thereafter leaders of Paramount-Publix), Sam Katz and Barney Balaban, published their own manual, *The Fundamental Principles of Balaban & Katz Theatre Management*, in 1926.<sup>59</sup> Unlike Katz and Balaban's book, which was "for the exclusive use of our managerial staff," and "under no circumstances [was] this manual to be loaned or permitted to leave your theater, nor copies made



of any portion of it for the use of any other organization,”<sup>60</sup> the George H. Doran Company published Franklin’s book, heightening its potential influence across both independent and studio exhibitors in the industry.<sup>61</sup> Doran Company sold *Motion Picture Theatre Management* for the hefty price of five dollars (almost eighty dollars in 2022), and advertised it in the industry trade presses, selling enough to require a second printing, showing its reputation in the industry.<sup>62</sup>

Not actually being the first book on exhibition management did not affect the book’s or its author’s authority and respectability in the exhibition industry. Franklin began his theatrical career as a vaudeville booking agent, before quickly working his way up from a prominent exhibitor operating in Buffalo, New York, during the 1910s to one of the most influential exhibitors of the era, perhaps second only to Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel, the most prominent developer of movie palaces and live performance prologues.<sup>63</sup> Whereas Roxy’s influence over the ideas and strategies adopted across the United States, Canada, and Europe stemmed largely from his innovative showmanship, Franklin was a strategic businessman able to build industry-leading movie palaces while managing and growing theater circuits. From 1924 to 1927, Franklin was the Vice President of Paramount’s exhibition arm, the Publix Theater Circuit. In this role, he not only led the company’s (then Famous Players Lasky) expansion into the studio with the largest number of theaters, but he was also in charge of the development and then operations of the circuit’s opulent 3,600 seat flagship Broadway theater, the Paramount, which opened in 1926. Just as he was finishing the book, Franklin left Publix to become president of the West Coast Theater chain, the largest theater chain in the American West Coast with 300 theaters.<sup>64</sup>

Franklin’s resume would continue to grow after the publication of his book. In 1929, the Fox Film Corporation acquired West Coast Theaters in an attempt to expand its theater holdings

beyond the Mississippi, making Franklin the president of Fox-West Coast Theaters. In February 1932 RKO then poached Franklin away from Fox-West Coast (which would soon declare bankruptcy). While RKO first hired him in an advisory role, it quickly appointed him president of the Keith-Albee-Orpheum (K-A-O) Theater chain. In January 1933, they expanded his role to include vice-president of all of RKO, with the responsibility of also overseeing production and distribution.<sup>65</sup> During his RKO tenure, Franklin supervised the construction of the two mega theaters within Rockefeller Center, Radio City Music Hall, and RKO Roxy Theaters (renamed RKO Center in 1933).<sup>66</sup>

During this time, and concurrently with Sam Katz (co-founder of the trend-setting Balaban and Katz Theater chain in Chicago and later president of Paramount Theaters), Franklin implemented an early form of the mass-retailing (also called chain-store management) approach to film distribution and exhibition. He also penned countless trade press articles in which he outlined his strategies for prologues and tie-ins with radio advertising.<sup>67</sup> Doran Company's advertising for Franklin summarized the author's illustrious career and his contributions:

The author, Harold B. Franklin, is known throughout the industry as one of the most progressive [in modern business methods] and able theatre executives and showmen the picture theatre has developed, and one of the leading forces contributing to the advance which the motion picture playhouse has made from its 'nickelodeon' beginning to the palatial community institution which the better theatre of today represents.<sup>68</sup>

Whereas Roxy might have been more famous, especially to those outside the film industry, it was Franklin's business strategies that helped form the foundation of the exhibition industry for the next two decades. Still, as the advertisement does not leave out, Franklin was also a celebrated showman, whose methods—both in practice and in writing—combined business and art.

With the authority of a career at the top of two of the major studios and his influential columns, Franklin designed *Motion Picture Theater Management* as a “practical guide to the procedure of theater management [...] planned for ready utility.”<sup>69</sup> The publisher put the book’s aims more dramatically, as “the most comprehensive and authoritative work written on the subject [...] this monumental work dealing with every branch of the theatre and offering a carefully considered presentation of the theories and practices, tested by years of experience, making for the successful and profitable business method of running a motion picture theatre.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, it outlines aspects of the building, operation, personnel, and programming involved in managing motion picture theaters, and covers topics from fire equipment and refrigeration to accounting, purchasing, film rental, and insurance. As indicated by the high, text-book-like price, the volume’s main goal was to educate nascent and future theater managers, either from universities or trade schools. Franklin repeatedly gives the examples of Columbia University, which had recently developed a course providing training in all branches of the industry, and the Publix Theaters Managers School, which he developed during his tenure at Paramount (and very likely was the impetus for the book).<sup>71</sup> This audience is also indicated in the book’s advertising, which largely highlights features in the book that would be of most interest to theater managers and not the general public, including “to train and maintain an organization,” “to provide adequate safety methods,” “to carry on systematic inspections,” “to prepare a properly balanced budget,” “to judge the effectiveness of advertising,” and “to purchase equipment and Build Good Will [*sic*].”<sup>72</sup> This key audience even impacted the structure of the book, which he claims to have broken up into thirty-four sections to conveniently allow review and quizzes. According to Franklin, the need to educate managers in the “new needs and standards” and “fundamental theory and practice” of theater management was especially imperative in the chain management

system because the investment across the industry was too large and individual failures threatened “the thousands of persons whose livelihood depends on the industry.”<sup>73</sup> As described, his book is thus an early effort to introduce and educate men (and they are always men explicitly in his book) to the tenets of the chain system.<sup>74</sup>

Despite laying the infrastructural foundation for the mass retail system and vertical integration through his pioneering efforts in creating theater chains from the perspective of chain store management, *Managing Motion Picture Theaters* is far from an encapsulation of the chain store management strategy. Though Franklin established the groundwork for the chain management system, his ideas and teachings in the book are a far better representation of the system that voraciously built variety palaces during the 1920s and had spurred heavy investment in prestigious and spectacular live performance than a representation of its more standardized future. The text, therefore, demonstrates how exhibition corporations viewed circuit building as an opportunity to synthesize prestige and uplift culture, as much as it was also an opportunity to exercise shrewd “scientific” business management. In other words, Franklin promotes a combination of showmanship with piecemeal chain store management techniques, an approach more similar to that of his former employers in vaudeville than the singular focus of the mass retailer which Gomery credits to Paramount-Publix, the company where he had been second in command less than a year before his book’s publication, and to which he dedicated the book (specifically Paramount’s president Adolph Zukor). This not only calls into question the maturity of Paramount-Publix’s scientific management, but also the entire industry’s, given Franklin’s prominent position within it.<sup>75</sup>

Evident in the qualities that he identifies for the ideal managers of the future, Franklin’s core philosophies presented in *Motion Picture Theater Management* are more indicative of

showmanship and reveal a growing tension with the top-down hierarchy of the chain-store system. In contrast to the standardization of the retail system, Franklin believed that success at any individual theater depended on individual showmanship tailored to specific demographics of the theater's patrons (he specifically mentions race and class as pertinent characteristics which require the "alteration in the personality of the house").<sup>76</sup> Thus Franklin believed that not everyone could successfully manage a theater and their role was not to simply be bookkeepers for central office decision making. Instead, he aspired to recruit showmen who were not just yes-men, but a "high type of young man" who had "acute personal intelligence" and "business judgment."<sup>77</sup> In this approach, any top-down guidelines presented in this book were second to an effective manager's inventiveness. "The personal element in theater operation is of great importance, and there will always be room for exhibitors of personality who understand theater showmanship."<sup>78</sup> In this way, Franklin's book represents a holdover of the vaudeville approach to mass culture, which attempted to cater different elements of the programming to distinct demographics and prioritized showmanship over standardized programs. *Motion Picture Theater Management* was simply guidance for "the right sort of candidate for managerial status" then a promoter of clear guidelines from the corporate office.<sup>79</sup> In other words, it is a manual for showmen to take from the mass retail system what they needed or wanted.

*Motion Picture Theater Management* also does not promote the chain management system in that it presents the most exceptional theaters as the only examples of how to manage a theater, and avoids strictly data-driven decision making. Franklin openly admits that his experience as a theater manager is largely limited to large urban theaters (in other words, variety palaces). He is also clear that the advice and procedures within the book are "based on the procedure of the better type of motion picture theater."<sup>80</sup> In turn, the book features Franklin's

Paramount Theater in New York City, a “Super” theater with over 3,500 seats, as the only “concrete symbol,” as he calls it, of how the exhibition industry functions.<sup>81</sup> With, at most, only around ten to twenty percent of America’s approximately 20,000 theaters qualifying as movie palaces, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, promotes, or at least describes, movie palace policies more than it represents chain management strategies and policy.

Franklin’s managerial advice also avoids the quasi-scientific statistics of the “scientific management system,” what we would now call analytics, that underpin similar manuals in the late 1930s.<sup>82</sup> Franklin explicitly refrains from including figures, financial advice, or algorithms that may mislead the average theater-manager, as he claims there is too much variation from theater-to-theater, region-to-region, and city-to-city. Though Franklin himself calls his methods “scientific training” several times throughout the book, he is also clear that his definition of this concept is not in line with the mass retail model as it usually is associated with in film history. Instead, in the chapter on “training for management” Franklin defines “scientific” not to mean hyper-rational accounting. Instead as training based on the shared and refereed wisdom of an entire circuit of managers, in contrast to a “one man to one man” apprenticeship system based on individual “observation, counsel, and responsibility” that theater managers had largely relied on the past.<sup>83</sup>

Franklin’s book is not a flawed portrayal of the chain-store management, though it is flawed by the logic of the mass retail system. As the manual of the most influential exhibition executive, it should now be clear that the mass retail model was not the primary *modus operandi* of studio theater chains as late as 1927. Instead, *Motion Picture Theater Management* is best understood as an early attempt to intermix and reconcile manager-based showmanship with Hollywood’s chain-store management system.

Sometimes these two systems were not easy to synthesize or reconcile. This is evident in the many contradictory ideas about the roles of live performance in motion theater exhibition. Franklin's mixed messages about stage entertainment, I would contend, suggests that he realized the chain store management system was somewhat incompatible with his personal beliefs about the importance of stage entertainment, and perhaps even acknowledged internal pressure by other executives for standardized motion-picture only theaters. As much as he underscores showmanship and the importance of live performances within that system, he also admits and foresees its incompatibilities with the emerging mass retail system and vertical integration growing in popularity with his peers and to which he also saw value.

On one hand, Franklin warns readers and potential pupils against programming live performance of any kind and does not mention it as a priority for the future of exhibition. Several times Franklin states in no uncertain terms that "a motion picture theater is devoted to entertainment by means of films."<sup>84</sup> The first sentence of the chapter solely dedicated to "Stage Presentations" likewise instructs reader that: "Primarily the motion picture theater must depend on the photoplay itself for genuine progress."<sup>85</sup> Franklin's final chapter, called the "Forecast," in which he outlines what this industrial "progress" might look like, also does not include any mention of stage entertainment. "The Future," of the motion picture industry would be dictated largely by activities outside the control of the exhibitor. Some of this involved standardization and homogenization. He believed the already ongoing industry-wide adoption of synchronous sound would democratize access to "higher music standards in the type of theater that previously was limited to music obtainable by performers of indifferent talent."<sup>86</sup> The majority of his other predictions concerned production, including color and stereoscopic photography, better quality directors, acquisition of "foreign directors" to make pictures for international audiences, and a

closer collaboration between the film industry and educational institutions, so that sound motion pictures could help “spread knowledge and inspiration to the world” by supplementing textbooks and by disseminating educational lectures to cities across the country.

The only parts of Franklin’s future vision regarding exhibition were the persistence of variety programming and the widespread construction of movie palaces. With the variety programming originating in vaudeville, and the movie palace being the primary venues for stage presentations, these elements might suggest a future for stage acts in studio theaters. But Franklin only mentions cinematic features, shorts, and newsreels as comprising the future of variety programming. Similarly, he celebrates the continued construction of movie palaces --which he viewed as “undoubtedly, one of the foremost developments of the future”-- for bringing fine architecture and large capacity even to smaller towns, which would continually attract more patrons.<sup>87</sup> Franklin’s beliefs and aspirations were lofty and deeply democratic; his dreams did not, however, prophesize a future for the combination of live acts with motion pictures.

On the other hand, and in spite of his warnings about live performance, Franklin clearly believed that for the right manager of a large enough theater stage and screen could be partnered for excellent showmanship and profitability, and was an acceptable programming choice. His manual includes detailed preliminary information that a new or aspiring manager would need to determine the appropriate type of live performance for any particular theater and how to hire the necessary staff. Franklin also included a detailed taxonomy of theaters and types of stage entertainment, including “Vaudefilm” and “stage presentations” and “Personal Appearances” which suggests that in “De Luxe” Theaters (the common industry term for standard-sized first run variety palaces) and “Neighborhood Theaters” in residential areas of large cities, stage presentations frequently programmed revues, prologues, dances, orchestral performances, or in-



person presentations or name acts, in which “frequently, well-known actors or actresses appear before the patrons.”<sup>88</sup> Franklin’s taxonomy of motion picture theaters also includes the “Vaudeville-Picture House,” by which he refers both to the variety palace style theaters made by (originally) vaudeville companies like Loew’s in large cities, using the vaudefilm program of five or six acts accompanied by “either a second run [feature film], or first run products of secondary importance.” Lastly, and perhaps most notably, Franklin discusses what he calls the “Super” theater: the most luxurious and massive variety palaces of 3,500 to 6,000 seats, with the Paramount Theater in New York City presented as the exemplar as “a city under one roof.”<sup>89</sup> Based on Richard Abel’s study of Detroit from 1916 until 1926, one of the few detailed studies of programming in a major American metropolis, Franklin’s taxonomy of theaters and their descriptions accurately reflected the reality of urban exhibition.<sup>90</sup> Nowhere in the manual does Franklin advocate for the programming (or existence) of live performance outside of major cities or in any theater other than the second run, suggesting that even before the mainstream proliferation of synchronized sound, chains had already deemed combinations not profitable or unnecessary outside city centers. Still, for managers of urban theaters, which made up the bulk of the chains’ holdings, Franklin asserts that managers, not the chain, decided programming and that stage shows could, and in many cases, should be considered.

A very brief history of “film exhibition” that accompanies the “stage presentations” chapter shows how ingrained was Franklin’s belief in the interdependence of live performance and cinema. Unlike many other histories of cinema written by film executives of the time—like those written to justify the straight picture economy—which argue cinema had evolved past the need of stage shows, Franklin’s own historization proposed that stage and screen were in the process of evolving together. Like many of those other histories, Franklin begins by hailing the

nickelodeon theater and similar storefront theaters featuring *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) as the first “exclusive motion picture theater[s]” and the beginning of a “new industry.” The reference to Porter’s famous film at first suggests a separate trajectory of live performance and film as it alludes to cinema distancing itself from types of films which more clearly aligned with theatrical forms of entertainment. However, this lay-history quickly backs away from these assumptions to highlight the work of “enterprising exhibitors” who at the same time were adding live acts (such as singers and dancers) to accompany the often lackluster films. Through profit, growth, and competition, Franklin traces this approach to the origins of the Loew’s style “picture-vaudeville policy as shown today.”<sup>91</sup> His book’s account of exhibition’s historical development ends by defining two-prongs of theaters which he believes will define the future of entertainment. The first involves small theaters specifically designed to show motion pictures, a progression facilitated by “improved” films which no longer need live acts.<sup>92</sup> The second is the “De Luxe” and “Super,” which originated with the opening of the Strand Theater in New York city in 1914 and the pioneering efforts of Roxy Rothafel. The movie palace’s prologues, orchestras on raised platforms, and organs represented this “new type of motion picture house” at the forefront of the exhibition industry.<sup>93</sup> Here he suggests that in variety palaces, live performance was not only an option, but was an essential feature that represented the height of the theater’s artistic and technological development.

Despite Franklin’s enthusiasm for the possibilities of stage entertainment, he acknowledges that it was increasingly at odds with the chain store management model of exhibition underpinned by economies of scale and other systems of efficiency. Franklin ends his taxonomy of stage shows by issuing another mixed message about the role of live performance in motion picture theaters, which appears to emanate from the growing desire in the industry to

reduce or eliminate stage shows: “While there is bound to be further development in the production of stage presentations, it is hoped that our more progressive exhibitors will realize that the real future of the motion picture theater is through motion pictures, and that stage presentations are intended only to ‘complete the picture,’ so to speak.”<sup>94</sup> This message that better films will not need stage acts contradicts the reasons in favor of live performance in his taxonomy. Both iterations of stage presentations were meant to use high quality films and stage shows to create the highest-class entertainment, like a “concert” and “comparable with the best [legitimate] theater has to offer.”<sup>95</sup> Franklin mentions several times, in contrast, that the other forms of stage entertainment were largely utilized with lesser quality films.

### **Franklin’s Way Forward: The Mass Production of Live Performance**

Based on his own practice of building variety palaces anchored in presentations--which he would continue even into the Great Depression--there is no evidence that Franklin himself believed in a separation of stage and screen entertainment. But he did increasingly support the tenets of vertical integration. Franklin makes this clear in his own feature in the 1928 *Film Daily* forum. Here, Franklin indicated in no uncertain terms that tightly maintained vertical integration with a more developed scientific management system was the future of exhibition:

Business methods in theater operation have made a great advance during the past year, and the theater that is to retain its place in the front ranks must modernize its methods and keep pace with the trend of events[...]There is today a closer cooperation between the various interests of the industry, which in itself is a sign of constructive progress. This spirit of cooperation will result in a unified industry and will make possible the elimination of waste.<sup>96</sup>

While Franklin never indicates what he means by “waste,” his emphasis on the cooperation between exhibition and production might suggest that he was beginning to turn against stage shows for the sake of properly functioning vertical integration. However, I would contend that, if

Franklin was referring to live performance at all, it was only specific iterations. As *Motion Picture Theatre Management* makes clear, Franklin's many contradictions and qualifications stemmed from the fact that he seemed to realize that almost all formats of live performance were infeasible, or at least unsustainable, in the chain management system. This "waste" presumably came from two overarching concerns Franklin had regarding live performance, particularly presentations, in variety palaces. First, staging a new program every week in any format cost a significant amount of money, especially if they depended on the funds of a single theater. Second was the necessity of skill, time, and divisions of labor. Staging, booking, and casting the stage show and coordinating with the crew and with the music team took an enormous amount of time as well as talent to perform consistently on a weekly basis.

One way of overcoming this, of course, was to eliminate stage shows. But, trying to reconcile showmanship with the tenants of vertical integration, Franklin also proposes methods for adapting the production and distribution of stage shows to the chain store approach. He proposed a strict division of labor in which live performance was handled by its own department and manager. The book's taxonomy of theater staff includes three scenarios of how and who handles the live performance, depending on the size of the theater. In the largest, the theater should carry three collaborating team members: a "production manager" in charge of all aspects of the stage offerings; a musical director, in charge of planning and selecting the musical accompaniment for both the stage and screen; and the general theater manager, who oversees all departments and is in charge of accounting, advertising, and other front office duties. In smaller theaters, *Motion Picture Management* suggests that the musical director could double as the production manager. Some other small theaters also relied on their general manager to act as the production manager. However, Franklin is critical of this idea, suggesting instead that stage

entertainment required specialization and concentration to achieve “the proper results.”<sup>97</sup> The book warns that prologues and presentations should especially “only be attempted by experts.”<sup>98</sup> In short, what Franklin proposes is that ideally managers of a circuit theater *should* resemble the chain-store’s bookkeeper/supervisor model, but *only if* they have the means to employ showmen under them. Otherwise, they can attempt to coordinate all the tasks required in Franklin’s hybrid chain store model: overseer, bookkeeper, and showmen, though he is increasingly skeptical of showmanship’s lack of divisions of labor.<sup>99</sup>

While more akin to the chain management system, simple divisions of labor within individual theaters did not solve the more major issue of producing a distributable good in which costs and revenue could be shared across a large group of theaters. To meet this challenge, Franklin’s second solution, the idea that excited him the most, was the creation of a circuit-wide live performance production office which would fulfill this requirement. This department, similar to a film studio, would centralize the best directors, producers, and talent to produce the highest quality stage entertainment. Essentially, this system would centralize the industry’s live performance acts, creating standardized products allowing managers to compartmentalize their work. Franklin’s own description highlights how the system maintained the elements of mass production, such as controlled standards and logistics:

Since the productions (scenery and costumes) are created for use over an entire circuit, it is apparent that more cost can be allowed for such items. The result is a performance of magnificence, vying with the best the [legitimate] theater can offer. Artists are now engaged for several months, and a better quality of talent, therefore, is available. The plan required the establishment of carefully worked-out schedules and routines, because of railroad jumps; but, that having been accomplished, the system moves on smoothly, with very satisfactory results. Scenery and costumes are designed by expert art directors and are manufactured at the central point, assuring the control of the standards. The stage producers selected are those of the highest talent and experience. It is likely that this plan of procedure will be adopted by other circuits, and by theater operators, where a sufficient number can be found to cooperate for the purpose.<sup>100</sup>

For Franklin's West Coast Theaters, Paramount (his former employer), and to a lesser extent Loew's, this department and system was not hypothetical. West Coast Theaters, for example, which had previously relied on a decentralized vaudeville booking system, had recently partnered with Fanchon and Marco (F&M) to produce their "Ideas"—the brand name for their presentations—and distribute them across their circuit theaters on a larger scale than before. Along with Roxy, Sid Grauman, Jack Partington, and others, the sister-brother team of Fanchon and Marco were one of the most well-known producers of presentations during the 1920s. Their "Ideas" were set apart from the competition in two ways. While traditional prologues attempted to maintain a stylistic and often thematic connection to the feature film, F&M's presentations sometimes tried to contrast the film. And while they organized each presentation around an explicit theme (e.g. aviation, radio technology), they were often arbitrary and purposefully emphasized chaos and randomness in order to differentiate themselves from "East Coast" approaches to presentations, which often drew their aesthetics from classical arts (orchestra music, ballet, etc). Many of their Ideas, according to historian Phil Wagner, celebrated "the heroic ingenuity of modern American industry" which aligned them with contemporary media industries also fostering a similar brand identity.<sup>101</sup>

More important to Franklin and other studio figures was the second characteristic that made them unique. F&M pioneered a wholesale model for producing and distributing presentations that both resembled the studio model and adhered to the mass retail approach that Franklin advocated. Most presentations, other than those produced by Paramount after 1926, were currently produced by in-house teams in the manner Franklin described, creating a show per week for individual theaters. Even the Balaban and Katz theater chain in Chicago, which made its name by producing elaborate presentation-like stage shows, did not always share its

productions across its theaters.<sup>102</sup> F&M, in contrast, operated a studio in Los Angeles where it centrally orchestrated and choreographed elaborate shows with teams composed of thousands of dancers, comedians, animals, magicians, circus performers, musicians, set designers, builders. Each show would then generally premiere in a theater in the Hollywood area before touring as many de luxe theaters as they had under contract. The incredibly popular Fanchon and Marco Dance School, also in Los Angeles, assured that the company maintained a nearly endless amount of talent that the company required to perform four to five times a day for up to fifty weeks per year.<sup>103</sup> The approach allowed them to produce elaborate and expensive spectacles in which the costs were spread across many weeks, if not months, and in which success was not determined by a single theater. The success of F&M's "musical comedy factory" earned them the name of the "Henry Fords of entertainment."<sup>104</sup>

F&M had partnered with the West Coast Theater chain since 1923, showing their presentations in some of its prominent Northern Division theaters, including the Warfield Theater (San Francisco) and the T&D Theater (Oakland). The following year, West Coast Theaters invited the company into its flagship theater, Loew's State in Los Angeles, which it leased from the titular theater chain. West Coast Theaters then continually booked F&M into more and more of its theaters over the next four years. The deal that excited Franklin, while writing the book in 1927, was F&M's contract to tour its shows in over 100 West Coast Theaters from San Diego to Vancouver. F&M also formed a partnership with Publix-Paramount (and West Coast Theaters), allowing the Ideas to circulate in Publix's massive circuit extending to the East Coast. By the end of the year, F&M was booked in over 300 American theaters.

F&M offered a model which promised to facilitate a mass retail system to the highly desired, but far less efficient presentation system. Its success would last far into the early 1930s

during the Depression, but it is worth emphasizing both its national scope and its desirability to the studio system. Over the next five years, F&M performed in almost every theater chain in the United States (except perhaps Loew's) and negotiated massive contracts with four of the major studios. F&M secured long-term deals with Fox (who continued and celebrated its affiliation with West Coast Theaters when it acquired the chain in 1928) and Paramount. The company also reportedly came within a few line items of merging with two other majors in 1932, first with Warner Bros. in March and then RKO in September. These deals show that the studios with theater chains anticipated live performance as a crucial part of their business model, and also that they longed for a Fordist, rational approach to the variety entertainment which F&M offered. These systems contributed to the prevalence of live performance in this "golden age" of live performance. By 1928 and 1929, Publix became the largest booker of variety talent with F&M not far behind, largely thanks to their centralized presentations.<sup>105</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Though F&M's and Publix's highly popular and heavily-booked presentations represented the ideals of these centralized systems, many variations existed. Not all studios wanted centralized production, especially those that came from vaudeville. RKO, for example, had a centralized production department that developed vaudeville acts and produced presentations. During the Depression, RKO even tried (and failed) to more heavily invest in the idea of centralized live performance production. But compared to Paramount, F&M, and Loew's, it hardly utilized them and relied on vaudefilm style programs and booking strategies. As discussed in the next chapter, Warner Bros. largely aligned with RKO in this regard. The reason is likely the same for the Orpheum Circuit, which abandoned its own centralized productions in



1927. Convinced to develop a centralized production department for presentations, Orpheum built its own studio in Chicago in 1926 with producers, actors, and choreographers. By the end of the year, though, it abandoned presentations, dismissing them as a “total flop” and returning its full attention back to vaudefilm.<sup>106</sup> More specifically, Orpheum believed presentations conflicted with both vaudeville’s industrial conventions and its approach to mass culture. Vaudeville traditionally paid performers a flat fee (or sometimes percentages for the largest stars), and the booking office coordinated with theater managers to create schedules. The performers then had to coordinate travel at their own expense. Presentations created by the studio had to be more involved, logically and financially. Vaudeville was not accustomed to the need to pay regular salaries to a production department, nor to paying for the continually growing cost of transporting the actors, crew, decor and customs. Unable to appropriately manage the expenses and coordination, Orpheum reportedly lost \$200,000 (over three million dollars in 2022). Orpheum theater managers’ reluctance to include presentations also added to these losses. Vaudeville valued two other programmatic elements: speed and local difference, which tended to conflict with presentations. Compared to vaudeville/vaudefilm programs which constantly changed acts roughly every seven to fourteen minutes, Orpheum managers complained that presentations’ elaborate sketches “slow[ed] up” their shows. Worse though, managers “didn’t want them” because they did not believe the bulk of their audience desired presentations.<sup>107</sup> Mass production of presentations, like films, depended on a mass audience imagined to be fairly homogenous in its taste. Vaudeville’s emphasis on variety contradicted that. As such, centrally-produced presentations failed to adhere to the values and conventions of vaudeville.

Most studios, however, did not choose one form exclusively. Loew’s had centrally produced units, but also had a vaudeville booking office operating under the manager system.

Many chains like First National and the Stanley Theater Company were affiliated with the Keith-Albee booking office and also utilized a vaudeville manager system. Even Paramount-Publix and West Coast Theater managers were not required to book the centralized presentations and could book vaudeville or build their own revues. As the 1920s progressed, even F&M acted as a booking office for vaudeville acts which facilitated the manager system.<sup>108</sup> Taken together, Franklin recommended a system in which general theater managers trained in and focused solely on the motion picture portion of the industry, while having only a supervisory role over live performance—an attraction ideally removed from their purview entirely and produced in a centralized department.<sup>109</sup> But he also acknowledged, and in many ways, continued to accept and instill showmanship, which sought a more holistic approach to entertainment inspired and curated from a multi-talented manager. In other words, though Franklin increasingly encouraged centralization, above all he supported the autonomy of the managers to decide.

Under the codified, hybrid showman/chain store system of the mid to late 1920s, live performance could fulfill either ideal. It could be an entertainment field ripe for enterprising showmen who, like the prototypical Roxy, wanted to curate the program themselves, either by creating their own presentations or curating vaudeville programs for their audiences. Or it could lean more toward the mass-retail system, with managers programming another form of standardized entertainment dictated by the corporate office. Though Franklin's manual seriously calls into question claims that any company within the studio system fully utilized a mass retail system in the late 1920s, it shows that this process was ongoing and involved cultural work beyond acquiring theaters. It also demonstrates that, for even the most powerful and influential theater executive, acquiring first-run theaters did not just fulfill the tenets of vertical integration of film, but also of variety theater, which could be produced, distributed, and exhibited under the

same corporate umbrella. The fact that theater executives like Franklin imagined theater acquisition as part of a multimedia business strategy was becoming increasingly obvious to fellow film production executives, and motivated their advocacy of cinema. During a time of rising admission and profits and in the spirit of uplift, their arguments fell on deaf ears to showmen and chain managers alike who happily programmed stage entertainment.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harold Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), 301.

<sup>2</sup> Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 231-65; Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Jeanine Basinger, *The Star Machine* (New York: Vintage, 2009), 1-100; David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 2003); Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926-1931* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: BFI, 2008). Andrew Hanssen, "Revenue Sharing and the Coming of Sound," in *An Economic History of Film*, ed. John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny (London: Routledge, 2007), 86-120; Andrea Comiskey, "The Sticks, the Nabs, and the Broadways: U.S. Film Distribution, 1935-1940" (Madison, University of Wisconsin, 2015); R Maltby, "The Standard Exhibition Contract and the Unwritten History of the Classical Hollywood Cinema," *Film History* 25, no. 1/2 (2013): 138-53; Thomas Schatz, "Film Industry Studies and Hollywood History," in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934* (London: British Film Institute, 1985). For an account of the general of retailers and its effects on cultural history see, William R. Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> "Stabilized Industry," *Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 1926, 3. *The Film Daily* reprinted this article the next day. "Stabilization," *The Film Daily*, July 27, 1926, 1, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Kia Afra, *The Hollywood Trust: Trade Associations and the Rise of the Studio System* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 203-34.

<sup>5</sup> “Chain Operators—How Many?,” *Variety*, January 4, 1928, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Fuller-Seeley and Karen Ward Mahar, “Exhibiting Women: Gender, Showmanship, and the Professionalization of Film Exhibition in the United States, 1900–1930,” in Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall’Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project* (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2013). Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women’s Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Jane M. Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018). For more on the wide range of roles women played (and pioneered) in the film industry, especially during the silent era, see “About the Project,” *Women Film Pioneer Project* (website), accessed April 25, 2022, <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/about/>; Richard Abel, “Opportunities for Women in the Movies,” *Film History* 31, no. 2 (2019): 176–96. The only leading roles I have found female workers in exhibition after the start of the studio era is as head bookers. This position led the department which acted as a liaison between film distributors and theater managers, largely focused on logistics and contracts. While not diminishing their contributions, this adheres to Hollywood’s gendered divisions of labor which assigned men to more creative roles and women to more clerical tasks. Thus, the head booker position was the exhibition equivalent of the head research position women also inhabited in production.

<sup>7</sup> Here I adopt the language Nicholas Gerhardt to discuss reforms to corporate culture within big-time vaudeville companies. Nicholas Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies: Popular Musicians and Mass Entertainment in American Culture, 1870-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 62-74.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Koszarski, “Introduction: Movie Business,” *Film History* 19, no. 3 (2007): 211–12. Here Koszarski also argues against one-to-one comparisons between the film industry and other mass retail industries.

<sup>9</sup> The writers vouching for live performance are mentioned and cited in chapter three.

<sup>10</sup> One of these authors is Louis B. Mayer (cited in chapter three), whose column is also pertinent here. Though Mayer is generally more positive about the programmatic benefits of the stage presentation, like these accounts he expresses faith that the feature film should remain the principal product of motion picture theaters. Louis B. Mayer, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1927* (New York: The Film Daily, 1927), 415.

<sup>11</sup> Richard A. Rowland, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 411-2. Rowland also founded Metro Pictures and had recently held an executive position at Fox Film Corporation

<sup>12</sup> Elmer Pearson, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 413.

<sup>13</sup> Earle W. Hammons, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1927*, 413.

<sup>14</sup> The rhetoric of the straight picture economy has informed the “standard story” of film history.

<sup>15</sup> For reviews and publicity that note that stage presentations made films look “bad” by comparison see, Phil Wagner, ““An America Not Quite Mechanized’: Fanchon and Marco, Inc. Perform Modernity,” *Film History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 251–67.

<sup>16</sup> It is important to emphasize that this discourse originated before the “sound era,” and is not premised on the idea that synchronized sound created a “total cinema” which could finally emulate live performance on a level of efficiency, mass production, and mass distribution not attainable by an entertainment built of flesh-and-blood. The mainstream adoption of sound would fuel this rhetoric somewhat, but at its core it was a hierarchical claim hailing cinema largely on the basis of economies of scale, with bits of medium specificity added.

<sup>17</sup> “Trend of Stage Shows,” *Film Daily Year Book 1928* (New York: The Film Daily, 1928), 29.

<sup>18</sup> Vital Facts and Nutshell Statistics that Amazingly Portray the Greatness of a Tremendous Industry,” *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Jack Alicoate, “Past and Future,” *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, C. While Alicoate’s final sentence appears to be a pun on the transition to sound, it seems unlikely given that no other claim in this issue mentions synchronized sound as a reason to eliminate stage shows.

<sup>20</sup> Richard A. Rowland, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 505; Elmer Pearson, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 503; Joseph M. Schenck, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 501; Al Lichtman, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 507; Samuel Goldwyn, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 509; Joe Brandt, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 509. Goldwyn expressed beliefs that film must be the principal product of the exhibitors as early as December 1918, though his specific reasons at this point are not available. Richard Abel, *Movie Mavens: US Newspaper Women Take On the Movies, 1914-1923* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 101-2.

<sup>21</sup> Earle W. Hammons, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 503.

<sup>22</sup> Goldwyn, Untitled, 509.

<sup>23</sup> Schenck, Untitled, 501.

<sup>24</sup> Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, 195.

<sup>25</sup> Al Lichtman, Untitled, 507.

<sup>26</sup> S. L. Rothafel, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 503.

<sup>27</sup> Sam Katz, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 507.

<sup>28</sup> Elmer Pearson, Untitled, 503.

<sup>29</sup> Joe Brandt, Untitled, 509. Brandt calls for exhibition to be “divested of its vaudeville tinsel and trappings.”

<sup>30</sup> Schenck, Untitled, 501.

<sup>31</sup> Goldwyn, Untitled, 509.

<sup>32</sup> “Theater Openings,” *Billboard*, August 13, 1927, 57; “United Artists Theater Circuit,” *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 923; U.A.’s Pre-Run Circuit Now has 10 Houses—in 50% on New Loews,” *Variety*, April 27, 1927, 4; United Artists Gets Kansas City House,” *Billboard*, March 19, 1927, 8; “United Artists Seek Publix Duo in N.Y.,” *Billboard*, July 9, 1927, 30; “U.A. Buys Shuberts’ Lease on Apollo, Chi,” *Variety*, February 23, 1927, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Afra, *The Hollywood Trust*, 206, 216.

<sup>34</sup> William Fox, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 501.

- <sup>35</sup> Harold Franklin, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 505; Richard Rowland, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 505.
- <sup>36</sup> Schenck, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 503.
- <sup>37</sup> Schenck, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 503.
- <sup>38</sup> Schenck, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 503.
- <sup>39</sup> Jacob Smith, "Detroit's Hectic Year," *Variety*, January 18, 1928, 10.
- <sup>40</sup> "'Student Prince, \$46,350; Penn's Record, Pittsburgh," *Variety*, February 8, 1928, 6; "Pittsburgh Ruined 'Sadie,' with 20 Cuts," *Variety* February 1, 1928, 8.
- <sup>41</sup> Afra, *Hollywood Trust*, 205.
- <sup>42</sup> Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies*, 64-5; Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & Its History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 499. For more on career of and mythos around Barnum see, James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); James W. Cook, ed., *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader: Nothing Else Like It in the Universe* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 1-9.
- <sup>43</sup> B.F. Keith, quoted in Alfred F. McLean, "Genesis of Vaudeville: Two Letters from B.F. Keith," *Theatre Survey*, no. 1 (1960): 89.
- <sup>44</sup> Edward Albee, quoted in Arthur Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 23.
- <sup>45</sup> Walter Richard Eaton, "The Wizards of Vaudeville," *McClure's Magazine* 55, no. 7 (September 1923): 43-9.
- <sup>46</sup> Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies*, 64-5.
- <sup>47</sup> George H. Eckhardt, "The Showman and Showmanship," *Billboard*, November 20, 1926, 51; Frank H Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1938), 96-9. Critics and industry personnel heavily criticized Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel for overemphasizing showmanship at the expense of business. See, Ross Melnick, *American Showman: Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908-1935* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 365-80.
- <sup>48</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 57-9.
- <sup>49</sup> Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies*, 64-5.
- <sup>50</sup> David Monod, *Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment, 1890-1925* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 4-5; M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 21-5.
- <sup>51</sup> Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies*, 67.
- <sup>52</sup> Robert Grau, *The Business Man in the Amusement World: A Volume of Progress in the Field of the Theatre* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1910), 139.
- <sup>53</sup> Grau, *The Business Man in the Amusement World*, 139.

<sup>54</sup> Douglas Gomery, "U.S. Film Exhibition: The Formation of a Big Business," in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 54-9.

<sup>55</sup> Gomery, "U.S. Film Exhibition." For an argument about how Hollywood films empowered a managerial class see, Mark Garrett Cooper, *Love Rules: Silent Hollywood and the Rise of the Managerial Class* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>56</sup> "23 New Publix Mgrs. Graduate," *Billboard*, January 11, 1930, 2; "Publix School Grads," *Variety*, July 2, 1930, 27; "35 Publix School Graduates Assigned to Circuit Positions," *The Film Daily*, September 14, 1930, 1, 11.

<sup>57</sup> The only extant evidence from the Paramount-Publix school is a document from a later period of the school's existence titled, "A Performance Check for Theater Managers" prepared by then school director, Jack Barry, and published annually in the *Film Daily Yearbook* from 1930 to 1932. In the future, I plan to use this document to trace the progression of the mass-retail system in film exhibition, arguing that this document reveals that even by the early 1930s, in the heat of the Depression, Paramount-Publix still relied in part on showmanship. For the purpose of this chapter, this document reveals little concrete information about the program during the 1920s. It does demonstrate, though, that the Paramount Publix school trained managers to program live performance in their theaters. Jack Barry, "A Performance Check for Theater Managers," *The Film Daily Year Book 1931* (New York: The Film Daily, 1931), 700.

<sup>58</sup> John B Rathbun, *Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting*. (Chicago: Charles C. Thompson Company, 1914).

<sup>59</sup> Balaban & Katz Corporation, *The Fundamentals of Balaban & Katz Theatre Management* (Chicago: Balaban & Katz Corporation, 1926).

<sup>60</sup> Balaban & Katz Corporation, *The Fundamentals*, frontmatter.

<sup>61</sup> Franklin's book was one of the Doran Companies final publications, as the company went defunct the year it was published. The company published an eclectic catalog, including works by famous authors including Arthur Conan Doyle, O. Henry, Theodore Roosevelt, Virginia Woolf, and H.G. Wells, as well as religious texts, instructional books (e.g. how to play golf), and children's literature. John Tebbel, *Between Covers: The Rise and Transformation of Book Publishing in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>62</sup> "A Second Printing Was Necessary!," *Motion Picture News*, June 2, 1928, 1895.

<sup>63</sup> "Harold Franklin," *MPPDA Digital Archive* (website), Flinders University, accessed April 25, 2022, <https://mppda.flinders.edu.au/people/202>.

<sup>64</sup> Ross Melnick, *American Showman: Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908-1935* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 463; Ross Melnick and Andreas Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theaters* (St. Paul (MN): MBI, 2004), 47-75.

- <sup>65</sup> “Franklin V.-P. of RKO,” *Variety*, January 17, 1933, 7. “Franklin and RKO,” *Variety*, January 26, 1932, 3. Reports indicate that RKO originally only wanted Franklin to oversee the 36 Orpheum circuit theaters on the west coast (12 of which were currently not operating).
- <sup>66</sup> Later in the decade, Franklin managed the industry-wide campaign declaring 1938 “Hollywood’s Greatest Year.” For more on this drive see, Catherine Jurca, *Hollywood 1938: Motion Pictures’ Greatest Year* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2012).
- <sup>67</sup> Melnick and Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures*, 47-75.
- <sup>68</sup> “A Second Printing Was Necessary!,” *Motion Picture News*, June 2, 1928, 1895.
- <sup>69</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 19.
- <sup>70</sup> “A Second Printing Was Necessary!,” *Motion Picture News*, June 2, 1928, 1895.
- <sup>71</sup> For more information on Columbia University’s early forays into film studies and industry training see, Peter Decherney, “Inventing Film Study and Its Object at Columbia University, 1915-1938,” *Film History* 12, no. 4 (2000): 443–60.
- <sup>72</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 15-19.
- <sup>73</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 18.
- <sup>74</sup> For more information on the professionalization of women in business of film exhibition from early cinema until 1930, see note 7.
- <sup>75</sup> For other sections of Franklin’s book which demonstrate that he understood and promoted the logic of vertical integration, even if his practices and beliefs overall supported showmanship, see Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, v-viii, 21-34.
- <sup>76</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 32.
- <sup>77</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 17-8.
- <sup>78</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 29.
- <sup>79</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 18.
- <sup>80</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 19.
- <sup>81</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 347-8.
- <sup>82</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres*, 28-56; 97-99.
- <sup>83</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 79.
- <sup>84</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 29.
- <sup>85</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 296.
- <sup>86</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 349.
- <sup>87</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 355.
- <sup>88</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 30.
- <sup>89</sup> The Paramount Theater’s competitor, the Roxy Theater, is perhaps a better example of his description of a theater as a city.
- <sup>90</sup> Richard Abel, *Motor City Movie Culture, 1916-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 84-135.
- <sup>91</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 296.



- <sup>92</sup> For more information on efforts by architect and studios to create theaters made only for cinema see, William Paul, *When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
- <sup>93</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 297.
- <sup>94</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 301.
- <sup>95</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 299.
- <sup>96</sup> Franklin, Untitled, *Film Daily Year Book 1928*, 505.
- <sup>97</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 151.
- <sup>98</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 298.
- <sup>99</sup> Like vaudeville manager used Barnum, Franklin positions Roxy as the embodiment of the mythos of the American showmen. Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 16, 297.
- <sup>100</sup> Franklin, *Motion Theater Picture Management*, 299-300.
- <sup>101</sup> Phil Wagner, “‘An America Not Quite Mechanized’: Fanchon and Marco, Inc. Perform Modernity,” *Film History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 251–67.
- <sup>102</sup> Gomery claims B&K tour presentation stage shows across circuit theater, but it is unclear how common it was. Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 50-3. B&K implies some of their stage shows toured in its 1926 manual see, Balaban & Katz Corporation, *The Fundamentals*, 73-5.
- <sup>103</sup> Wagner, “‘An America Not Quite Mechanized,’ 257; Reva Howitt Clar, *Lollipop: Vaudeville Turns with a Fanchon and Marco Dancer* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2002); Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 84.
- <sup>104</sup> J.B. Griswold, “Let’s Be Ourselves: The Story of a Brother and Sister Who Licked the Big City by Going Back Home,” *American Magazine* 114 (1932): n.p., Fanchon and Marco scrapbook, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
- <sup>105</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 53.
- <sup>106</sup> “Orpheum’s Production Dept. May Be Abolished-Total Flop,” *Variety*, December 29, 1926, 20.
- <sup>107</sup> “Orpheum’s Production Dept.,” 20.
- <sup>108</sup> “Schallman Booker for Fanchon & Marco,” *Billboard*, August 31, 1929, 24; M.H. Shapiro, “Fanchon & Marco – Warners Enfranchise their Agents,” *Billboard*, November 14, 1931, 6.
- <sup>109</sup> If common practice, Franklin’s suggestion to lump live performance directing and management with the live music director (a position that would soon be displaced by synchronized sound) and these large production companies (which the studios would soon eliminate), would have dire consequences for the live performance industry.

## Chapter 4

### **The Show Must Go On: Restructuring Variety Theater During the Great Depression (1930-1948)**

“A straight picture economy is false economy.”<sup>1</sup>

- Joe Bigelow, December 29, 1931.

“Vaudeville will have its chance when there are more managerial believers in vaudeville. The picture and vaudeville hook-up in chains is all wrong for vaudeville. The weight lies with pictures, because the controllers of the chains are firstly picture men, who don't know vaudeville and have no faith in it.”<sup>2</sup>

- Sime Silverman, December 31, 1930.

As I demonstrated in chapter 3, the industry-wide adoption of synchronized sound had little impact on live performance in motion picture theaters except outside of cities. The 1928 - 1929 entertainment season marked a new height for variety live performances housed within the umbrella of the studio system, despite the growing calls among some industry leaders to abolish the practice for the sake of vertical integration.<sup>3</sup> Variety entertainment, like all media industries, soon faced another threat which mobilized the straight picture movement into the mainstream and led to significant decline: the Great Depression. This chapter provides an account of how the programming and prevalence of live performance in movie theaters changed and survived during the Great Depression. It argues most simply that the Depression era was as transformative as it was destructive for variety theater. The show continued, and the industry emerged restructured.

Unlike other media industries, including film and radio, variety entertainment fared far worse in terms of job loss among agents, performers, writers, and producers, and in the declining prevalence of theaters and bookings. The industry also never recovered its previous scale.<sup>4</sup> While the total number of theaters using live performance during and after the Depression oscillated from year-to-year, the industry (in number of theaters) persistently remained approximately fifty to ninety-percent smaller than their pre-Depression levels until at least the Paramount Decree of 1948, with permanent job loss both onstage and off. However, the decline of live performance during this five-year period was neither immediate, uniform, nor continuous, with major players refraining and doubling-back from year-to-year. It was nonetheless an unambiguous decline overall.

The economy is not to blame, however. Explanations that the Great Depression led to widespread decline of live performance do not explain why this format and the industry behind it did not return, like its contemporaries, to its previous scope once the economy and theater-going slowly returned to pre-1930 levels. In fact, economic conditions in the industry do not correlate to the oscillating prevalence of live performance.

Though this is the first account set against the narrative of vaudeville's demise, it acknowledges a principal cause of change for variety theater during this period: the studios' so-called "killing strategies" aimed at live performance. Hollywood studios and some of its top executives, motivated by their pre-existing desire to eliminate live performance in favor of standardized exhibition, no longer supported it and took advantage of the hardships of the Great Depression to push largely for its termination. Hollywood's efforts to limit live performance during this time were relentless and multifaceted, effecting company infrastructure, as well as distribution and accounting policies. In addition to continued accusations that stage shows were

outdated and needlessly expensive, each of the major studios disbanded their centralized departments producing live acts and units. The recently adopted percentage film rental system made booking top quality films with stage shows financially unfeasible, and the studios encouraged theater managers to eliminate overhead expenses. For the majority of managers, this meant cutting onstage talent and backstage crew. In short, Hollywood worked diligently and carefully to create an industrial environment biased against variety entertainment. Having become established with the film industry during the studios' theatrical acquisitions of the late 1920s, variety entertainment now suffered the repercussions of this once symbiotic relationship.

But live performance was not outmoded or a financial burden; nor was it defenseless against these changes and policies. While crucial for understanding the smaller shape of the live performance industry after the Great Depression, only emphasizing the Hollywood studios' attacks against the stage serves to reaffirm the dominant historical discourse promoted by the studios themselves: top down management's overwhelmingly successful path toward standardization, oligopolistic control, and hyper-efficiency.<sup>5</sup> However, the survival of live performance contradicts these claims and their assumptions about the underlying hierarchy of exhibition. Thankfully for variety entertainment, studios placed significant decision-making power on theater managers. Continued bookings of vaudefilm relied on the decentralized control over theater programming, which intensified during the Depression because of studio bankruptcies and overall debt and expense reduction. Under a decentralized system, managers decided the programming policies and were solely responsible for the financial success or failure of their theaters, despite remaining dependent upon whatever films were available. This left circuit theater managers and, increasingly, independent theater owners in charge of theater programming, and allowed some theaters to negotiate friendly terms for live performance

bookings. While the studios largely wanted live performance eliminated (or were unsure whether to keep it around), decentralization kept that decision largely out of their hands.

Because of this control, vaudefilm supporters regularly posited two possible paths for the variety industry to survive the Depression and ideally return to its former prevalence, as described in a December 31, 1930, editorial by *Variety* founder Sime Silverman (epigraph): 1.) convincing “picture” managers of the benefits of programming live performance in their theaters, and/or 2.) securing theaters free from the influences and policies of the studios and the film industry. *Variety* regularly republished Silverman’s editorial throughout the 1930s, indicating its continued relevance.<sup>6</sup>

Silverman’s claims were quite prophetic regarding the underlying factors that led to vaudefilm’s ultimate survival. The variety theater industry worked hard to convince and accommodate the needs and worries of theater managers by, for example, accepting pay disparities to continue anchoring bills with stars and adjusting longstanding booking policies to foster more collaboration between once rival circuits. But the real impetus for the stage’s survival and transformation during this period of transition were the studio’s own financial shortcomings and systemic problems with production. Hollywood, I argue, failed to achieve a completely standardized exhibition landscape because its production sector was unable to maintain the tenets of vertical integration and the straight picture economy: they could not regularly produce enough quality films to satisfy heavily saturated urban markets.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Hollywood’s distribution and exhibition system during the studio-era needed this less efficient and more costly medium to compensate for its own inadequacies, stay competitive, dispel competition, and maintain control of first-run markets. It also opened a rare source of control and method of competition for individual (increasingly independent) theater owners in and against

Hollywood's urban-centric oligopoly. Hollywood-owned and independent theaters in these markets turned (some regularly, others occasionally) to live performance as a method to control their own programming and to regularize entertainment quality in hopes of securing consistent box-office returns. These theaters would also regularly drop stage acts if and when they could secure "good pictures," but the frequency of this varied from year to year, and market to market. Some never could. No longer desired primarily for its prestige, variety entertainment transitioned largely into a utilitarian role. To weather the storms of underproduction and studio-favoritism, these theater managers turned to and favored a strategy more akin to "showmanship," then the comparatively standardized approach which became the norm during the Depression.

My argument does not present a chronological account of the Depression era. Between 1930 and 1934, studios and theaters reacted differently and at different times to each condition, depending on their location, studio-affiliation, and financial and managerial strategies. As such, this chapter is structured categorically. In order to prove the simple economic turmoil of the Depression was not the major reason for decline and that this period in no way marked the total demise of the practice, I begin the chapter by tracing the presence of live performance in motion picture theaters as compiled by *Variety* and the United States government.<sup>8</sup> After, I use Warner Bros. (which aggressively attempted to expand its live performance circuit even during the worst years of the Depression) as a case study to demonstrate the power dynamics between studio offices and individual circuit theaters which ultimately left it to theater managers to decide upon the use of live performance. I then demonstrate how theater managers justified booking stage acts under these pressures and policies, while also dispelling Hollywood's claims of live performances' lack of entertainment value through their almost sole reliance on a cross-media star system. This strategy and the accommodations made by performers and talent agents to

facilitate these changes, however, created widespread instability in the industry, largely from rampant underemployment. In the next section, I explain the primary motivations for managers to continue booking live performances, including a lack of first-run films and the studios' failure to regulate local competition. I end by describing the hopeful attempts to create an autonomous variety entertainment industry within the studio-dominated theatrical landscape, how the Depression created new opportunities for live performance in the growing number of independent first-run theaters, and how the changes to and roles for live performance during the Depression continued to influence its use for almost two decades.

### **Taking the Show on the Road Through the Depression**

On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed, an event which would set the stage for major changes in American life and business including catastrophic poverty and joblessness. However, its immediate effects on the film industry were uneven and, early on, resulted in no widespread managerial changes.<sup>9</sup> Despite the crash, film industry profits rose more than 160% between 1928 and the end of 1929, making 1929 one of the most profitable in motion picture history.<sup>10</sup> The first months of 1930 proved equally promising with the Standard Statistics Company increasing its stock index of the top motion picture companies by more than 85%, despite its index dropping 18.5% overall. Unsurprisingly, the amusement industry headed Standard's list of "depression-proof" industries published early in 1930.<sup>11</sup>

While those working in and analyzing variety entertainment expressed worry that the Depression would negatively affect their businesses, the trade press reported no widespread loss of booking during the early months of 1930. During the first two months, 290 major metropolitan theaters reported some kind of live performance accompanying movies every week

to *Variety*, a typical amount for the publication.<sup>12</sup> The widespread reports of “business as usual” which dominated *Variety* and *Billboard*’s variety theater sections in early 1930 further suggest that a bullish entertainment market insulated live performance from its critics inside the studios.

Not long after these reports, the confidence that Hollywood and theatergoing were completely immune to economic depressions proved false--at least a for a moment. The first signs of trouble came from theater manager reports that observed falling attendance by the spring. In most of the country, except for poor communities on the edges of cities like Chicago and New York, these declines were temporary and did not lead to closures. Many studio distributors and key members of the Motion Picture Theater Owners of America even continued to express optimism that overall patronage would not decline, dismissing these “junk” theaters as not a bellwether of faltering conditions in the industry as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

With the overwhelming affluence in the business of theatergoing during the late 1920s threatened (though not yet destroyed), live performance was no longer immune to the growing calls for the straight picture economy. During this time, live performance saw its sharpest and first ever widely reported decline in bookings, largely explained as just another temporary revenue saving endeavor until theater managers could “figure out the economy.”<sup>14</sup> By the end of 1930, the weekly reported average of live performance programming dropped by about a third from the beginning of the year, with *Variety* reporting that 185 theaters still regularly booked live acts, 140 using vaudefilm and 45 programming presentations.<sup>15</sup>

While 1930 proved to be a difficult year for variety theater, Hollywood as a whole did not experience the same kind of financial pain or decline. 1930 actually marked the then all-time height of weekly theater attendance of 80 million attendees, a figure which helped even out the dips in attendance. Although the national income dropped more than nineteen percent, the major



studios continued to appear immune from the Depression. Even though studios continued spending in similar amounts to what they did before the crash, building more studio space, acquiring music rights, and competing in the race for new technological innovation, each of the majors turned a profit: MGM earned \$12 million, Paramount \$18.4 million, Fox \$10 million, and RKO \$3.4 million. Warner Bros. also earned a \$7 million profit and ended the year with \$230 million dollars in assets, a figure which placed them clearly within the Big Five.<sup>16</sup>

Like 1930, annual changes in the number of stage shows from 1931 to 1934 do not perfectly correlate with the specific economic impact of the Depression on the entertainment industry. General economic conditions worsened in 1931, with national income down more than thirty-five percent from 1929 levels. Despite the studio heads' earlier confidence in the economic immunity of their companies, amusement related stocks decreased by an average of seventy-five percent, and trade papers indicated that theater admissions decreased around forty percent; revenues shriveled, leaving RKO, Warner Bros., and Fox with losses ranging from \$4 to \$8 million each. Loews's and Paramount both earned profits, but sixty percent less than the prior year. With sinking revenues and rising production costs, the studios further adopted strategies to reduce expenses and downsize their liabilities that would last the next three or four years.<sup>17</sup>

In contradiction to these trends, the number of stage shows actually increased in 1931, with some notable variation across the major circuits. 256 theaters, on average, reported programmed live performance with 159 theaters using vaudefilm and 77 weeks of presenting, bringing the national total almost back to early 1930 levels.<sup>18</sup> Only the theaters of two majors, Fox and Warner Bros., increased their use of live performance. F&M (still partnering largely with Fox West Coast Theaters) expanded their Ideas into fifty theaters per week. Not only did five more Warner Bros. theaters adopt a vaudefilm policy (for a total of fourteen), but eleven

theaters now also booked presentations. The number of independent theaters that booked stage acts also increased slightly to twenty. The rest of the majors slightly decreased or shifted their use of live performance.<sup>19</sup> During this year, the circuits together employed somewhere between 675 to 800 acts (many of which would have had multiple performers) each week, with at least 475 acts used in vaudefilm theaters and 200 in presentations. Despite the industry's fairly stable numbers appearing as a major victory for the stage when viewed historically, most critics in the variety entertainment industry remained overly pessimistic. Joe Bigelow, one of the lead journalists for *Variety's* vaudeville section and a vaudevillian himself, wrote that the 1931 "figures comprise an unprecedented bottom for a business that's learned as much about the bottoms as the stock market."<sup>20</sup>

In 1932, the economy continued to decline, and the film industry fell even harder with bankruptcies and receiverships plaguing almost all of the major studios. This year marked the very bottom for the American economy. National income had declined by nearly fifty-percent since 1929 (\$81 billion to \$41 billion), approximately twenty-eight percent of Americans earned no income, nine million savings accounts were wiped out, and thousands of businesses and banks closed. In the entertainment industry, losses suffered by Fox, RKO, Warner Bros. reached new record highs, but now Paramount "led" with \$21 million in losses. Two important theater chains, Fox Theaters Corporation and Balaban and Katz (a Paramount subsidiary, known primarily for their thirty-five theaters in Chicago), entered receivership.

1932 is the only year in which the overall economic trends somewhat matched the prevalence of live performance. The beginning of the year actually marked a small resurgence of live performance, returning the industry to its 1931 high of 256 weeks. Toward the end of the year, however, bookings of live performance decreased by more than seventy-five percent to a

low fifty-six weeks, twenty-five of vaudefilm and thirty-one of presentations. The yearly average, though, was a bit higher with fifty-six theaters using vaudefilm weekly, bringing the total theaters with presentations to eighty-seven weeks. Each studio also eliminated their production departments responsible for building presentations and/or developing vaudeville acts. Collectively, the industry now only employed 200 acts per week. The number of bookings and acts shrunk so much that the major studios considered creating a combined booking agency responsible for coordinating live acts with all studio-affiliated theaters. During the arguably worst year of the Depression, variety theater temporarily reached its lowest point—but so did the rest of the entertainment industry.<sup>21</sup>

For most contemporary commentators, and many scholars today, the year 1932 marked the death of vaudeville not primarily because of the prevalence of live acts, but because of the “closing” of the Palace Theater, the last big time, two-day vaudeville house in New York City, vaudeville’s symbolic and industrial capital.<sup>22</sup> Far from signaling the demise of the combination of live performance and film, the Palace was a latecomer in an industry that had long transitioned into vaudefilm style programming. Assertions that the Palace’s policy shift marked the death of live performance obscure the fact that the Palace (now owned by RKO), in fact, did not close. Rather, on May 7, management implemented a more industry-standard, combination policy that was shown four times per day, with sound shorts accompanying a bill of live acts. In July, the Palace programmed its first feature film, *The Kid from Spain* (1932), starring Eddie Cantor. Its adoption of synchronized sound loudly signaled the end of vaudeville as defined as *only* live acts played twice daily. This spurred nostalgic, longing recollections from many critics, performers, writers, and theater circuit employees. Yet, it was hardly consequential to the variety industry as

a whole as it had simply adopted the standard combination format, which it kept throughout the Depression.<sup>23</sup>

Though 1933 was another horrible financial year for Hollywood, variety live performance was far less affected, and the studios never created the combined booking agency.<sup>24</sup> Unable to pay their immense mortgages accrued during the theater acquisition and building spree of the late 1920s, several of the studios' theater chains declared bankruptcy--led first by RKO's Keith-Albee-Orpheum (KAO) theaters in January, with Paramount and Fox not far behind. Warner Bros. never declared bankruptcy but similarly began restructuring and selling off assets.<sup>25</sup>

Despite all the financial turmoil within the entertainment industry, 1933 marked only another small decline in overall playing time of live performance. The most important changes to the industry were in terms of infrastructure and booking strategies, however. Overall, eight fewer studio theaters that reported to *Variety* regularly booked live acts, dropping the total number from fifty-six to forty-eight.<sup>26</sup> *Variety* also stopped tracking presentations separately from vaudefilm policies for several reasons. Programs resembling presentations still existed, but they were generally less unified and spectacular with little to no uniquely created decor and costumes, a cheaper alternative to the previously lavish entertainment format. All of the studios had now eliminated their own presentation production departments, so most presentations were now decentralized outside of studio control, produced independently and sold to circuits and/or theaters. Other "presentations" were simply disparate vaudeville-style acts booked separately, unified haphazardly usually with a final number combining all the acts on the bill, and directed by theater managers.<sup>27</sup>

While live performance in movie theaters certainly declined during the Depression, it should also be clear that the economic turmoil, plummeting theater attendance and chaotic studio finances do not correlate with changes to the prevalence of combination policies. Usage of live acts declined before conditions for the entertainment industry actually worsened in 1930, then recuperated during the first crisis of 1931, plunged as they worsened in 1932, and then nearly stayed the same as overall conditions worsened again in 1933. Thus, general economic conditions were not the single driving factor that brought changes to the variety entertainment industry - other agents and actors must be examined.

Statistics printed in *Variety's* articles outline the general trend of live entertainment during this period, but other evidence suggests the press's vaudeville department significantly overestimated the decline of the practice. This contradictory data is rare and infrequent but appears more rigorously researched.<sup>28</sup> In 1933, the United States Department of Commerce collected research on American theaters for its Census of American Business. Their report indicated that, of the 10,143 theaters showing motion pictures operating in the country that year, more than six percent, 644 theaters, qualified as "Motion Picture - Vaudeville" theaters, with the remaining theaters playing straight films.<sup>29</sup> The census reported that Motion Picture - Vaudeville theaters operated in forty-two of the forty-eight states and the District of Columbia.<sup>30</sup> At its most simple and most crucial, however, the Census for American Business demonstrated that—even at the tail end of the very bottom of the Great Depression, the use of live performance was more prevalent than *Variety's* more regularly produced data suggest, reaching nearly every corner of the country even in stretches outside of the major studios' purview. *Variety's* data suggested only forty-eight theaters a week used live acts, whereas the census indicated a prevalence thirteen times higher.<sup>31</sup>

## Theaters Closing

Another problem with any statistical data about the decline of live performance (and the displacement narrative as a whole) is that it is impossible to determine how the decline of live performance was exacerbated on a national scale by the widespread closing of theaters during the Depression. Between 1930 and 1933, some approximations suggest that more than fifty percent of American theaters closed. At the beginning of 1930, 23,000 theaters operated in the United States.<sup>32</sup> This decreased to as few as 10,143 in 1933 - a rate of about 4,000 closures per year.<sup>33</sup> Not surprisingly the rate of closure nearly matched the general decline in theatrical attendance during this time, which dropped from an all-time high of 110,000,000 in 1930 to 60,000,000 in 1932 and 1933.<sup>34</sup> *Variety's* vaudeville section regularly noted that many theaters showing live performance were part of this number, with many combination policy theaters outright shuttering or temporarily moving to a straight-picture policy before quickly succumbing.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, no information gives even a general approximation of how frequent theaters that employed live performance closed. Given that, a "vast majority," according to Tino Balio, of theaters that closed seated an average of 700 patrons and were owned by independents (rather than studios), this suggests that smaller vaudeville-style theaters showing live performances could have been regularly affected, but many palace-sized theaters, which were largely owned by studios and had larger seating capacity, were less so.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, the reduction in theaters utilizing a combination policy during this time should not be understood purely as an *increase* in the number of theaters using straight picture policy. When pleading to the United States House of Representatives in 1932 to lower the admission tax, RKO's representative, Fred De Boudy manager of RKO Keith Theater in Washington, D.C., noted that the use of vaudeville in only fifty percent of the company's theaters was partly the result of "many of our theaters clos[ing] on

account of the depression.”<sup>37</sup> Simply put, with fewer theaters in operation, there were less for live performances in total, even among the larger companies.

The statistical data proves that live performance in movie theaters did not disappear during the Depression, though it did decline. During this time the practice became constricted to, at worst, five percent (according to *Variety* data) and at best fifty-percent (according to the Census of American Business) of its former size between 1,000 and 2,000 theaters in the mid-1920s. Blaming the Great Depression (or even less accurately, the adoption of synchronized sound) in the most general sense for the declining use of live performance misses the nuances which shaped the scale and location of where live performance continued, who performed in those theaters, who booked the acts, and what format the show took.

To understand why live performance survived the Depression, one must examine not just the discourse of the studio heads (which largely made clear they wanted the practice gone), but rather focus on the conflicts, restrictions, and opportunities created by four factors: 1.) policies and infrastructural changes the film industry enacted during the Depression to disincentivize managers from booking live performance, 2.) complaints by theater managers that live performance was too expensive and lacked novelty, and how the variety entertainment industry and theater managers accommodated these complaints, 3.) problems of film production and distribution exacerbated (but not created) by the Depression, and 4.) how the financial crisis increased theatrical competition in metropolitan markets.

### **Who is in Charge? A Case Study of the Warner Bros. Booking Office**

I begin by turning attention to *who* is responsible for the decline of live performance in studio circuits. Scholarship on the studio system suggests that when looking for motivations and

decisions within a film corporation, one should look for the top-decision maker located in each of the studios' corporate offices in New York City. In this theory (which Gomery calls "Industry Analysis"), studio heads like Paramount's Adolph Zukor or Loew's Nicholas Schenck handed down decisions which shaped policy in the departments below.<sup>38</sup> This, however, does not accurately reflect the corporate power dynamics in exhibition which determined the prevalence and location of live performance across the industry. To make this clear, I present a case study of the Warner Bros. circuit from 1929 to 1933. While no studio can claim to be representative of the entire industry, the choice demonstrates the limits to this top-down model of corporate governance.

Warner Bros. leaders, Harry and Jack Warner, were well-known antagonists of stage entertainment.<sup>39</sup> In contrast to their reputation in scholarship as the originators of the studios' pro-sound, anti-live performance and live music attitudes, Warner Bros. actually had an atypically aggressive interest in building and expanding its live performance circuit, especially during the early years of the Depression. Not only does this suggest the persistent attractive position live performance held in the industry even during the early 1930s, but also that studio action and policy regularly diverged from the polemic discourse of its executives. While the studios' actions toward live performance between 1930 and 1934 were always hesitant, they were rarely truly antagonistic and more regularly ranged from cautious support to indifference. Instead of antagonistic, the studios would be better described as undertaking a constant search to make booking live acts cheaper and efficient, and each studio remained committed (albeit in different ways and not at the same time) to finding more profitable ways to book (or produce and distribute) live acts. Most simply, however, this case study demonstrates that the fate of live performance in movie theaters rested largely outside the studio's corporate offices.



As the last of the Big Five, Warner Bros. also was the last major studio to develop its own booking office. Before mid-1929, Stanley-Warner theaters booked vaudeville or presentations (of which there were fourteen in late 1929) through RKO, due to a 1923 agreement between Stanley Theaters and RKO's predecessor, the Keith-Albee circuit, that prohibited "Stanley or its affiliated outfits from doing vaudeville booking in any form" in exchange for Keith-Albee's booking services.<sup>40</sup> However, Warner Bros. skirted their contractual obligations by starting the Warner Bros.'s Booking Office in April 1929, with a staff, including Harold Kemp as head booker, and Steve Trilling as the assistant booker.<sup>41</sup> Warner Bros.'s Booking Office immediately removed all ten theaters not under explicit contract with or partially owned by RKO, and placed them under their umbrella.<sup>42</sup>

Now operating autonomously with fourteen theaters, the Warner Bros.'s Booking Office sought to expand their market reach and talent pool.<sup>43</sup> In January 1930, they announced that, like RKO, they would sell their booking services to independent theaters. Kemp also announced that they would maintain an "open door policy" for talent agents, allowing any and all agents to sell the acts they represented to Stanley-Warner Theaters.<sup>44</sup> They also began plans to produce their own presentation units out of Pittsburgh and distribute them to nearby cities in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Warner's initial push for new theaters resulted in disappointment, however. Kemp and Trilling convinced only one theater in the Hoffman Theater Circuit to book vaudeville out of their office (the other theaters in the circuit felt they were "better off with straight sound," and they also gained another Stanley-Warner Theater in New Britain, Connecticut).<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile two theaters in Pennsylvania that previously booked vaudeville, one in Pittsburgh and another in Erie, adopted a straight picture policy, as did two other unknown theaters.<sup>46</sup>

The mediocre start did not deter Kemp and his team. Despite booking two less theaters (for a total of twelve) by the end of April, Warner Bros. became the only studio circuit to publicly announce its intentions to expand its use of live performance. By the end of 1930, Kemp anticipated booking twenty to twenty-five venues, double their current total and finally earning the office profit. At this number, Warner would surpass the size of the Fox circuit and nearly equal that of Paramount-Publix and Loew's. Kemp and his team planned to recruit from three pools of theaters that primarily exhibited films: straight-picture theaters owned by Stanley-Warner (approximately numbering 500), independent theaters that the circuit planned to buy, and about seven circuit theaters currently programming Paramount-Publix stage presentations. Kemp's office sent a survey to each theater in these pools to determine the "adaptability of the theaters for stage shows" to boost profits.<sup>47</sup> Spyros Skouras, then head of the Stanley-Warner theater circuit, also echoed the desire to add more live performance to its theaters, declaring in July that "larger houses will be compelled to give vaude the recognition which they long shunned" and predicted that, this year "vaude will be given its biggest opportunity by the film industry."<sup>48</sup> Working throughout the summer of 1930, Kemp and others at the studio offered terms that no other studio circuit previously had. To further attract the best acts and talent agents, the Warner Bros.'s Booking Office became the first studio circuit ever to forgo the expected five-percent commission from talent salary, an "innovation" which made them the "juiciest spot" for agents according to *Billboard*.<sup>49</sup> They also worked with the studio's talent department, Warner Artists Bureau, to book "name" talent, paying competitive salaries up to \$7,500 per week (\$119,934 in 2022) for stars as big as Eddie Cantor. They also offered an industry-leading seven weeks of guaranteed work for these top earners. Other studios usually booked stars for shorter residencies because of their high cost.<sup>50</sup>

By mid-November, the Warner Bros. Booking office not only had *not* neared its goals, but they had also remained stagnant with their twelve-theater circuit. The office nonetheless remained committed to convincing circuit theaters of live performance's viability. Since April, the team had secured commitments from theater managers in New Jersey (Newark and Jersey City), Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh and Philadelphia), Indianapolis, and St. Louis that they would discontinue the use of Paramount-Publix units *next* season and had five theaters try out two nights a week in Philadelphia.<sup>51</sup> Most notably they added the Earle Theater in Washington D.C., a sizable movie palace that had not programmed live performance since 1926. At the same time, they struggled to retain managers' commitment for theaters already on their circuit, in part because the intense summer heat in the Northeast kept audiences away from these theaters without air conditioning. Live acts were too expensive to program for an empty theater, and neither live acts nor celluloid could mitigate the weather induced slump.<sup>52</sup>

Undeterred, Warner's booking office planned Christmas and New Year's special events for theaters playing straight-films in an attempt to convince them to adopt live acts. Kemp's team hired mentalist (i.e., a "mind reading" illusionist) Gene Dennis and booked her for thirty week-long stints at primary straight picture houses. Two Warner booking agents accompanied Dennis and met with managers at each theater. The team also sent three act bills to four Pennsylvania theaters as an "experiment" for the theater.<sup>53</sup> They also booked five to eight act bills for seven primarily cinema-only theaters in New Jersey and Connecticut to showcase in a special New Year's Eve midnight show.<sup>54</sup>

The beginning of 1931 finally looked promising for Warner Bros.'s expansion, though problems still persisted. Stanley-Warner's Davis Theater in Pittsburgh reopened after a two-year closure with a vaudefilm policy. With this one small success came another roadblock, however.

The booking office primarily pushed vaudeville-style and not presentations in its theaters. Despite early experiments to mass produce units in Pittsburgh, Kemp's team ultimately decided to push only vaudeville acts. For one, they were collectively cheaper to book. Second, they provided "more entertainment by greater variety," echoing vaudeville's heterogeneous approach to mass culture.<sup>55</sup> This latter point, that what differentiated vaudeville from both film and presentations was its ability to cater to locally specific tastes, seemed especially important to the circuit's executive team. Dan Michalelove, new head of Stanley-Warner theaters (taking over from Skouras) stated this even more explicitly in August 1931, "Stage shows, especially, must be tailored for their particular locality."<sup>56</sup> Not all managers agreed. Some of Stanley-Warner's larger, deluxe theaters (e.g., variety palaces) which had previously booked Paramount-Publix units wanted to maintain a combination policy but considered its theater "unsuited to vaude."<sup>57</sup> Instead they wanted to return to Publix shows. The manager of the Indiana Theater (Indianapolis) justified this move by claiming that vaudeville "looked bad."<sup>58</sup> His comment suggested that presentations better matched the grandeur and filled the visual space of the large stage. Currently unprepared to build a presentation production department to match those of Paramount-Publix or Loew's, the Warner booking office began negotiations on Valentine's Day to introduce Fanchon and Marco's "Ideas" to any Stanley-Warner Theater, particularly targeted at theaters currently playing Publix shows.<sup>59</sup>

Even with this plan, just as many Stanley-Warner theaters adopted live performance as did drop it for straight-pictures.<sup>60</sup> But Kemp and his team continued their plans, and even adapted them in accordance with circuit variety palace manager's pleas for presentations. In March 1931, they announced a partnership deal with Fox and F&M to build a forty theater "'B' circuit" which would act as a farm system for developing talent, employing around one-thousand

performers, stagehands, and musicians.<sup>61</sup> The theaters would not come from either Stanley-Warner or Fox houses, but instead would be composed of independent houses on the East Coast that could not regularly afford high quality live acts. Knowing that some managers would not drop their preference for presentations, Warner planned to rekindle its Pittsburgh production department idea by using this new circuit to develop the onstage talent and production team needed to build their own presentation department capable of replacing both F&M and Publix shows on its circuit. While the two studios decided on the terms, the deal remained tentative until stage and music unions agreed to concessions allowing the corporations to bypass usual requirements of hiring pit orchestras and additional stagehands when live acts appeared on stage. According to the studios, only this allowance would make the B circuit financially feasible. If successful, this circuit would have increased the total playing time of the major circuits by nearly fifty percent. The unions refused the deal, however, and negotiations went no further.<sup>62</sup>

The rest of 1931 proved to be much the same in terms of bookings, with Warner Bros. adding just two more theaters as it lost, now totaling a record high of fourteen. But live performance appeared even more viable and desired throughout the circuit. For one, only seven theaters (almost two-thirds of the total) on the circuit dropped live acts for the summer. While a significant portion of the total, it was not uncommon for “movie” theaters programming live acts to adopt straight pictures during the summer (some even closed temporarily), especially if they did not have air conditioning.<sup>63</sup> Circuit officials also saw it as a positive sign because no Stanley-Warner theater had ever kept live acts throughout the hot months. More importantly, a greater number of theaters than anticipated submitted plans to program live acts starting in the fall. The surveys collected by the theater circuit showed that out of five hundred theaters, twenty planned to carry vaudefilm and up to four would book F&M presentations through the office. In October,

Stanley-Warner division manager for the Pittsburgh-area theaters, John Harris, also requested that the booking office organize a three to four act vaudeville bill that would travel to thirty-four different theaters in his region for up to three nights each. Thirty-six other theater managers also agreed to a new plan to route live performances of Warner Bros. stars, including James Cagney, Marian Marsh, and Douglas Fairbanks Jr., through their theaters, facilitated through the Warner Bros. Artist Bureau when the stars were not shooting films. In total ninety theaters, almost twenty percent of the Stanley-Warner chain, planned to program some form of live performance beginning in the fall of 1931.<sup>64</sup>

Even during the first year that the Depression affected Hollywood's business practices and revenues, Warner Bros. saw immense potential in live performance. In December *Variety* reported that "on good authority," Harry and Jack Warner were no longer "personally against the use of vaude" as they had been as late as December 1930 and "have decided strongly in favor of live talent and will use it in their theaters wherever the policy seems a possible solution."<sup>65</sup> Warner Bros. Booking Office also began looking to lease a second office in Chicago to better cater to its West Coast and Midwest theater holdings, some of which had been booking live acts through local and regional independent agents like the Arthur Fischer agency. With significant momentum, Warner Bros. looked to become, in the eyes of *Variety*, the "heaviest user of stage shows before spring 1932."<sup>66</sup> While they did not approach RKO's seventy weeks, by early 1932 Warner Bros. Booking Office reached their earlier goal of a twenty-theater circuit and became the second largest major circuit ahead of even Loew's, a company that had begun as a vaudeville circuit.<sup>67</sup>

The beginning of the year started out promising. In January, the circuit debuted the first revue it self-produced at the Warner Theater in Hollywood.<sup>68</sup> Warner Bros. also began finalizing

a three-year mega-deal with Fanchon and Marco to create the largest booking office in the country with over sixty theaters. For Warner Bros. the deal represented another step in its expansion plan, allowing them to take advantage of F&M's reputation and economies of scale for production and distribution. For F&M it was part of an exit strategy from affiliation with the financially faltering Fox, for which it had booked presentations and vaudefilm since 1928 when Fox merged with West Coast theaters, while maintaining side contracts with a range of other theaters and studios.<sup>69</sup>

Unfortunately, Warner Bros.'s plans for live performance reached their maturity during 1932, the worst year of the Depression for theatergoing. In February, feeling confident in the success of live performance in their theaters, the Warner Bros. Booking Office and the circuit's Theater Department began a two-week process of comparing grosses, profits, and losses of theaters employing stage acts. The departments intended the survey to inform circuit recommendations of where and what theaters should use live performances in the future. The problem, however, was that Stanley-Warner theaters began dropping live acts as soon as attendance declined. In the last half of the month, three theaters dropped live acts in favor of straight films. By April 5, they had lost six more. With the circuit reduced to nearly half of its prized twenty-theater number, live performance no longer appeared to be a viable option, at least to some in the Warner Bros. organization. On April 15, Jack Warner reportedly canceled the merger with F&M, ending Warner Bros.'s quickest path to primacy.<sup>70</sup> One month later, six other Stanley-Warner dropped live acts, leaving only five weeks of Warner Bros. Booking Office time. By mid-July this fell even further to only two and a half weeks of playing time (this time not credited to the usual summer declines), with rumors that the circuit would soon be all straight-picture theaters. Troubled union negotiations in key cities, including Philadelphia, Minnesota,

Toledo, and Pittsburgh, also hindered Warner's efforts as theaters in these cities could not book live acts until they reached a deal with each union separately. By the end of 1932, Warner Bros. Booking Office had recovered only slightly with four theaters, the same number with which it originated in 1929.<sup>71</sup>

To end here would risk repeating the narrative of the (near) death of live performance in Warner Bros. theaters. On the contrary, the Warner Bros. Booking Office continued to work with theaters during and after the Depression to book live acts. By June 1933, their circuit again comprised more than ten houses. And, as will be evident by appendix A, the Warner Bros. circuit would be the largest bookers of the majors by the late 1930s until at least the mid-1940s. However, this short history aptly demonstrates the corporate power dynamics that influenced the prevalence and location of live performance, not just at Warner Bros. but across the industry. Above all, Stanley-Warner's failed attempts to expand show that theater managers, not the booking office nor the top studio executives, largely determined bookings even in studio-affiliated circuits. No correlation existed between the Warner Bros. Booking Office's campaigns to expand the circuit's use of live acts and their actual adoption. Nor was their correlation in bookings between Jack and Harry Warner's opposition, subsequent support, then opposition again of the practice. In fact, the Warner brothers' public antagonism to live acts coexisted with the booking office's most aggressive push to proliferate vaudefilm bookings in their circuit, and their newfound enthusiasm was merely a reaction to the entertainment form's temporary success in the circuit during late 1931 and early 1932.

As nearly all contemporaneous commentators agreed, the studios and their corporate employees were not the major agents of change in the bookings of live performance during the 1930s. Most critics agreed that the main sources of vaudefilm's Depression-era misfortune were



the “picture men” and, more specifically, “[theater] managers.”<sup>72</sup> Trade writers regularly called-out managers because they knew that the studio system by and large left programming to theater managers instead of studio executives, what was known at the time as “decentralization.”<sup>73</sup>

If the theaters’ programming decisions were as centrally controlled from the studios’ New York offices as some accounts suggest, live performance would have likely ceased completely. Without long-term exception, studio leaders like the Warner brothers urged their theaters to adopt a straight-picture policy, enacting policies and employing discourse to discourage stage entertainment. But within a decentralized system, it was not their decision.

In fact, the degree to which the studio system relied on decentralization grew greater during the Depression as a result of bankruptcy-led restructurings. Under the management of Sam Katz during the late 1920s, Paramount-Publix instituted the most rigorous top-down management of its theaters, in which the New York office dictated almost all decisions for individual theaters, sending pre-made presentations to theaters. Some scholarship has argued that other studios emulated Paramount-Publix’s central management approach, but there is little evidence to support this claim other than in Fox Theaters.<sup>74</sup> But even Paramount-Publix and Fox abandoned this approach in 1932, implementing a “localization” operating policy giving back control over programming and most other decisions to individual managers.<sup>75</sup> The decision financially protected the head office from debt incurred at its theaters (which at Paramount-Publix, was nearly 1,000 theaters).

Knowing the specific ways in which theaters worked with the Warner Bros. Booking Office also nuances our understanding of the corporate dynamics of decentralization with respect to live performance. Booking offices are better understood as a studio-offered service for its managers, and not a body governing live performance. Like the other studios, Warner Bros.

required that theaters request the use of the booking office. Interested theater managers contacted the theater-operating department in New York City, which then forwarded the request to the booking office on a different floor of the Warner Building. The policy governing this process gave the head of the theater circuit and the lead booking agent the “right to object to putting vaude in a spot where, in his opinion, it could never be successful.”<sup>76</sup> There is very little evidence that any studio enacted this or any similar clause, likely because it would have been merely symbolic. Blocking the use of live acts in this way restricted a theater manager from using the studio booking office and represented an official recommendation, but it did not bar them from using live acts in their theater(s).<sup>77</sup>

As some managers of Stanley-Warner Theaters did in this short period, studio-affiliated theaters could and did book live acts through other studios and independent talent agencies, bypassing their studio offices. RKO provides a telling example. In February 1932, RKO hired Harold Franklin, whose 1927 theater operation manual is discussed in the previous chapter, as president of RKO’s Keith-Albee-Orpheum Theater Circuit (the official name of its theater division). As previously established, Franklin growingly believed that either live performance should be centrally mass-produced or not used at all, which is hinted in the manual’s obsession with F&M. This became his earliest mission at RKO. Franklin reassigned the RKO vaudeville booking head, Charles Freeman, to a different undisclosed position within the company, and eventually took over as booking head. As booking manager, Franklin largely attempted to dissuade managers from using the vaudeville format, pushing them instead toward more standardized presentations. Some evidence suggests that he even denied the requests of managers who wanted to book vaudeville acts through the KAO booking office. Frustrated theater and regional managers began to book acts outside of the RKO offices. In the most dramatic case,

Franklin's own brother-- J.J. Franklin, division manager of RKO Theaters in Cleveland, stuck with a string of flop pictures and apparently barred from booking with RKO, began booking \$2,000 per week worth of live acts for the regional flagship Palace Theater through William Morris and Fanchon and Marco in February 1933. The move surprised even representatives from William Morris and F&M, as it meant RKO lost the five to ten percent booking fee to its competitors.<sup>78</sup>

In 1933, RKO managers and division leaders once again considered bypassing RKO's vaudeville department to book live acts. By this time Franklin had failed to centralize stage presentations at RKO and, as a result, morphed his unofficial policy against vaudeville into a straight-picture strategy.<sup>79</sup> Franklin publicized RKO's policy at a press conference held at the end of July 1933. First lauding the profitability of straight pictures across the circuit, Franklin announced that "the circuit has ambitious plans [for the next fiscal year] in which vaude is not included."<sup>80</sup> The benefits that he claimed for this change, however, were challenged even by Franklin's most prominent theater circuit executives. Regional circuit managers including Nat Holt (Ohio region), Charles Koerner (East Coast), and Charles McDonald (New York Metropolitan) publicly challenged Franklin and RKO's proposed policy, stating that they had, in contrast, planned to increase the amount of "flesh" shows in fall, and argued that both RKO managers and affiliated independent theater managers in their regions believed that live performance is a "necessary part of the theater operation."<sup>81</sup> Franklin never saw his plan for eliminating vaudeville completely realized, and the managers did not again have to utilize their control over programming by booking outside of the studio. The RKO Board reportedly had grown disappointed in Franklin's work, and began to reassign some of his many jobs. Franklin

resigned from RKO in late October 1933, vowing to start his own small production company and theater circuit.<sup>82</sup>

While decision-making rested with theater managers, the studios retained significant influence and indirect control over programming. As seen in Harry Warner's reportedly single-handed veto of the merger with F&M, studio heads could assert their way over any decision that involved money from the central office and inter-corporate agreements. Thus, their lack of interest in live performance hurt the variety industry by eliminating or otherwise reducing studio-run centralized vaudeville and presentation production departments (as all did in 1932) and stopping efforts to expand live performance through corporate mergers. Their desire to eliminate live performance was also undoubtedly influential in the decisions of theater managers, even if the influence is largely untraceable. Studio heads could have easily eliminated the studio booking departments under their centralized payroll, and the fact they did not suggests they were not totally antagonistic to them. More definitely, however, these offices likely survived despite some corporate displeasure because they offered relatively inexpensive services to theaters that generated revenue through commissions. Having a corporate office dedicated exclusively to circuit theaters also discouraged managers from using outside agencies, which would send at least five percent more money outside of the studio. Nonetheless, under the decentralized system, the hypothetical elimination of studio booking offices would not have inhibited studio-affiliated theaters from booking acts through other agencies if they had wanted to.

The booking offices themselves also influenced (or sought to) studio theaters by being the main (and sometimes the only) champions of live performance in theaters. As *Variety* once stated with no hint of irony, booking offices like Warner Bros. had the "right" to "suggest resuming [live acts] in a house the operators had figured on keeping in straight pictures."<sup>83</sup> Their

campaigns and networking aimed to persuade theater managers that variety entertainment was a viable and profitable strategy through data (profits, losses, revenues), try-outs, and programming experiments. Although these campaigns did not disappear, they did decline. The Depression-spurred antagonism toward live performance deflated and transformed the Warner Bros. Booking Office, once most proactive and aggressive booking agency in the business, into a passive service which would act largely only when prompted by theater managers. After 1932, Kemp and his successors worked almost exclusively with theaters that reached out to express interest in live acts, making only the occasional efforts to convince those not already considering it.

### **Convincing Managers Against the “False Economy”**

Convincing theater managers to book an undeniably more time-intensive and less efficient entertainment form during a moment of declining admissions required critics, agents, and performers of variety performance to alleviate or dispel many of the disadvantages claimed by studios and proponents of the straight picture economy. One of the loudest arguments against programming stage acts was that it was no longer economical and could not generate profits.<sup>84</sup> Beyond the obvious fact that stage shows did increase overhead (at minimum: the added cost of booking acts, musicians, and stagehands) this argument was largely unfounded with existing evidence to the contrary. On the other hand, their rhetoric was also a self-fulfilling prophecy built on two new studio practices that incentivized managers to standardize exhibition practices: the percentage rental system and conservative financial management, in which theaters were encouraged to reduce or eliminate all operating overhead regardless of its effect on revenue. There is no evidence to suggest that studios adopted and encouraged these policies with a

specific antagonism toward live performance, but they did explicitly favor film production. Live performance nonetheless suffered due to their widespread application of these policies.

Just before the Depression, the studios ratified the percentage rental system, a distribution policy adopted by every major studio which aimed to standardize exhibition and redirect the bulk of a theater's expenses back toward film production. Under this system, booking stage shows and stand-alone "A" feature films together became financially impossible even for the largest, best situated theaters. This change in film contracting practice began not long after the introduction of sound and became far more damaging to the live performance industry than synchronized sound itself. As a 1933 front page headline in *Film Daily* announced, "Percentage Film Contracts Block Vaude Revival."<sup>85</sup> The article, which cited a survey of theater managers, found that "though many theater operators expressed a desire to add stage acts at least part of the time" percentage contracts constituted "the chief barrier to any widespread return of vaudeville."<sup>86</sup>

Sometime toward the latter half of 1929, most major studios adopted the percentage based-rental system (still in use today) instead of the flat-rental system that had generally been in use throughout most of the silent era. The practice had been occasionally employed in road-show exhibitions during the 1920s, and Warner Bros. used it in their sound-film distribution as early as with *The Jazz Singer* (1927).<sup>87</sup> Instead of an exhibitor paying a pre-fixed cost for a film, determined by the film's anticipated quality and popularity, the studios' distribution arms instead offered rental agreements which required that exhibitors pay producers and distributors a percentage of their total box-office revenue for an "A" film. The exact percentage varied depending on the film's quality and anticipated popularity, which one Fox executive noted should normally range between 25% and 35%, and only rarely 40% for the best films.<sup>88</sup> Throughout the 1930s, however, the average rental costs for Paramount and Fox films ranged

from 22% and 25%.<sup>89</sup> This system only applied to “A” films, and not “B” films. These designations have many meanings in film scholarship, with “A” films usually denoting a stand-alone feature made by a major studio or premiere independent producer (like David O. Selznick) with major stars, a run-time over 90 minutes, and production budget over \$200,000 to \$400,000, with “B” its inverse, typically referring to lower-budget films of certain genres, such as horror and westerns.<sup>90</sup> Industrially, however, these categories referred more simply to the pricing scheme used to sell and generate revenue from films, determined largely by its perceived quality and the length of time it had already circulated through the runs and zones system. More than genre, studio, or stars, what the industry designated as an “A” film was a film that in its first run generated revenues from which the studios would earn a percentage. In contrast, the “B” film distinction did not necessarily refer to any specific type of film genre (such as horror), studio (such as the Poverty Row studios), but any film that could be rented for a low flat fee, often as low as \$250, so that studios did not share in theater’s revenues. Major, minor, and Poverty Row studios all sold films for flat fees.

Since exhibitors were the sole collector of residual income in the flat-rental system, it encouraged them to do anything within their means to attract paying customers and maximize their revenue. This spurred, or at least facilitated, showmanship previously at the heart of variety palace management, discussed in chapter 3, as it encouraged managers to prioritize the entertainment value of an entire program and the total theatrical experience over any individual component. In this system, managers had the financial capacity to decide (on a case-by-case basis) whether to prioritize feature films by paying solely for an expensive one, or to pay for a slightly cheaper (but still quality) film and spread expenses across other attractions, like live performance. In fact, the flat rental system allowed live performance -- to the consternation of

those in film production-- to receive the bulk of a theater's programming expenses, up to forty percent, in major theaters.<sup>91</sup> In this system, film, as well as live performance and music, could be all part of the exhibitors' mode-of-production, and expenses could be split among them on a program-by-program basis.

The change to the percentage rental system was the greatest victory for the straight picture economy and those in film production who wanted more standardization in exhibition practices and greater exhibitor cooperation in vertical integration. By requiring theaters to funnel the lion's-share of revenue back to production in exchange for quality films (revenue which would continue to grow as the film became more and more successful), the system disincentivized exhibitors' role in the programming, not just the booking of live performance. The percentage-based system forced exhibitors to make a strict choice between which part of the bill would anchor the program as the "A" product. Oftentimes, this choice was already predetermined. Long term contracts between theaters and studios meant theaters agreed to book "A" films for a set period of time, sometimes lasting as long as three years.<sup>92</sup> No theater budget in the country could share revenues with both top quality live performance (which could cost as much as 40% of gross revenue.<sup>93</sup> To book both, on the low end, would mean that a theater would have guaranteed costs of 65% of their revenue, leaving little to no remaining funds for any other fixed overhead (rent, payroll, advertising, etc.).<sup>94</sup>

Even if theaters could accommodate such small revenue percentages, they would not want to book high quality live acts because, even if live performers were the principal attractions, the feature film would still receive a fixed total percentage of the gross revenue even if it was not the prime attraction.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, the percentage rental system also limited, or at least slowed, the theaters' profit accumulation because as revenue increased, so did rental costs.



This made the additional expense of live performance a deeper risk for theaters, as it raised the profit threshold. Taken together, these factors meant that exhibitors had more incentive to promote motion pictures above all, given that the percentage system required them to fix films as the headline portion of the bill.

The percentage rental system forced theaters who wanted the highest quality films to adopt standardized exhibition practices. Making the film the largest claimant on revenue came with the implicit assumption that films were now singularly responsible for what was previously additional entertainment supplied by the exhibitor, including music and live acts. In essence as proponents of the straight picture economy and synchronized sound intended, the increased fee came with the assumption that film production was expected to distribute a standardized theatrical experience, which could eliminate all other costs previously left to the exhibitor. While this argument was never directly used to justify the percentage system, it was built into the dominant discourse of synchronized sound as a replacement for expensive music and live acts.<sup>96</sup> For a significant stake in the revenue, a theater manager could now receive a complete package of entertainment, without the financial risk of larger overhead and flat fees of other entertainment forms. In short, the percentage-based system encouraged exhibitors to reduce their overhead to ensure that their most expensive asset (the film) was generating the bulk of the revenue. In the words of a studio sales manager, the percentage-based system, along with sound motion pictures, assured that exhibitors “let the picture do its own work” - not the stage managers and definitely not onstage talent.<sup>97</sup>

Beyond the financial obstruction created by the percentage booking system, little evidence suggests that booking stage shows was uneconomical. Supporters of stage shows counter-argued that such studio and managerial accusations confused profitability with a

bureaucratic obsession with overhead and the elimination of expenses without consideration of consequences. In this sense, the straight picture economy was “a false economy” (epigraph) because it did not acknowledge the possibility that a better, if slightly more expensive combination show might pay for itself and attract larger, more consistent audiences. In addition to individual theaters that operated successfully and unwaveringly with a combination policy from 1930 to 1935, the worst years of the Depression, two major sources support this argument.<sup>98</sup>

The first was RKO’s end-of-year financial records for 1930 and 1931. The fledgling studio continued to encourage widespread bookings of vaudefilm in its theaters for two years after the other major studios had begun to discourage it. Though RKO never hid the fact they did this only reluctantly as “insurance against bad pictures and low grosses,” they also could not hide the fact that the practice was immensely popular and profitable.<sup>99</sup> Calling live performance “insurance” incorrectly suggests that it was a luxury padding RKO’s pocketbook, when in fact it saved the company from bankruptcy during its nascent years. When its film production office lost more than four and a half million dollars after a long series of financially underperforming films up to 1932, the two-million-dollar profit RKO earned from its vaudeville performances prevented the company from dissolving completely.<sup>100</sup> *Variety’s* vaudeville section put RKO vaudefilm performance on a pedestal, believing that this success marked “vaudeville’s wedge for a comeback and progress, and it might make 1932 vaudeville’s biggest chance year.”<sup>101</sup> RKO vaudeville performed so well financially that it caught the attention of a writer dedicated to the film industry. *Variety’s* picture section, reflecting on the industry wide film grosses for 1931, featured a section dedicated to vaudefilm, calling it the industry’s “banker” and likewise promoted the vaudeville supporters’ argument against the “false” straight picture economy:

Considering everything vaudeville really held its own better than any other of the popular mediums. This answer can be gleaned in the RKO theatre figures before that studio's balance sheet wipes everything out[...]That vaudeville could stand up at all against the pictures it was forced to play with is unusual enough, but what it will do if ever given a string of drawing pictures remains in the future. The RKO houses did happen upon a couple of smash films during the year. When this took [managers] throw out the acts during those weeks the smash film was playing its theatres, just to get a faster turnover and make a flash showing on the books. It hardly evidences any forethought in that, for once, the houses might be presenting an excellent combination show, really worth a bit more than the admission scale, and thereby building up a new and regular clientele. But no, out with the acts, said the theatre depart [*sic*], and the following week the burden was on the vaude end again. That RKO's theatre department will show a 2,000,000 net for '31, despite the pictures with which it has been teamed and the ever-changing policy abuses, should be proof enough of the public affection for vaudeville. The past year did much to establish it in the minds of the doubtful as the most staple of all the amusement forms on a week in and week out basis. At least vaude dies hard and has every chance of sweeping into its own if the celluloid yoke placed there by its own studio is removed from its neck.<sup>102</sup>

According to this writer, RKO vaudeville proved live acts remained popular and, more pertinent, profitable, deserving a platform in which they were not weighed down by poor films nor thrown to the side when good films were booked.

In 1933, a year after RKO released its impressive 1931 financial reports, the Census for American Business provided additional documentation for the stage's capacity to increase theater revenues and profits. The Census collected revenue data from all theaters showing motion pictures in the United States and found that, despite only comprising about five percent of all theaters in the United States, theaters showing live performance with motion pictures collected disproportionately higher revenue: twelve percent of national total for 1932.<sup>103</sup> The average yearly grosses of these 644 theaters (\$77,991) more than doubled those which played motion pictures alone (\$37,510). Even when accounting for the stage's associated increases of overhead and the fact that many small, non-metropolitan theaters likely weighed down the average grosses of straight motion picture theaters, this number again impressed *Variety's* picture writers. Sam Shain, who penned the publication's official summary of the census, titled a section in bold

letters “Combos’ B.O. Advantage” in which he exclaimed, “Filmdom can perk at that kind of official figuring.”<sup>104</sup> From RKO to industry wide averages, stage acts proved, even with hardships at their peak from 1931 to 1933, that they could perform economically even in the worst conditions.

This evidence did not sway studio officials, however, who stuck to their belief in the straight picture economy. Even RKO encouraged theaters to reduce live performances as much as possible within twelve months of announcing its impressive vaudeville grosses, believing that a straight film policy would lead to all-around financial prosperity.<sup>105</sup> Like the lottery, the occasional blockbuster film instilled hope that siding solely with the film industry promised wealth with no risky expenses. As *Variety* wrote, “Just as their argument [that straight picture economy is a false economy] appears to be gaining ground, a good picture will arrive and revive visions of greater profits with less expensive straight films.”<sup>106</sup> In other words, while evidence existed to prove stage shows’ overall economic value, the straight picture economy *promised* big rewards with little effort or risk. Supporters of stage bookings believed this promise was fulfilled not nearly often enough, at much financial cost for individual theaters.

### **Conservative Financial Management of Individual Theaters**

To the detriment of the vaudefilm industry, and contrary to the aforementioned evidence, the studios’ chief financial strategy for weathering the Depression called for reductions of payroll and operating overhead.<sup>107</sup> The logic of this decision was simple - too simple in the minds of stage supporters. The film industry generated around \$300,000,000 per year in 1932, the worst year of the Depression for the entertainment industry.<sup>108</sup> Still, studio executives

believed this base revenue was sustainable on its own and potentially profitable if all of its departments could shave expenses.<sup>109</sup>

Studios encouraged individual theaters to do their part in reducing costs and—in the logic of the straight picture economy—they especially viewed every stagehand, every backdrop, every act as expendable and bad for the bottom line. These reductions were fairly straightforward for theater managers to make, and they eliminated additional work and oversight by instilling more clearly delineated divisions of labor. According to one Fox Theaters executive, costs for stage shows could reach up to forty percent of a theater's weekly revenue, especially at deluxe theaters.<sup>110</sup> Surviving records from RKO's Palace Theater in Cleveland, a slightly larger than average movie palace (3,284 seats) in the heart of the city's theater district, in 1935 corroborate this and show they could be even greater. From February to December, RKO's Palace Theater in Cleveland spent an average of \$8,285.59 to program live acts per week, including salaries for performers, orchestra, stagehands, and occasionally new scenery, while only spending \$1,000 on average per week for feature films, newsreels, and shorts.<sup>111</sup> Thus, stage-related costs constituted an average of fifty percent of the Palace's average revenue, and sixty-five percent of its total expenses.

Even if the Palace's expenses and revenues were not representative of other theaters across the country, the example demonstrates that a manager could make a noticeable reduction of expenses in one swift action, without any further adjustments. This signaled to the corporate office that the manager followed company directive. As *Variety* quipped: "Dropping of the stage show immediately eliminates a large slice of a theater's overhead and that simple move, when translated into terms of money, can make any overhead-chopper look good in a financial report to the board of directors."<sup>112</sup> Reports indicate that a majority of managers adhered to this

reasoning, even just to appease the studios, and that reduction of overhead was a principal reason for the decline of vaudefilm across every studio, region, and city.<sup>113</sup> However, the RKO Palace example once again supported the financial argument *for* stage shows, albeit a year into the Depression recovery in 1935. Despite its heavy expenses, the Palace earned an average weekly profit of \$3,731.41 (\$72,736.35 in 2022) with its stage shows.

### *Financial Strategies Justifying Live Performance*

The managers who continued to support vaudefilm bookings used two financial strategies to mitigate the increased overhead. Some managers raised their theater's admission rates.<sup>114</sup> In March 1934, the Orpheum Theater (Independent) in San Francisco raised admission to 55 cents. Seeing that it did not appear to lower the number of admissions, the Paramount Theater (Fanchon and Marco) in Los Angeles adopted the approach, and managers of several other Fox and RKO theaters on the West Coast considered it, but ultimately chose against it.<sup>115</sup> As this example suggests, raising admission prices was not a common strategy; studios and vaudefilm critics alike abhorred it. They feared that higher admissions priced out unemployed and underemployed workers and their families, abandoning the cross-class utopia of movie theaters and connoting stage entertainment as a luxury, rather than an inexpensive habitual practice like movie-going. Given that most motion picture-only theaters reduced admission prices during the Depression, raising prices at vaudefilm theaters would have made admission more exorbitant.<sup>116</sup>

The far more widely adopted strategy involved reducing the cost and/or number of live acts in a bill, especially through capped limits. In 1930, for example, RKO implemented a chain-wide policy reducing the maximum number of live acts per bill to four and capped the total cost of any bill to \$5,000. RKO then reduced this allotment to \$3,000 toward the end of the year.<sup>117</sup>

These restrictions only applied to theaters booking through the KAO Booking Office, and theaters could request exemptions. Theater managers especially confident in vaudefilm and willing to spend more could even bypass the restrictions entirely by booking acts outside of the studio pipeline, through agencies like William Morris or by working individually with acts and unit producers.<sup>118</sup> While the other studios did not openly enforce caps or maximums like RKO, their booking practices differed little. In 1931, average sized vaudefilm theaters (1,000 to 2,000 seats) rarely paid more than \$2,200 per week for their acts, and especially sought out pre-constituted units costing under \$1,000. Even the “mammoth deluxe” which built their own presentations (e.g., Roxy Theater, Chicago Theater, Paramount Theater, etc. usually with 3,000 or more seats) reportedly tried to restrict their costs to \$6,000 per week, though occasionally exceeding such limits to book star performers.<sup>119</sup> Pre-fixing salaries in this way not only helped justify the practice to studio offices, but it also kept overhead costs near a limit in which most theaters knew their revenues and other costs could withstand.

### *Causes of Unemployment and Underemployment*

Given that theaters using vaudefilm or presentations spent anywhere from \$10,000 to \$20,000 (or higher for “mammoth” theaters) before the Depression—depending on the style of performance, the size of the theater, and the caliber of star—live acts faced salary reductions of ninety percent in some cases. As a result, most performers, producers, and writers suffered poverty and underemployment, but they accepted reduced wages to keep the shows going. Many producers who had originally priced their cheapest units at around \$3,000 per week were completely driven out of the field. The acts which had been paid all-time highs when movie palaces increased payrolls during the late 1920s, shrunk to all-time lows. Whereas many acts

received salaries nearing the high three-figures in the “palmy days,” they now accepted rates as low as \$50 or even \$25 per week.<sup>120</sup>

The other issue was that most acts faced unemployment for significant portions of the year. Even in 1935, when the economic effects of the Depression began to wane, no non-star acts receiving around or slightly above \$500 dollars a week (which were likely the most famous vaudevillians still working) were booked for more than twenty weeks of work, with *Variety* reporting the average as fifteen. Acts costing under that amount, and usually far under it, still could only find enough gigs to work forty weeks, leaving them unemployed for more than one-fifth of the year. The best non-star comedians might make \$75 per week, but even some units composed of fourteen to twenty performers only received one-hundred fifty dollars to split amongst them and their producer(s). Groups like this had to hitchhike and sleep in boarding houses to survive.<sup>121</sup> Some deluxe theaters became more willing to pay for slightly more expensive units, which ranged from \$2,500 to \$5,000 though even this rate left little room for profit margins for the act. The average unit cost its producer \$2,750 to \$3,750 in weekly expenses (salaries, travel, etc.), and they had rehearsal and production costs anywhere from \$2,500 to \$15,000 to recoup.<sup>122</sup>

Low salaries coupled with high competition and fewer available venues left performers and their agents severely underemployed. Many left vaudefilm performance entirely, either on their own volition because they could not get work, or their agent quit, and they could not find another willing to accept them. The acts that continued to book gigs were reportedly what were once the best of the big-time, but were getting paid in some cases worse than what an amateur performer might have made in the coffee-and-cake circuit. Amateur performers and copy-cats of



famous performers like Cab Calloway thrived under these conditions, given they would accept salaries far lower than a professional and especially an actual star.<sup>123</sup>

Performers' inability to find regular work for an entire year was not simply the result of the shrinking number of theaters booking live acts. The continued reliance on long standing, now outdated, selling and buying practices exacerbated the problem. In vaudeville (and even in vaudefilm and presentations until the early 1930s) agents typically sold their client's services to a single circuit at a time. During this time, an act would largely contract to perform in the theaters of a particular chain (e.g., RKO, Pantages, Paramount, Orpheum, Loew's, etc.) for a specific period of time. The duration ranged from half a week to three years, though a one-to-two-year stint was common and the most coveted. While under contract, performers would generally not perform in another circuit's theaters. Long tours at a single circuit were predicated on chains having a relatively vast number of theaters, but the plethora of available playing time at each circuit was not the only reason agents and performers did not shop around and move across circuits. Big time-circuits, and occasionally some small-time chains, maintained a monopoly over vaudeville stars and prominent standard acts for much of the 1910s and 1920s through the threat of blacklisting. If performers decided to book time with another circuit, then the Keith-Albee and Orpheum circuits would indefinitely ban them from their prestigious theaters. Booking with a single chain avoided a possible ban.<sup>124</sup>

Outside of the circuits' monopolistic practices, booking long stints with the same circuit had financial benefits for both performers and chains. As itinerant workers who were by and large responsible for their own transportation, vaudevillians wanted guaranteed work as they traveled throughout the country in order to avoid being stranded with no money and no work to earn it.<sup>125</sup> Circuits obliged because they could offer longer routes at lower pay in compensation

for guaranteed bookings. Booking long stints with chains also offered performers guarantees and a logistics team. The principal job of the major circuit's booking agencies was to coordinate bookings with individual theaters and to plan the most efficient travel routes for performers based on the theaters that wished to book them. If a theater decided against booking an act or they dropped live performance (some did this for the summer and/or might adjust their policy abruptly), the booking office sought out nearby chain-affiliates to fill the schedule gap.<sup>126</sup> Vaudeville was so accustomed to this closed off system that it was formalized in circuit selling policies. Most circuits affiliated with specific talent agents from which they would exclusively buy acts, and many of these agents had their offices within the same theater building as the circuit's booking office. As a result, most vaudeville agents regularly sold their acts to only one circuit either because they were only sanctioned with one circuit or because it had not been necessary to extend their network.

As more and more theaters dropped (even temporarily) live acts during the early 1930s, booking year-long tours with a single circuit became impossible, further decentralizing the control of individual studio bookers. Already by the end of 1930, no chain other than RKO had the minimum of fifty-two weeks of booking time across its theaters.<sup>127</sup> Having an act perform at the same theater twice (or more) within a year did happen but was uncommon as managers and agents wanted to avoid overplaying an act in a locale. Loew's, the chain with the second highest number of theaters using live acts for most the Depression, only had enough theaters for only just over half of a year of booking time by the end of 1930. Performers could (and did) continue to book yearlong tours with RKO until the end of 1932 when RKO's booking time fell to an average of just over twenty weeks. Even before that time, however, they became hard to secure.

Screen star and Will Rogers' counterpart Irene Rich, for example, could only secure a six-month contract with RKO in late 1931, with her tour running from November 1931 to April 1932.<sup>128</sup>

With no circuit now offering long-term contracts, performers needed to book time between a combination of circuits to secure stable work. But until at least 1935, the still-intact sanctioned agent policies at RKO and Loew's, the two largest circuits, technically prohibited this.<sup>129</sup> In 1934, when only twelve RKO theaters booked live acts per week, the company still worked only with their sixty franchised agents and booked at least one act with around forty of them per week. Loew's only had twenty-five franchised agents, but the circuit still only needed sixty-five acts per week. Warner Bros., Paramount, and independent theaters had no sanctioned agents and allowed any agent (even occasionally those affiliated with RKO or Loew's) to sell their acts to their theaters. However, they had less booking time combined (just under ten weeks) to offer to a huge pool of agents (there were still at least 150 vaudeville agents in New York City in 1935) than either RKO or Loew's did alone.<sup>130</sup> In turn, the conventions of the now-outdated act buying assured that the small amount of booking time remained fragmented. Significant unemployment could not be avoided even if the system had not remained in place, but its continued existence assured that most vaudeville agencies and their acts were severely underemployed. As *Variety* lamented in 1934, "agents who have nothing but an RKO or Loew's franchise, or no booking office affiliation whatsoever, and who know nothing else but selling an act for vaudeville. These are the members of vaudeville's starvation brigade."<sup>131</sup> For the livelihood of an entire industry of people, keeping the show going now required performers and agents to adapt to booking tours across studio circuits.

## Fighting Claims of Vaudeville's Stagnation

Not all performers were so horribly compensated, nor did some of them have a hard time finding performance opportunities. One of the loudest complaints charged against vaudefilm by studios, managers, and even its own journalists was that bills no longer drew crowds, especially in comparison to its celluloid companion. They accused the format of boring audiences from their lack of novelty, continually repeating the same stale formulas and acts. Some supporters of vaudefilm blamed the now widespread (at least) four-a-day format for exhausting performers and draining their creativity, while some critics proposed that theater managers, acts, and producers needed to recall and implement the fundamentals of vaudeville programming: properly ordered, well-paced variety acts which would appeal to diverse audiences.<sup>132</sup>

To the bane of many vaudeville traditionalists, managers, studios, and agents resorted to a star-based approach to programming in response to vaudefilm's supposed staleness, particularly booking stars from other media industries including film, radio, and live and recorded music, regardless of the quality their onstage performances.<sup>133</sup> A 1932 poll of RKO theater managers, for example, revealed they believed audiences only wanted variety theater if it contained stars. Summarizing the poll, the *Syracuse Herald* wrote, the "general opinion is that a personal anybody [a word play on personal appearance], whether he told jokes or danced his head off, was the piece de resistance," anything including "picture stars, radio entities, musical comedy names, established vaudeville features, magicians, 'flash' acrobatic acts, noted comedians and dancers."<sup>134</sup> Theaters also especially booked performers of big-band jazz, in particular swing, fame, at the height of its popularity in the 1930s and 1940s (chapter 5).

Certainly, booking stars from other media industries was not a new phenomenon for variety entertainment, as it had been a common practice in big-time vaudeville, as well as in the

practices of “big” small-time circuits of Loew’s and Fox and in variety palaces during the mid-1920s. But before this point it was not seen as essential across all theaters that featured variety performance. Before the late 1920s and early 1930s, small-time vaudeville, prologues, and popular presentations enjoyed success and profit without the necessary participation of stars. During and after the Depression, however, the inclusion of some sort of “name” anchoring a bill was so widespread that the presentation-like units which still toured seemed like anomalies by comparison, and even they often had stars.<sup>135</sup> As a testament to the star-dependency of this system, some theater managers even used the lack of available names as a reason to stop showing live acts entirely.<sup>136</sup>

The logic of the star-based system was fairly foolproof in terms of box-office draw, as it gauged a performer’s potential ability to generate revenue based on their popularity in other media. Their appearances in other media also assured the performer had national recognition. In this way, it aligned with Hollywood’s star dependent system of marketing. In 1935, the Marcus Loew Booking Agency (the official booking agency for Loew’s circuit) adopted the slogan “The THEATRE of the STARS” which they used at least until the late 1940s.<sup>137</sup> This slogan, a play on MGM’s (Loew’s production wing), claimed to have the greatest abundance of prolific stars in Hollywood, as indicated by the slogan that MGM had “more stars than were in heaven,” and that functioned as a clear indication of the circuits’ dedication to booking stars in its circuits. Loew’s was not unique in that sense, though, and the slogan could have applied to any of the live performance circuits after 1930.<sup>138</sup>

From a financial standpoint, theaters booked name acts at a hefty price. This system created an alarming pay disparity between name acts and the three to five other acts that agents and managers used to fill the remainder of the bill. Top vaudeville performers who had turned

cross-media stars of film, radio, and the variety stage, including Eddie Cantor, Jack Benny, Al Jolson, and the Marx Brothers, commanded enormous weekly salaries ranging from \$8,000 to \$25,000 per week (\$154,672 to \$483,352 in 2022 dollars) which on the top end neared the highest salary for film work during the early 1930s. Will Rogers, for example, earned \$25,000 per week shooting with Fox Films in the late 1920s.<sup>139</sup>

A fairly representative sense of how limited the upper echelon was, as well as a representative collection of stars performing on live performance circuits comes from the list of top paid performers in 1932. During this year, only thirty-four performers (or groups) earned more than \$5,000 a week. Most were bands and singers, including Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Kate Smith, Paul Whiteman; some were cross-media comedians including the Marx Brothers, Cantor, Olsen and Johnson, Joe Cook, and George Jessel; others included such movie stars as Edward G. Robinson, Pola Negri, Barbara Stanwyck (appearing alongside her then husband, vaudeville comedian Frank Fay), Maurice Chevalier, Lilyan Tashman, and George Bancroft. Performers composing the remainder of the list included a professional wrestler, Jim Londos, circus leaders Fred and Ellen Bradna, and dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson (the most famous living African American vaudevillian, who had yet to achieve his movie fame from dancing with Shirley Temple). Only one unit without a headline act, titled “Crazy Girl,” earned enough per week to reach the top grossing list.<sup>140</sup> While this list demonstrates the array of professional talent that the circuits booked, they still represented a very small percentage of all the severely underpaid acts. One estimate in 1933 indicated that well-paid acts such as these represented five percent of the industry’s acts, with the remaining ninety-five percent severely underpaid.<sup>141</sup> But even this approximation may have been an *underestimate* of the percentage of acts at or below what people in the industry considered the poverty-line. In 1935, when the

circuit was smaller (in total number of acts and of theaters) than in 1932, at least 4,132 different acts performed at least one week at a movie theater.<sup>142</sup> Using this number of total acts, the salaries in the top grossing category would have constituted less than one percent of the industry. With the star receiving a lion's-share of the costs that theater managers were willing to spend in a week, they booked the supporting acts with whatever monies remained.

The pay cuts and disparities plaguing variety performance became so dire that they attracted attention from President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal committee to promote fair practices in the entertainment industry. On November 27, 1933, Roosevelt ratified the "Code of Fair Competition for the Motion Picture Industry," an executive order permitted under the National Industrial Recovery Act (NRA) that intended to stimulate the economy by fostering competition, enforcing minimum wages, and protecting workers from unscrupulous working conditions.<sup>143</sup> Despite no committee member having direct affinity to exhibition and experience with live performance, part two of Article IV covering "labor provisions" included a lengthy section dedicated explicitly to "Actor Employees in Vaudeville and Presentation Motion-Picture Theaters."<sup>144</sup> While the Code was short-lived anyway, with the NRA declared unconstitutional in 1935, the article only properly addressed minimum wage issues and in no way solved the industry's underemployment.

I have demonstrated that the variety entertainment industry was not defenseless against its loudest critics, despite suffering pay disparities, underemployment, and underpayment in the process of responding to complaints. Though star-power and lower costs caused significant instability for the variety entertainment industry, it also helped convince managers that programming live acts was still feasible. However, they were not the underlying conditions for which managers believed the entertainment form remained necessary when so many other

theaters moved to the cheaper, more standardized, and more efficient films-only model. Managers in metropolitan markets continued to book stage acts during the Depression (and for two decades after) for two principal reasons: the underproduction of “quality films” and increasing competition from independent theaters. These underlying conditions were situated in major urban markets. While the Depression worsened these conditions, they were largely the consequences of Hollywood’s overzealous vertical integration in the 1920s.

### **The Helpful Problem of “Bad” Films**

The percentage-based system largely made it unfeasible for a theater to play both quality films and stage acts, but it did not stop theaters from using live acts alongside inexpensive “B” films. For this reason, theaters that booked stage shows placed them alongside “B” films almost without exception from 1930 to at least 1948. This is true even for the largest flagship studio-owned theaters, who—by all scholarly accounts and according to studio oligopolistic distribution practices—should have shown first run films due to their ideal location and high revenue-earning potential. According to well-established and ever-growing research, Hollywood’s monopoly over film exhibition depended largely on studio ownership of most of the roughly four hundred metropolitan first-run theaters, placing their highest quality films there before anywhere else. They then assured patronage through restrictive distribution policies toward other theaters (including runs, clearances, and zone and minimum price agreements), and granted their theaters flexible contracts not offered to non-affiliated theaters.<sup>145</sup> Why then would the Hollywood studios and its managers ostensibly waste (in the logic of vertical integration) strategically placed movie palaces to present live acts with non-first run films? The simple answer is that they had to.



As we saw in the first chapter regarding Balaban and Katz and the State-Lake policy, variety stage acts have a long history of sharing bills with low-grade films. However, the reason for their combination differed after 1930, especially in studio-owned theaters. The predicament shared by Balaban and Katz and those operating under the State-Lake policy in the 1920s stemmed from their lack of affiliation with production studios, and they used stage shows to partially control their programming in order to compensate for Hollywood's biased distribution practices at the heart of the Hollywood oligopoly. However, the vertical integration of the studio system, built on massive theater acquisition and construction hypothetically (and temporarily) solved this issue. Paramount's acquisition of the Balaban and Katz chain in 1925 and the formation of RKO in 1928 created the first stable flow of first run pictures for Balaban and Katz theaters and Orpheum's State Lake Theater, allowing both of them to no longer depend on stage material to counteract weak film product forced upon them. Both still regularly booked stage acts, however, because of their popularity, prestige, and feasibility under the flat rate booking system.

After the late 1920s and until the early 1930s, almost no downtown movie palaces lacked studio affiliation. Instead of effectively eliminating stage shows it created a new problem that urban theater managers solved through the combination of stage shows with "B" films. Many managers were reportedly fine with eliminating stage shows to accommodate percentage contracts of high-grossing films, but they felt that Hollywood too regularly failed to live up to the system's promises. The primary and most widely reported reason that theaters continued to book stage shows during and after the early 1930s had nothing to do with increased cost of feature films under the percentage system or star-power promised by stage shows. Instead, it was the result of Hollywood's own structural inadequacies and inability to fulfill the necessary

volume for quality features in saturated metropolitan areas. Put more simply, the studio system could not produce enough “good” pictures for urban markets.<sup>146</sup>

Charges of underproduction in film history are rarely, if ever, brought against the studio system, which is almost always depicted as adequately “feeding the maw of exhibition,” in the words of Tino Balio. In explaining the underlying conditions of the vertically integrated oligopoly, Balio explains that Hollywood “honed an efficient means of producing large numbers of feature films” that met three criteria: they appealed to a mass cross-sectional public, consistently attracted audiences, and were produced in sufficient and regular quantities to support the 10,000 to 20,000 theaters that operated at any one time during the studio era.<sup>147</sup> However, most managers who booked live performance, especially when they were affiliated with a studio, did so because they believed the studios could not produce enough films that would fill their theaters, which the studios implicitly promised through the high cost in the percentage rental system.

The percentage rental system was, and is, predicated a mutual dependency between film producers and exhibitors, with the latter exchanging a significant portion of their admission revenue for a stand-alone product with a high attraction value. This promise was easier to achieve in markets with only a handful of theaters. Each film produced in the studio era had roughly 250 distribution prints minted, allowing even cities of under 100,000 people to secure a first run given only ninety-three cities in the United States had over that population in 1930. This largely explains—when coupled with the high expenses difficult for non-palace sized theaters to recoup—why live performance almost completely disappeared in anything smaller than largest cities (around 200,000 people). However, critics and reporters of variety theater regularly reminded readers that the studios continually failed to satiate all the theaters in these large

American cities. As *Variety* summarized the situation in 1930 (and continued to reiterate annually):

Theater managements and circuits at large do not consistently figure on the stage fare drawing above the picture, but they do want the stage flesh show to keep the house from dropping under a certain figure, regardless of the picture. That marks the difference between the average studio and theatre men. The studio factions always maintain that the picture is the thing and will do the business. To which the theatre man merely answers, 'Okay, but give us the pictures.' And all the studios combined have so far failed to turn out sufficient money films to hold any house of the red for every one of 52 weeks.<sup>148</sup>

Hollywood's failure was the result of two interrelated problems in the major cities. The first was the underproduction of "quality" films, an issue likely made worse by an overall decrease in feature film production during the Depression. The total number of feature films produced by major and minor studios decreased from 462 films in 1928 to a low of 318 in 1932, an average of just over six new films per week.<sup>149</sup> The second was overly saturated urban theater markets, often referred to as the "overseating" problem, which many had foresaw as the consequence of Hollywood's intense vertical integration during the 1920s (chapter 2). Studios, regional chains, and independent operators built or acquired urban theaters with such voracity, the major studios could no longer keep up with demand. For example, by the end of 1932, Detroit (the country's fourth largest city by population) had fifty-four theaters with over 1,000 seats. Twelve of these even had larger than 2,000 seat capacities, three owned by RKO and seven owned by Paramount.<sup>150</sup> The rest were independently operated including the Fox Theater (the largest theater in the city with 5,500 seats), which had recently been sold by the titular company. However, only six theaters could receive a new film per week, and even some of those were likely "B" films. The remaining theaters then had to project a film on subsequent runs, if all they wanted to program films that is.

Both issues inhibited some first-run theaters from having a constant supply of “A” films. Just as importantly, the prevalence at which variety palaces mitigated their lack of film supply with live acts made—in the words of *Variety*—the “vaudeville outlook [...] just a reflection of the picture outlook.”<sup>151</sup> As the production and success of “A” films ebbed and flowed, the number of theaters using stage shows inversely reflected it. Put another way, the prevalence and location of stage shows became connected to the availability of “quality” films, and the invariably declining (and sometimes increasing) use of stage shows during the Depression resulted from ever-changing production conditions.

These theaters became first-run theaters in name only when good films were available. Otherwise, they showed “B” films with stage acts. This meant that live acts played with a nearly random assortment of films, with few obvious booking strategies or discernable patterns, just whatever theaters could book cheaply for a flat price. This could include more traditional “B” thrillers and crime films like Fox’s *Charlie Chan* films or *The Glass Key* (1942). It could also include quality “A” films like *The Big House* (1930) and *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) rented as “B” films; the former qualified for the flat rental after playing in a theater across the street for an extended run, and RKO sold the latter as a “B” after believing the film was untenable and sought to recoup its one-million-dollar production costs.<sup>152</sup>

Because of rapid turnover - most theaters changed films every week - and varying conditions (e.g., number of theaters, ownership/affiliation) in different markets, it is difficult to trace the impact that the changing supply of quality films had on the use of stage shows without detailed case studies of individual cities or a detailed database that traces the changing use of live performance every week. While the *Variety*’s Variety Bills database (appendix A) supplies evidence that the lack of quality films drove onstage programming during and after 1935,

unfortunately, the database does not yet include any finished data from the early Depression years. Similarly unfortunate, city-specific studies of distribution that do exist either ignore theaters using live performance or dismiss them as anomalies, which they claim would be soon obsolete.<sup>153</sup>

Even without this data, evidence of the lacking availability of quality films and its consequences for live performance in variety palaces exist in many forms. For one, theater executives cited it as the primary reason to continue the practice, albeit one that should be situational, temporary, and supplementary.<sup>154</sup> For example, Warner Bros.'s Michalove told *Variety* in September 1931 that “the Warners are looking at the vaude situation in much the same way as Publix [...] Warner houses will be considered in an individual way as situations and problems come up. If pictures are pulling satisfactorily and there seems no apparent necessity for vaude, it won't be used [...] it's entirely up to individual operations, local conditions, pictures, competition, etc.”<sup>155</sup> In December of that year, an unnamed employee of Warner Bros. claimed that their employers were especially advocating for stage entertainment because they failed to “make pictures pull on their own.”<sup>156</sup>

#### *RKO and Loew's*

Differing scales of film production and the supply and demand of quality of films also partially explains the diverging actions and attitudes toward stage entertainment at RKO and Loew's during the early years of the Depression. In early 1930, both companies represented the pinnacle of the major live performance circuits, composing about seventy-three percent of available playing time, led by RKO with 168 bills per week and Loew's at seventy.<sup>157</sup> “At the present time,” *Billboard* wrote at the end of January, “vaudeville's hope is in the hands of Radio-

Keith-Orpheum and Loew's Circuit."<sup>158</sup> Both company's held identical stances that their theater managers should determine the use of live acts based on the "strength of their lineup of film attractions."<sup>159</sup> But over the next two years Loew's and RKO theaters took divergent approaches to booking live acts. By the end of 1931, Loew's only had eight theaters booking live acts, a drop of eighty-eight percent, and it had permanently closed their Chicago booking office, leaving them with one in New York, citing "not enough business." RKO, by comparison, lost nearly one-hundred theaters (fifty-eight percent), but stayed steady at seventy at the end of the same period.<sup>160</sup>

A comparison between RKO and Loew's demonstrates how intertwined the prevalence of stage shows became to the patterns of film production. The major difference between the actions of Loew's and RKO was that MGM, Loew's production affiliate, better satisfied the entertainment needs of Loew's theaters than RKO's fledgling production department. Loew's managers easily turned "anti-vaudeville," in the words of *Variety*, because MGM produced the largest number of the highest grossing films and had the highest new films-to-theater ratio. Between the start of 1930 and the end of 1931, MGM produced an average of 46.5 films per year, the third most behind Paramount (53) and Fox (48).<sup>161</sup> However, as Paramount owned more than 1,000 theaters and Fox 700, Loew's owned just a fraction of the theaters of their top producing competitors. Having roughly four theaters to one new film ratio allowed new films to circulate far more quickly through more of the circuit. Straight picture policies also more greatly benefited Loew's theaters because of their commercial success. During this same time, MGM produced half of the twelve top grossing films in the United States.<sup>162</sup> Not only did this mean increased revenue across the company, but it also meant Loew's theaters more regularly "held

over” films, programming a popular film for more than the normal one week, which left other circuit theaters to premiere other newly released films.

RKO did not share in the luxuries enjoyed at the Loew’s circuit. From 1930 to 1931, RKO owned three hundred theaters, the second fewest of majors, above Loew’s, but they also produced only sixty-five films over the first two years of the Depression. Worse yet, its films failed to attract audiences. Compared to Loew’s, RKO only produced one of the twelve top grossing films over this two-year period and most failed to recoup even their production costs.<sup>163</sup> As such, RKO relied on vaudeville to stabilize their revenues as much as possible. “Vaudeville was fostered only where needed and by those who feared to dispense with it.,” *Variety* wrote, “RKO was the most prolific vaudeville user because RKO’s picture product was among the worst. Loew’s which had the best film break of the year, became one of the minor vaudeville - playing circuits after threatening for years to lead the field in extent of vaude playing time and quality of bills.”<sup>164</sup> *Variety*’s analysis remained the same early in 1932, “Those 70 weeks of vaudeville on the RKO book at the start of ‘32 did nothing more than mirror the circuit’s picture situation. Being weak in pictures, RKO out of necessity was strong in vaudeville. Audiences do not come into theaters to look at the ushers. Entertainment is necessary too, and vaudeville was that entertainment in the RKO theaters 45 weeks a year.”<sup>165</sup> *Variety* and *Billboard* predicted that if RKO could rectify their production problems, they would convince theater managers to follow their Loew’s colleagues in transitioning from vaudefilm to the straight picture economy.

### *Theater Pools*

Besides explaining the differing approaches of RKO, Loew’s, and Warner Bros., the underproduction of quality films which drove the use of stage shows is most obvious in the many

attempts by urban markets to self-regulate film distribution. Between 1930 and 1934, theater managers and studio circuits in New York City, Denver, St. Louis, Oakland, Brooklyn, Syracuse, Memphis, Los Angeles, Cincinnati, Birmingham, Omaha, Houston, Fort Wayne, South Bend and several cities in New Jersey, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and likely many others, created “pools”: agreements, largely involving studio-owned theaters, which aimed to dispel competition created from decentralization by establishing mutually agreed upon programming strategies and maximum attraction costs.<sup>166</sup> During the Depression, many of these agreements centered around the programming of stage shows in order to mitigate underproduction of first-run films. The agreements took many approaches to handling this problem, but all sought to determine which theater(s) would or would not book stage shows, and how much they would pay for live acts.

The most common terms of a pool set which theater(s) would have the first choice of available films and which would use stage shows. For example, a 1932 agreement in Memphis between theaters affiliated with RKO, Loew’s, Warner Bros., and the Fanchon and Marco company established a deal to close two theaters and make the Orpheum and Warner Theaters straight pictures venues with priority over RKO, Loew’s, and Warner Bros. films. It also established the Loew’s State Theater as the only theater with live performance in the city, showing F&M Ideas Monday through Wednesday, and RKO booked vaudefilm Thursday-Saturday.<sup>167</sup> By closing two theaters, the deal decreased competition by reducing the collective number of seats and screens in the city, designating a single combination theater, and further concentrating the exhibition of first-run films made by several companies to only two theaters, giving them an increased chance to more regularly secure popular, profitable films that could stand alone without a stage attraction.



In a unique variation of a theatrical pool, theaters agreed to eliminate stage shows entirely, so long as their competition did too. Sometime in late 1932 or early 1933, Loew's State Theater and RKO's Keith Theater, located less than a block away on S. Salina Street in Syracuse, created a "no-vaude pool."<sup>168</sup> The agreement stated that neither theater would book stage acts, and instead would rely on straight pictures as the basis of their competition. While neither theater was satisfied with the attraction value of their feature film exhibitions, the agreement kept the theaters' costs down by eliminating stage salaries, denied each the advantage of stage attractions which, of course, stopped the theaters from competing for the same talent which would increase talent costs further.<sup>169</sup>

The most prominent example of a pool, dealing with two of the most iconic and trend-setting variety palaces of the 1920s, involved the Capitol Theater and the Paramount Theater in New York City. This example demonstrates that the problem of underproduction affected even the largest and most prominent movie theaters in the United States. Both movie palaces were the flagship theaters for studios, Loew's and Paramount respectively, and were located seven blocks (exactly half a mile) away from each other on Broadway. On two separate occasions, once in early 1933 and again in mid-1934, the Capitol Theater's management decided that they would adopt straight pictures, a decision that would break the 5,230-seat theater's long-standing legacy as the premier venue for combination entertainment under the direction of pioneers Major Edward Bowes and Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel.<sup>170</sup>

Survival, not legacy, was management's primary concern. Of course, declining admissions during the Depression hurt the Capitol's bottom line, but most sources suggest new competition from the RKO-affiliated theaters inside the Rockefeller Center (opened on December 27, 1932) absorbed a significant portion of Capitol's clientele. Located one block

away from the Capitol on East 51st Street, Rockefeller Center housed two theaters, Radio City Music Hall and the RKO Roxy (later the RKO Center) both showing films with a combination policy at their opening, and collectively adding another 9,540 seats to the already over-seated Time Square area.

Because New York City's market had an abundance of seats and did not have enough film supply for another theater showing only quality pictures—problems worsened by Rockefeller Center—Capitol's management sought help from its competitor, the Paramount Theater. In the first tentative deal, the Capitol would eliminate their stage shows, thereby eliminating one of the Paramount Theater's key competitors. In exchange, the Paramount Theater would grant the Capitol first choice of any Paramount Pictures films offered to them by the distribution-arm of their parent company. Premised on the fact that, without a deal, it was "impossible for both theatres to obtain sufficient number of [quality film] attractions,"<sup>171</sup> the agreement gave the Capitol precedence over a combined one hundred ten MGM and Paramount films per year. Of course, the prints for the films still had to be shared among other first-run theaters in their market, but the deal made it more likely that the Capitol could secure the around forty "A" films it needed to sustain a straight-picture strategy.<sup>172</sup>

Ultimately managers at the Capitol Theater never signed the deal. They feared that dropping their long established stage policy "without assurance" of profits resulted in too much risk.<sup>173</sup> Just as importantly, and emphasizing the severity of the underproduction problem in New York, they believed that the deal to secure films intended for the Paramount Theater did not adequately address the undersupply of quality films in New York City; it only "partly cleared up" the problem.<sup>174</sup> Over the next year, the two theaters continued their combination policies and booked mostly "B" films in direct competition with one another. In June 1934, however,

Capitol's management once again sought to adopt a straight-picture policy and to rekindle negotiations with the Paramount Theater. Using the terms of the previous contract as a base, managers from both theaters added the "assurance" that the Capitol felt the earlier agreement lacked: the contract specified that the Capitol and Paramount Theaters equally split any profits produced by either programming method.<sup>175</sup> Whether or not straight quality pictures or combination policy outperformed the other, both theaters benefited.

Like block booking, blind buying, preferential distribution contracts, and even talent sharing, theater pooling functioned as another oligopolistic practice in which studio entities supported each other at the expense of independent competition, choosing to cooperate rather than compete in order to keep their expenses low and their revenue high. Pools also promised to limit, and in some cases eliminate, stage competition to films by designating specific, and even single, theaters as the venue of this entertainment form in a particular market. Pooling thus also promised to forge consistent identities for theaters, allowing some to be known for showing the best films regardless of studio, and other (usually singular) theaters known for showing a combination of entertainment forms. It also kept costs of films and live talent down, as it kept theaters from bidding against each other.

Thankfully for competing theaters and for proponents of variety theater, the potential for pooling to further, or at least reinforce, the studios' centralized oligopoly was often temporary, if not hypothetical. The key difference between pooling and policies like block booking was that these were agreements between coalitions of local theaters and not centralized studios. These agreements were also often short lived, if they were ever signed at all, and could be canceled without consequence. Others were only verbal commitments.<sup>176</sup> The Capitol-Paramount deal lacked any consequences at all for canceling the contract, as it included language that the

contract could be canceled by either party “if [the contract was] not working out.”<sup>177</sup> I would argue that the widespread failure of pools is another consequence of the decentralization of exhibition (and a lesser degree oversaturated markets), and shows again how even studio-owned theaters do not fit perfectly into the mass retail model where decisions are made from a central office. Other oligopolistic practices, like block booking for example, remained consistently enforced (and consistently unforced on studio theaters) because they were dictated from the top down through studio distribution offices in New York to regional exchange offices that were responsible for contracting with individual theaters and chains. Pools, by contrast, involved agreements between individual theaters in specific markets and were never enforced by any centralized office.<sup>178</sup> In other words, they were agreements by decentralized theaters that attempted to centralize themselves. However, while the agreement may have benefited the larger studios, it was not necessarily best for individual theaters which had to fend for themselves (especially dire in the Depression years). In competitive, oversaturated markets, it did not always make sense for a manager to tie their theaters down to one programming strategy, especially if it unevenly benefited another theater in the pool.

As such, theaters almost always reneged on pool agreements in hopes of outperforming and out-attracting their competitors. This involved many approaches depending on the pool agreement and what the manager felt was the most competitive programming strategy for their market at a given time; theaters might either drop stage shows and adopt a straight-picture policy because they believed a string of profitable films were on the horizon, or they might drop their straight-picture policy in favor of stage entertainment because they were frustrated by the mediocrity of available films or jealous of the stage-shows’ profitability at a competing theater. Both were again luxuries that only studio-affiliated and other first-run theaters enjoyed, as studio

distribution arms stuck other exhibitors with stricter, long-term film-buying contracts.<sup>179</sup> The aforementioned pool in Syracuse collapsed after five months when RKO Keith's Theater booked Don Redman's band, hoping to capitalize on the popularity of African American jazz and the relatively inexpensive salaries of its artists during the early 1930s. Within two months, Loew's State Theater also re-established their stage policy in response. Both theaters' about-faces also led to programming changes at other nearby theaters. The Paramount Theater in Syracuse started a combination policy in the summer of 1933 in an attempt to compete with its counterparts down S. Salina street.<sup>180</sup>

While the Syracuse pool only eliminated the programming of live performance in the city for five months, the second Capitol-Paramount pool went unsigned. Capitol's managers signed the second deal, but the Paramount Theater realized their competitive position would only improve through a deal with both the Capitol and another nearby Loew's theater. While the deal as written mitigated competition from the Capitol, it provided a competitive advantage to the Loew's State Theater, which was even closer to the Paramount on Broadway and used a combination policy with second-run films, which in their case meant screening whatever films had just finished at the Capitol. If the deal had been signed, the State Theater would have been able to bid against the Paramount for live acts and they would have gotten the second run of an "A" film immediately after its run at the Capitol, leaving the Paramount handcuffed to whatever film(s) the Capitol rejected. Without a deal, the Capitol Theater never successfully adopted a true straight-picture program and had to varying degrees rely on stage entertainment when the supply of MGM features was slim. This changed from year to year. In 1935 management took a leap and attempted to book only films, but they still had to utilize a combination policy for twenty-three weeks during the year. By 1939, the Capitol's use of stage shows further declined although

they still relied on them for eleven weeks of the year. However, by 1944, the Capitol returned to booking stage shows nearly every week.<sup>181</sup>

While pools were prevalent, they reveal more about the inadequacies of the studio system than they do about the decline of variety stage entertainment. No matter whether in New York, Memphis, or St. Louis, pools were precarious agreements which help to explain the oscillation of combination policies more than the long-term erasure of live performance. In all cases, however, they revealed a decentralized system of theaters in a shared market trying to mitigate the problem of undersupply over which they had little control in a vertically integrated system, and whose financial incentives to cooperate with theaters with other studios was short-lived. Without pools, stage entertainment continued to satiate first-run theaters when they could not regularly access the first-run films studio practice dictated they should.

### **Divorcing the Studios**

As much as declining revenues, economic hardships, and overall financial conservatism shriveled the livelihoods of variety performers, the Depression also created further opportunities for both competition and some level of autonomy from studio control. Like Silverman, writers in the vaudefilm industry longed for a return to a theater environment that resembled the pre-vertically integrated studio system. With the studios shaping the actions of many first-run theaters—some through ownership and all through the percentage booking system and their (empty) promise of highly-profitable films without the need for expensive, time-intensive live acts—critics believed that variety theater could not return to even a shadow of its former size, stability, or cultural pervasiveness. Counteracting this would require, at a minimum, theater managers to consider their venues as *theaters* rather than *motion picture* theaters (what I call

showmanship in the previous chapter). In the most ideal scenario, proponents of variety entertainment would (re)acquire theaters and remove them from the influence of the film industry. Critics believed, or hoped, that metropolitan theaters not under the control of studios, or at least managers free from studio policy, would book live acts more regularly, and perhaps even return the straight vaudeville theater.<sup>182</sup>

Supporters of this divorcement pointed to the fact that vaudeville still thrived in other countries where theatrical variety performance was not largely under the blanket of film exhibitors and their studios. Even in the middle of a worldwide economic depression, the 1930s marked a reawakening for international vaudeville. Straight vaudeville theaters in major cities in France, England, Australia, Germany, Brazil, and South Africa thrived, producing “healthy profits,” and maintaining a voracious demand for acts.<sup>183</sup> Theaters in London and Sydney, in particular, regularly offered American acts eight to twenty weeks of work as they had more work than their domestic acts could fill. While more research into these international markets is needed, many in the trade press at the time argued that the vaudeville theaters’ autonomy from the film industry was the only logical explanation why they thrived internationally but not domestically.<sup>184</sup>

Though the idea of divorcement was popular, I have not located any trade article that suggested a way to accomplish this goal, and, as demonstrated above, more concrete solutions focused on methods of convincing theater managers to book acts in their theaters (e.g., through star power, salary concessions, etc.) The lack of any brainstorming indicates even proponents of stage entertainment knew that the idea was largely infeasible. By 1932, no straight vaudeville theaters operated in the United States, and no one successfully implemented it as a long-term strategy during the Studio Era; in fact, almost no one tried or seriously considered it.<sup>185</sup> Studios,

theater managers, and even audiences had established cinema as the mainstay of theatrical, urban entertainment. Variety entertainment's accompanying role was comparatively precarious.

Autonomy for variety theater within the studio system would have required the endorsement of the most powerful studio heads, as even the support of the most influential and powerful exhibitor, Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel, proved fruitless. In 1930, Rothafel joined RKO, unofficially at first, to direct the construction and programming of the multimedia hub within Rockefeller Center which was to house and interconnect NBC's radio and television network, the Radio Music Company, and what would end up being two new RKO flagship theaters. Despite building his career on media convergence, creating hybrid entertainments combining film, immaculate stage shows, sound effects and music, and radio broadcasts, Roxy premised his original plans for the facility on the separation of film and live performance; a decision guided by the logic of the proponents of variety theater.

Rothafel's plans are sometimes viewed in scholarship as foolish, but that is only true in the logic of the straight picture economy. Instead, it should be viewed as the last attempt to secure autonomy for live performance *within* the studio system, an autonomy that Roxy believed (like many of those involved in stage entertainment) would be needed for the variety entertainment upon which he built his career to continue within an industry that was at best apathetic and at worst doing its best to extinguish it.<sup>186</sup>

To maintain the stage industry and preserve his creative autonomy, Roxy set his aims on separate venues for separate media. As he explained at a convention for Universal film salespeople in June 1930, echoing the newfound hopes of variety entertainment industry:

The day of merging the so-called presentation idea with the picture is past, and that the pictures will be able to stand on their own. I think you are going to have purely motion picture entertainment without any other form of entertainment that may go with it. I am firmly convinced that is coming, especially as the universal thing[...]I think the theatre of



tomorrow will not be as large but more luxurious and confined entirely to motion pictures, as far as you are concerned. I think, on the other hand, that stage entertainment is coming back, and very strongly in another form. I think that variety, that is, vaudeville, in a much finer way will have a tremendous field in the next five years. So, there will be two distinct fields of entertainment, the motion picture on the one side, and the rehabilitation of what is known as variety, but in a much greater and different form.<sup>187</sup>

Roxy's earliest plans for Rockefeller Center, as reported by the *New York Times*, included five theaters, each dedicated to different performance formats: "variety theater," "legitimate drama," "musical comedy," symphonies, and "sound motion picture[s]."<sup>188</sup> Though the Rockefellers reportedly agreed to the plan for a five venue facility, RKO, Roxy, and the Rockefeller family ultimately decided on a plan resembling Roxy's manifesto to Universal: a two venue facility, including the Radio City Music Hall, the larger of the two and dedicated solely to live performance, and a smaller one, the RKO Roxy Theater, largely for sound motion-pictures. In April 1931, RKO president Hiram Brown announced the plans for Rockefeller Center and Roxy's involvement, alongside plans for RKO to increase its emphasis on vaudeville and stage entertainment, in part by distributing live acts and presentations produced by Roxy at Radio City to RKO Theaters across the country.<sup>189</sup>

While Roxy's creative vision for live entertainment oscillated somewhere between a return to big-time vaudeville (eight-acts, twice per day) and the mega revue/prologue style he made famous, his commitment to the separation of stage entertainment and cinema remained. He promised the *Toronto Daily Star* that "the policy of the motion picture theatre in Radio Centre [sic] is for it to be divorced entirely from stage presentations." These programming decisions remained tied to his belief that it reflected the future of entertainment. In the same interview Roxy posited, "Henceforward pictures and human entertainment have no place on the same stage before the same audience."<sup>190</sup> He also echoed these claims in the 1932 *Film Daily Yearbook*,

doubling down on his belief despite recently witnessing the heaviest losses to theaters booking stage acts since 1930:

During the next twelve months, motion pictures and stage shows will gradually become so separated that in 1933 few theaters will have combination programs as their policy. There is a tremendous future and still a greater outlook for “flesh” presentations, but together they are becoming a thing of the past. Radio City is to have separate theaters for both forms of entertainment.<sup>191</sup>

Unfortunately, the premiere at Radio City Music Hall was a critical and commercial failure.

Days later, without consulting Roxy, RKO changed the Radio City Music Hall’s policy to include film screenings alongside presentations. However, the opening’s failure was less due to the financial efficacy and popularity of live performance in movie theaters, than it was the result of Roxy’s own spendthrift tendency as a producer and his uncharacteristic desire to cater and price these theaters to only (older) upper-class audiences.<sup>192</sup> Roxy overfilled the production with a hodgepodge of what he called the “pageant of the entire theater.”<sup>193</sup> Largely including older staples of theater and presentations, opera, ballet, jazz, blackface minstrelsy, modern dance, orchestral music, “circus numbers,” “comic singers” and “dramatic sketches,” the show required hundreds of singers, musicians, stagehands, and other performers.<sup>194</sup> With no dazzling feature spared, the exorbitant expenses had to be recouped largely through inflated admission prices.<sup>195</sup> Tickets ranged from ninety-nine cents to two dollars and fifty cents (about nineteen dollars to forty-eight dollars in 2022). This high price resembled those of the most prestigious and expensive big-time vaudeville theaters in the 1920s would have been financially cumbersome for lower and middle class audiences even not during the worst years of the Depression. With Radio City Music Hall, Roxy abandoned the cross-class vision of theatergoing based on showcasing popular, high-class culture at low prices on which he had made his career. All variety palaces that utilized live acts followed the twenty-five to thirty-five cent base prices used in first-run

theaters without live acts. With this policy, Radio City appeared to be an overpriced and outdated venue catering to the upper-middle class, an anomaly even for combination theaters.<sup>196</sup>

Despite his continued enthusiasm for stage entertainment, Roxy hurt the possibility of its expansion. In the short term, his bloated iteration of autonomous live performance within the studio system in a mega-theater provided only a failed example of the practice, and no studio ever tried this again during the studio era. In the long term, Roxy's failure, as we will see, continued to haunt the variety entertainment industry for years as it became misremembered as the decline of variety theater's overall popularity.

### **The Depression Transformation**

Roxy wasted the brief opportunity that the variety entertainment industry had of achieving even a modest amount of industrial autonomy within the studio system, since no other exhibitor had more sway and name recognition. Unlike the industrial conditions enjoyed by international vaudeville markets, the American market was already well-entrenched in a vertically integrated system which stifled even the hope of fostering a small, fairly independent niche for live performance within a Hollywood studio run circuit.

Thankfully, the independence variety theater sought would be forced on the studios. The immense debt the major companies accumulated from theater building and purchasing (which originally created its stronghold over live performance), coupled with economic hardship and declining revenue, forced some of the wished-for divorcement of studios' large-scale theatrical holdings. Before the Depression, the majors' theater divisions had built or acquired just over 2,500 theaters--the result of nearly ten years of heavy borrowing from Wall Street banks.<sup>197</sup> From a strategic standpoint, the majors owned a majority of the approximately four-hundred first run

theaters located in cities with over 500,000 people, the cornerstone of its oligopolistic runs-and-zone system.<sup>198</sup> However, this aggressive acquisition strategy left the studios with millions of dollars of debt. They managed these mortgages and bonds well-enough during fair-economic times, but by 1932 and 1933, when admission had readily declined and it became clear that they were not immune to the Depression, most of the major studios could no longer meet their debts. Paramount-Publix, Fox, and RKO formally declared bankruptcy, and entered court-ordered restructuring of their assets. Warner Bros. faced a similar degree of financial ruin but refused to file for legal protection. Instead, they chose to reorganize and reduce its debts itself. The only vertically integrated studio to avoid bankruptcy (or bankruptcy-like changes in the case of Warner Bros.) was Loew's. During the mid-1920s, Loew's acquired and built theaters at a much more prudent rate, only doubling its theatrical holdings from around 100 to just under 200, the smallest of the majors. Their relatively small debt-load, and dominance over popular stars at this time helped them to survive the Depression with only decreased annual profits, not bankruptcy-inducing debt.<sup>199</sup>

These bankruptcies and general economic hardships, in particular, marked major changes in theater ownership and control. Since the exhibition departments of each studio held the theatrical debts, in every case they (not the production and distribution divisions, or the parent company) formally declared bankruptcy, making theater deacquisition the primary strategy for attaining solvency, with very few production-related assets shed in comparison. During this time, RKO sold many of its theaters largely to independent operators, dwindling their holdings from 300 at the very beginning of the RKO merger to 100.<sup>200</sup> Warner Bros. likewise sold just under half of its seven-hundred theaters, leaving itself around four hundred theaters concentrated in Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C.<sup>201</sup> Paramount-Publix and Fox also

sold an undisclosed amount of its theater holdings.<sup>202</sup> Fox also reorganized its theater chain in 1933 as a separate company called National Theaters which still had partial affiliation with Fox Films.<sup>203</sup>

Many of the theaters sold during this two-year period included variety palaces in first-run markets known (or previously known) for using a combination policy. RKO sold the State Lake (Chicago), the Hippodrome Theater (Baltimore), several Palace theaters in the Midwest, the entire Pantages circuit, returned the Interstate Theater Circuit in Texas to its former owner, and sold most theaters formally part of the Orpheum circuit, most notably the Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles.<sup>204</sup> Fox likewise returned all theaters formally part of the Poli vaudeville circuit, and sold several flagship Fox movie palaces, including one in downtown Detroit, another in downtown Atlanta, and the Roxy in New York.<sup>205</sup> Paramount-Publix sold its flagship Los Angeles theater to Fanchon and Marco. In addition, the presentation producing duo, F&M, temporarily took advantage of the de-acquisitions by becoming a theater chain of their own. At the beginning of the Depression, F&M ran two theaters, the Paramount Theater in LA and the Roxy Theater in New York, owned by Paramount and Fox, respectively. When Fox and Paramount decentralized theater management in 1932, F&M formally took over the full operation of both these theaters. For the next year, F&M expanded their theatrical holdings. In 1933 F&M took over the operation of theaters in Salt Lake City, New York, St. Louis, Worcester (Mass.), and Springfield, (Mass.) With all the majors, except for Loew's, selling significant chunks of its theater holdings (with Warner Bros. and RKO selling more than fifty percent), the prospects of the independents looked promising, at least relative to the past half decade.<sup>206</sup> Tom Waller of *Variety* wrote that theater deacquisition promised to place, "the independent exhibitor[...]back on the throne he occupied slightly over a decade ago as the most important

factor in the exhibition end of the picture business” and that 1933 looked to be “the biggest year” for independent exhibitors.<sup>207</sup>

Waller’s statement proved precipitate in the grand scheme, given that independent theaters faced the brunt of Hollywood’s oligopolistic distribution policies. Even if an independent theater had a first-run designation, or even worse if they were of similar size and located in the same geographic area as other first-run theaters but had a lower-run designation, Hollywood distributors and their contracts heavily favored studio-affiliated theaters and theaters in large chains. In practice, this often meant that the “bad films” problem discussed above more heavily and regularly affected large independent theaters in heavily saturated urban markets, and studio-affiliated theaters received the first pick of potentially revenue-generating films, if Hollywood studios produced enough quality product for their own theaters. This left independent theaters with bottom of the barrel “A” films, or with the first choice of “B” films.

Because of Hollywood’s control over film distribution, live performance became an attractive strategy for independent theaters. Booking live performance allowed these independent managers to expand their control over their theater’s programming, of which they were otherwise dependent on whatever films available to them. Of course, talent agents and the availability of acts still mediated their choices, but the relative control was steps beyond the codependency of mediocre content offered by Hollywood distribution. Former prominent variety palaces, like the State-Lake (Chicago) and the Hippodrome (Baltimore), could now compete, differentiating themselves through their focus on live acts. Less than a year after their sale in 1933, both theaters performed so well with regular stage acts in their respective markets that *Variety* reported they were “giving the circuit houses a tough fight if not a licking.”<sup>208</sup>

These newfound opportunities for, and successes of, independent, vaudefilm theaters also helped stabilize the studio's use of live acts. As late as 1932, twenty-five of the thirty-two largest cities by population had no non-studio competition for variety theater, and the studios considered dropping it in these cities because there was no threat of another theater meeting the demand.<sup>209</sup> However, in the changing theater map of the Depression, independent theaters using vaudefilm forced, in part, studio-affiliated theaters to compete with them on the stage, a space which they could comparatively control.

### **Conclusion: Live Performance in the Mature Oligopoly**

The Great Depression is sometimes characterized as a period of media divergence; a claim which gains new meaning when taking into consideration variety entertainment. Unlike the media convergence of the 1920s, which brought together media corporations, their assets, technologies, and intellectual property through conglomeration for the purpose of cross-media marketing opportunities and ancillary revenue, media divergence involved the deacquisition or elimination of these synergies, usually through divestment. Such decisions aimed to manage debt and/or rectify what some in the corporation believed were unsound or unproductive business practices. For example, in late 1931 Warner Bros. sold Brunswick records to focus on its other media ventures as it distanced itself from the sound-on-disc technology they failed to get adopted as the industry standard. Likewise, in early 1932, Paramount sold their forty-nine percent stake in CBS in an effort to mitigate its Depression-caused financial issues.<sup>210</sup> In some ways, the decline of variety entertainment in the motion picture industry resembles these typical examples of media divergence. Executives argued since the late 1920s that programming live performance distracted theater managers and stifled the growth of film production by funneling revenue

outside the film industry. Then, under the financial turmoil of the Great Depression, the majors defunded and eliminated the production departments that were responsible for live acts.

These few similarities aside, variety theater did not have the luxury of a typical media divergence. The business model and necessary assets for variety theater overlapped too much with Hollywood and the film industry. Unlike CBS or Brunswick, vaudeville corporations and presentations had no centralized intellectual property or assets that were not also desired by studios or those in film exhibition. The combination of live performance and cinema differed from many other media conglomerations at the time in that, unlike Hollywood studios and radio networks, it could not be separated in a mutually beneficial way because they both relied on the same key asset: theaters. The primary assets for variety entertainment companies had always been its urban theaters holdings. While necessary for the operation of a circuit, booking teams themselves had no value since, as the studios that built their own circuits without merging with a vaudeville corporation (e.g., Paramount and Warner Bros.) showed, they could be easily replicated. As both theatrical entertainments aimed at a mass audience, variety theater and the film industry could not be so easily separated. Hollywood (by which I also include former big small time vaudeville circuits of Loew's and Fox) acquired vaudeville corporations in no small part because of their theater circuits, and they would only relinquish as many theaters as necessary by their insolvency. Nightclubs, cabarets, fairs, and amusement parks (among other venues) became an even more crucial place of employment for variety entertainers, but they could in no way compensate for the several thousand theaters which had once booked four to eight acts every day.

After reaping the short-term benefits of the conglomeration with Hollywood in the 1920s, bringing the industry to new heights in terms of prevalence and pay and providing countless



promotional opportunities on movie screens across the country, proponents of variety entertainment did what they could to survive during the Depression trapped in the umbrellas of corporations that disincentivized its products. In the process theaters developed a new business model. Variety theater became inextricably linked to the ebbs and flows of the studios' inability to properly feed the maw of urban exhibition and to maintain its control of first-run markets. The variety stage industry accommodated managers how they could, relying on a tried-and-true synergistic strategy built on promoting cross-media stars, with the rest of the industry accepting pay cuts and weathering extreme underemployment. These factors brought some instability and limits on growth that would far outlast the worst of the Depression, but they also kept stage shows a viable and attractive option for many managers for just as long.

By the mid-1930s, the economic factors that the studios claimed necessitated the many changes to vaudefilm booking and payroll began to dissipate.<sup>211</sup> Employment, payroll, and studio earnings figures began to rise in 1934, as did box-office receipts and theater admissions. As a result, so did studio profits. One-thousand theaters even reopened. By 1935 the stock prices of the motion picture studios returned to favorable trading positions, and Paramount and Fox emerged from reorganization, no longer with outstanding debts. Though RKO would not finish its own bankruptcy restructuring for five more years, the continuing proceedings resulted in no structural changes to the industry and the bulk of their theater sales were completed during 1932 and 1933. Thus, in the mid-1930s, the industry entered into what Tino Balio has called the "mature oligopoly," a period between roughly 1935 and the late 1940s. During this era, the American film industry and its logic of vertical integration had finally stabilized after many tumultuous years of multimedia conglomerations, the transition to sound, and the financial crises related to the Great Depression. During this time, the oligopoly system profited and assured

virtual control to the Hollywood studios over the production, distribution, and exhibition of motion pictures until competition with television, antitrust litigation, and post-war suburbanization created new industrial shifts.

Vaudefilm enjoyed no such resurgence. I would argue, however, that variety entertainment and its role in motion picture exhibition also normalized and stabilized during the mid-1930s. By the end of 1934, the major studio time remained nearly unchanged from 1933 totals, although independent vaudeville continued to climb back into prominence. The major studios booking increased to 50 weeks total.<sup>212</sup> With some oscillation from year-to-year, these trends continued for more than a decade. The “Variety Bills” database indicates that the annual bookings after 1935 ranged from 30 and 65 weeks, with about 100 to 150 theaters in 68 to 104 cities programming acts per year.<sup>213</sup> Each of the studios maintained circuits and by 1939, Warner Bros.’s theaters booked the most bills among them.

The most evident trend in bookings involved independent theaters and small chains unaffiliated with the studios. Proven by the early success of the State-Lake Theater in Chicago and the Hippodrome in Baltimore, the number of independent theaters using live performance as a method to combat Hollywood’s biased distribution practices and compete in saturated markets grew in popularity through the 1930s and 1940s. By 1939, independent theaters constituted the majority of theaters (more than 40% reporting to *Variety*) programming live acts and motion pictures. Several small chains, such as Wilbur Cushman and Walter Reade, also started their own vaudefilm circuits to compete with studio theaters.

In part, scale and changing prevalence in bookings between years included some issues previously not discussed at length or at all, including city-specific and regional strikes by stagehand and musician unions, as well as increased theater revenue and attendance during and

just after World War II.<sup>214</sup> However, the variety industry normalized below pre-Depression levels and with expected oscillation because it faced an even more formidable, though intangible barrier than the economy or attendance: codification. Many, if not all, of the Depression era beliefs and policies about theater management and live performance became taught and codified practice in the Hollywood studio system. The clearest evidence of these changes is in the most prominent exhibition manual published during the studio era, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters* by Frank H. “Rick” Ricketson, Jr, who at the time was the Inter-Mountain Regional Manager of the Fox-West Coast Theaters.<sup>215</sup> Published in 1938, film scholar Eric Smoodin has called it “the exhibitor’s bible,” due to its influence and accuracy to studio-era policy.<sup>216</sup>

Ricketson’s values for theater management are fundamentally different than what we saw in Franklin’s hybrid showman model. These differences show how studio training and practice after the Depression more closely resembled the mass retail system, though not nearly as centralized as accounts such as Gomery’s would attest. In line with Hollywood’s “scientific” methods, the manual outlines and promotes systems of efficiency, gauges of fiscal responsibility, and strict divisions of labor, supported by a “scientific method” based on statistics, formulas, and even a few “universal” theories. It also recasts the principal job of the theater manager as advertising Hollywood films to their local audience. Rule number one of the Fox West Coast Theatres made this priority clear: “It is the manager’s duty to merchandise his pictures.”<sup>217</sup> The job of the theater manager under the mass retail system was thus less a showman than a salesman of prepackaged entertainment content, what those in variety theater called a “picture man”: a highly specialized bookkeeper and film promoter who supported a straight picture economy.<sup>218</sup>

These policies and recommended strategies dissuaded and dis-incentivized theater managers from booking stage acts and posited that programming it should lay outside of the purview of theater managers. In Ricketson's own words, "Fitting the stage show into the budget, finding the proper proportion of costs in relation to the picture attractions, and the consequent difficulties of theatre bookers and distributors, all helped to make the stage show an expensive nuisance."<sup>219</sup> Later he goes further by characterizing theater managers who program stage shows as "addicts" who determine business decisions by "vanity," "whim, fancy, personal desires, and so-called inspiration."<sup>220</sup> In short, studio training attempted to delegitimize showmanship by amplifying arguments premised on a proposed dialectical historical relationship between "modern," industrialized film exhibition and its supposedly anti-rational live theater antecedents; the differences between which Ricketson compares to "a wheel-barrow and a stratosphere airplane."<sup>221</sup>

If managers were not convinced for these reasons, Ricketson's anti-stage rhetoric also claimed that specific qualities of cinema better fit the business practices and space of the modern theater. This rhetoric also cunningly sympathized with the most widely expressed beliefs of those in the variety entertainment business. Ricketson's first claim was that cinema was more apt for the system efficiency underpinning the mass retail system: "The human being has not the flexibility of the tireless, emotionless, inanimate film that is run by machinery and transported in a can."<sup>222</sup> In general, Ricketson's point is that cinema symbiotically replicates the best, "scientific" qualities of the mass retail system: cost-effective, efficient, unceasing, and completely rational. Inversely, stage acts are positioned as the embodiment of human flaws antithetical to this system, and that the manager booking these acts had to take on yet another job dealing with live performers (and their emotions and varying levels of energy.) In part, this

argument echoed variety entertainers and critics regular complaint that the frequency of shows in variety palaces, ranging from 4 to 6 per day, was a detriment to their performance.<sup>223</sup> Even the minimum four shows was far removed from the two-a-day format of the big-time vaudeville circuit, which many in the industry still believed was the ideal format assuring quality performances.

Ricketson also posited that stage shows were largely incompatible with the architecture and spectatorship of variety palaces. Part of this thesis hailed cinema's ability to project onto a large screen and change shot scales, thereby allowing spectators to legibly read the screen regardless of their location in these theaters with 3,000 to 5,000 seats: "These picture theaters are fitted to picture and pictures to them. Any good picture can fill the whole theatre--reach with full force all the people in the house when it is full [...even] those sitting in the far corners of the balcony."<sup>224</sup> In comparison, then, Ricketson concludes, the "modern motion picture theatre is structurally wrong for stage shows [...] It is so because the architectural intention was to make it so."<sup>225</sup>

Factually, Ricketson's final statement is false—most architects designed the majority of variety palaces after theatrical antecedents to privilege their stages by including proscenium arches and seating based on legitimate theaters—but his argument still resonated with those in variety theater.<sup>226</sup> He continues, "[stage shows, especially with a single star,] may get over to a few hundred down front, but his efforts are lost to those sitting in the far corners of the balcony." This point sympathized with the most prominent complaint of variety performers and critics toward performing in variety palaces: that their size prohibited "circularity," the perceived intimacy between vaudeville performers and audiences, which allowed them to hypothetically communicate and react to each other, largely without the use of sound amplification mediating

the communication. Ricketson's manual echoed these complaints: "Imagine a personality big enough to fill a picture cathedral! [...] The living actors need a certain intimacy with their audience. They have not the qualities of expansion and contraction to fit the home of the film. They are out of place on the stage of an ideal picture theatre."<sup>227</sup> For all of these reasons Ricketson writes, "The stage show cannot compete with good pictures[...]the result caused the passing of the most unproductive period in motion picture exhibition."<sup>228</sup>

Though this evocation of theater management was the bane of the variety entertainment and far outlasted the Depression, studio policy also accepted that stage programming was still viable and even necessary in metropolitan markets precisely for the reasons which became primary during the Depression. However reluctantly, Ricketson acknowledges that audiences did not just want films and so managers may have to fold to simply appease "any public hunger for living attractions," in which case a theater be open to booking six to twelve live shows per year, which he believed was the minimum number of programs to dispel any pressing desire from local patrons for regular stage entertainment. He also recommends programming stage shows as a method to dispel competition from nearby theaters (especially if they too booked them).<sup>229</sup>

Largely, however, he acknowledges the necessity of stage shows in the entertainment ecosystem because of Hollywood's own structural inadequacies to fulfill these saturated environments. "The stage show, or flesh attraction," Ricketson writes, "is a dead issue in the motion picture theater, as an established policy, except in de luxe theaters in metropolitan cities." The primary reason was the "protection of house prestige [...] If the supply of attractions is limited, stage shows may keep the public from discovering the letdown of the ordinary pictures interspersed with the better attractions."<sup>230</sup> Stage shows, in other words, acted as the great cover up for the inefficiencies of Hollywood's ostensibly all-power vertical integration, with the

booking any form of live performance maintaining the prestige of a theater which should otherwise showcase Hollywood's best product (and ironically instead showcased some of their worst product.)

Put shortly, as antagonistic as Ricketson and the studios were toward live performance, the showmanship strategy was still a reality even in the comparatively corporate post-Depression chains. As such, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters* includes an entire chapter solely dedicated to the logic and rationale behind programming stage shows into movie theaters, as well as detailed insights into how live performance fits in with other programming practices, its expected costs, and how it affects a manager's weekly schedule.<sup>231</sup> This schedule describes day-by-day, and hour-by-hour the additional tasks creating stage shows add to the work of a manager of a de luxe theater with a staff of two hundred that produced its own weekly stage shows, including reviewing rehearsals, editing the show, meeting with the production and music departments, and holding talent tryouts. Even if a theater did not utilize stage entertainment, Ricketson recommended that a theater's stage and stage equipment be maintained. Most surprisingly, Ricketson also advocated that all theaters, regardless of size and how often they program live performance still hold local talent tryouts once per week (he recommended Friday at 11pm): "No matter how little talent [the manager] uses, he needs to have some on hand." Maintaining the stage and recruiting talent allowed a theater to change the policy in short notice, suggesting that Ricketson believed this could happen to any theater at any time.<sup>232</sup>

Though they were not the only theaters to book stage shows, metropolitan first-run theaters were the epicenter of variety entertainment because they were a "perfect storm" of qualities which demonstrate the limits of vertical integration in the studio era. Theaters' massive size lent them the economy-of-scale needed for the often expensive process and their association

with the studios allowed them the flexibility around restrictive distribution policies, but they also faced relatively-intense competition from a growing number of independent variety palaces in heavily saturated markets in which the studio's oligopoly only worked imperfectly with pooling, and Hollywood could not produce enough quality films to satisfy the demand for films worthy of these picture palaces.<sup>233</sup>

Hollywood studios could have openly and proudly embraced stage strategies, and controlled programming and performers much closer than they did.<sup>234</sup> This would have, however, meant investing in a comparatively inefficient entertainment which conflicted with their systems of efficiency. It also would have meant admitting--or at least making more obvious---their own shortcomings which kept their straight film utopia a fantasy. Instead, they allowed theater managers, agents, and performers control the booking, circulation, and content of live acts. This system facilitated and continued to foster showmanship, a more diverse star system and vaudeville-like interactions between performers and audience.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joe Bigelow, “Vaudeville’s Outlook,” *Variety*, December 29, 1931, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Sime Silverman, “25 Years Ahead—and What?,” *Variety*, December 31, 1930, 39.

<sup>3</sup> I include many of these calls in chapter 3.

<sup>4</sup> The few existing accounts in film history that mention live performance’s endurance in motion picture theaters after this period, such as those by Douglas Gomery, Tino Balio, and Donald Crafton, capture to some extent live performance’s continuation within movie houses, albeit largely from the perspective of those sympathetic to film (only) industry. Each of them, however, posit the misleading, and sometimes incorrect notion, which was supported by the film industry, that synchronized sound had already severely weakened the use of live performance in studio theaters. These authors then credit the rampant financial retrenchment during the Great Depression and declining attendance of stage shows as delivering the final blow. As Gomery summarizes, “If the coming of sound caused the end of the stage show, the Great Depression buried it. Orchestra pits were covered up; paint in the dressing rooms began to peel; and the backstage became another storage room.” As much as these accounts prop up the supposed death of live performance that many film industry insiders and studio executives reveled in at the time - they also contradict this dominant discourse by providing occasional piecemeal accounts of the continuation of live performance during and after the Depression. The authors note that during the Depression, many studio theaters turned to live performance as a method to attract cash-strapped patrons to theaters either because of a dearth of popular films or as an attractive promise to prospective theatergoers of a full bill of entertainment at inexpensive costs. However, the authors note that these strategies were only temporary as studios eventually dropped stage shows because they had “lost [their] effectiveness” and became a “burden.” They also suggest after the Depression even most deluxe theaters were “forced[...]to switch to a pictures-only policy by 1934” and that only the “top movie palaces” and studio “flag-ship theaters” in America’s largest cities continued to program live performance, and were increasingly focused on booking personal appearances especially of music stars. Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 27; Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 72-3; Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema’s Transition to Sound, 1926-1931* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 265. For another history that cites the Depression as the explanation of vaudeville’s final death, see Nicholas Sammond, “Vaudeville - Online Companion to *Birth of an Industry*,” Scalar, Accessed on March 29, 2022. <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/birthofanindustry/from-blackface-to-burlesque?path=vaudeville>.

<sup>5</sup> While I borrow the phrase from Crafton, several of the so-called killing strategies presented in this chapter have not previously received scholarly attention. Crafton, *The Talkies*, 252.

<sup>6</sup> Sime Silverman, “25 Years Ahead—and What?,” *Variety*, January 2, 1934, 85; Sime Silverman, “25 Years Ahead—and What?,” *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 3. *Variety* accompanied the 1935 reprinted article with this description: “The following is reprinted from five years ago because it is *Variety*’s belief that it is the most remarkable editorial ever written for an amusement trade paper.”

<sup>7</sup> The originality of this argument is that it was a systemic problem for Hollywood. Other studies have noted in passing that the lack of A films was a problem in specific cities, such as New York and Philadelphia. Ross Melnick, *American Showman: Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908-1935* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 350-70; Catherine Jurca and John Sedgwick, “The Film’s the Thing: Moviegoing in Philadelphia, 1935-36,” *Film History* 26, no. 4 (2014): 58–83.

<sup>8</sup> This data does not come from the *Variety*’s “Variety Bill” database. It was instead printed in annual summaries of the status of vaudeville and variety in *Variety* (cited below). I am in the process of finishing the “Variety Bills” database for 1930 in hopes of seeing how this data compares to what *Variety* printed in its articles.

<sup>9</sup> This overview of the film industry during the Depression adapts three sources, which I cite here for the section. Balio, *Grand Design*, 13-36; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 59-66; Crafton, *The Talkies*, 181-216, 250-65. Like most American corporations, the stocks of the major and minor studios all dropped between 35 and 75 percent by mid-November. On average these declines were less than those of many staple industries, including automobiles, rubber, chain stores, and food. As a result, the crash had little effect on industry morale. Industry leaders, including Will Hays—head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA)—projected optimism even when speaking in front of the United States Chamber of Commerce. Like others, Hays believed that cheap amusements were immune to economic depression. Under this view all drops in stocks were temporary--motivated by fear, not economic substance. For the moment, optimism proved correct. Investment companies and industry analysts, including Standard Statistics Company, confirmed Hay’s rosy outlook.

<sup>10</sup> Hollywood was only one of three industries (along with electrical equipment and food) to increase its profits in the fourth quarter of 1929.

<sup>11</sup> Crafton, *The Talkies*, 14,188, 216.

<sup>12</sup> *Variety*’s “Variety Bills” Database, appendix A.

<sup>13</sup> Crafton, *The Talkies*, 190. The papers of the Theatre Owners of America can be found at: National Association of Theatre Owners Records, MSS 1446, Special Collections Library, Brigham Young University.

<sup>14</sup> “Predicts ‘Flesh’ Revival: Expert Sees Big Comeback of Vaudeville in the Offing,” *Billboard*, December 27, 1930, 1.

<sup>15</sup> “125 Weeks of Vaude Left,” *Variety*, January 8, 1930, 95; “Vaude in 1921,” *Variety*, December 31, 1930, 21; Joe Bigelow, “Vaudeville of 1930,” *Variety*, December 31, 1930, 21; Acton Davies, “What I Don’t Know about Vaudeville,” *Variety*, December 31, 1930, 62; In

vaudefilm, RKO theaters led the majors with eighty-one weeks, spread across the theaters it booked in the American East, West, and South, with Loew's theaters trailing at twenty-eight weeks, and Fox (East and West Coast) at a mere seven. Only Stanley-Warner theaters increased the number of theaters which booked live performances from six to nine. Vaudefilm at independent theaters which, as previously mentioned, had been especially disrupted by the transition to synchronized sound, continued to decline, operating now only in fifteen theaters. Most notably, the (Fally) Markus Circuit, the biggest independent circuit, disbanded both out of concern about the Depression and because Markus wished to retire. Two corporations continued to dominate the production and booking of presentations. Paramount-Publix kept on touring its self-produced presentations in twenty-five of its theaters at a time, followed Fanchon and Marco's (F&M) "Ideas" which were mostly presented in Fox theaters, which owned fifty percent of F&M, over twenty weeks that year. Loew's even increased its use of presentations from six weeks to eleven. The overall decline still left enough circuit time for the best acts to book year-long tours with RKO although less so with Loew's. For many acts, though, as many as 1,500, the end of 1930 marked the end of regular work in variety performance, even if they did not realize it yet.

<sup>16</sup> "Outlook for 1931," *The Film Daily Year Book 1931* (New York: Film Daily, 1931), 549-55; Balio, *Grand Design*, 13-36; Crafton, *The Talkies*, 201-10. The lack of an overall financial decline in 1930 further intensified support for the straight-picture economy because it seemingly showed that theater programming no longer required stage shows. For example, Adolph Zukor, head of Paramount Pictures, hailed 1930 as the year that not only proved Hollywood's immunity to the Depression, but also demonstrated the definitive ascendancy of "good pictures" over other entertainment commodities for the good of the vertically integrated industry: "To us in the motion picture business, one of the outstanding lessons which 1930 has driven home repeatedly is that the public, no matter what general conditions may be, will patronize good pictures. Good pictures! Nothing in this business can take their place, nothing is so absolutely necessary to the continued prosperity of all phases of the industry. Week after week, when other businesses have been languishing, when poor pictures have been starving, we have seen good pictures draw thousands of people to boxoffices. The record has been so plain that the wonder is anybody ever could have been deluded with the idea that there was a substitute for good pictures." Like Zukor's statement, no other studio executive in the 1930 yearbook of the *Film Daily* even mentioned live performance, suggesting that none of them considered it a major part of their business plan in contrast to how it dominated discussion in previous years. While there is little evidence that discourse like this directly led to changes by theater management, 1930 appeared to prove what promoters of the straight picture economy had claimed for several years: that the "film" industry could reduce stage entertainment and still earn a profit -- even during the Depression. It also marked a change in the dominant discourse from a narrative of speculative supplantation (e.g., sound cinema replacing expensive live performance) to one of cinema's ascendancy above all other media - with all dissent supposedly disproven.

<sup>17</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 13-36; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 59-66; Crafton, *The Talkies*, 201-10, 250-266.

<sup>18</sup> Joe Bigelow, "Vaudeville's Outlook," *Variety*, December 29, 1931, 19, 171; Joe Bigelow, "Vaudeville in 1931," *Variety*, December 29, 1931, 21; Joe Bigelow, "Outlook of Vaudeville," *Variety*, January 2, 1934, 87; Ed Dawson, "Circuits Extend Vaudeville Plan," *Motion Picture Herald*, December 19, 1931, 79. One of these cited reports slightly contradicts this information, stating that 197 theaters on average used live performance each week, 120 weeks of vaudefilm and 77 weeks of presentations.

<sup>19</sup> Paramount-Publix theaters collectively reduced its self-produced presentation tours to five weeks, while six of its theaters on average also programmed vaudefilm every week. Fox theaters also collectively decreased its vaudefilm bookings to four weeks. Loews's theaters made the most drastic cuts to stage shows, reducing their use of vaudefilm from twenty-eight weeks to eight, though its bookings of presentations remained the same at eleven theaters on average. RKO continued to book the majority of vaudefilm time in the country. In 1931 the circuit collectively cut stage acts from eleven of its theaters, however, the company's seventy weeks of vaudefilm exhibition still represented almost sixty percent of the industry.

<sup>20</sup> Joe Bigelow, "Vaudeville's Outlook," 19.

<sup>21</sup> Bigelow, "Outlook of Vaudeville," 87; Joe Bigelow, "End of 'Poor Vaudeville,'" *Variety*, January 3, 1933, 69-70; "Confab on WB, Loew's, Publix, RKO Merging Bookings; Only 25 Vaude and 30 Presentation Weeks Left," *Variety*, December 6, 1932, 39; "Only 100 Houses Playing Vaude Now, Against 300 Last Year," *The Film Daily*, June 20, 1932, 1; "Par Considers Producing Own Units Next Season; 'Name' Shows in 4 Towns," *Variety*, April 24, 1934, 49; "Vaude a Tonic for Loew Biz," *Billboard*, May 6, 1933, 7; "F&M Drive Nets Houses," *Billboard*, May 6, 1933, 7; RKO Working on Plan for Permanent Staging Bureau," *Billboard*, February 14, 1931, 16. Loews's and Warner Bros. completely dissolved its use of presentations, and not a single Fox theater booked vaudefilm during 1932. Paramount-Publix theaters also effectively eliminated vaudefilm programming, although some theater managers booked six weeks of "presentations" in the vaudefilm style, by booking disparate acts and then haphazardly tying them together in a revue style performance with little-to-no added production value - a sharp contrast to the company's meticulously curated, centrally managed presentations of the past. F&M's Ideas were reduced by half, with bookings continuing in twenty-five theaters on average, largely because theaters under the Fox Theater umbrella largely stopped booking acts from them. Loews's theaters had the only increase in booking with eleven weeks of vaudefilm, but was negative in terms of overall playing time with the elimination of its presentations. Four Warner Bros. theaters also continued to book vaudefilm. In contrast, other changes made by RKO theaters disrupted the foundation of the variety entertainment industry in 1932. The theaters of the fledgling studio, which had just proclaimed live performance as a cornerstone of a studios' business strategy the previous year, cut their bookings by seventy percent. At its lowest, this left only ten RKO theaters regularly booking vaudefilm, although this number more

regularly averaged between twenty-five and thirty houses. While this was the year that Loew's, Warner, and Publix really stopped any centralized production of stage shows, it is important to note that RKO had stopped this largely in 1928, with a few exceptions.

<sup>22</sup> Trav S. D., *No Applause, Just Throw Money: The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 254.

<sup>23</sup> For more than twenty years afterward, the Palace Theater would switch between showing only films and combination policy, culminating in the "return of vaudeville" campaign in 1948 (a subject for future research). Trade press commentators believed the Palace Theater struggled to maintain stage entertainment (despite its continued efforts) because of its comparatively small capacity. At just over 1,700 seats, the capacities of other Broadway-area variety palaces trumped the Palace. Bigelow, "End of 'Poor Vaudeville,'" 69-70.

<sup>24</sup> President Roosevelt's four-day bank holiday in March reduced already hurting theater attendance by another forty-five percent, with some theaters reportedly accepting IOUs or non-cash goods in exchange for tickets. By this point studios had also laid off more than one-fifth of its workforce.

<sup>25</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 13-36; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 59-66; Crafton, *The Talkies*, 201-10, 250-65.

<sup>26</sup> Bigelow, "Outlook of Vaudeville," 87; Joe Schoenfeld, "The Starvation Brigade," *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 114. RKO theaters continued to reduce live performances, and only had thirteen theaters utilizing the practice by the end of 1933. RKO's distancing from its past identity of a vaudeville company left Loew's theaters the unintentional leader in the field with fifteen weeks of live performance. F&M regularly booked its "Ideas" in ten-and-a-half theaters per week, followed by Paramount at five weeks and Warner Bros. at two-and-a-half. These forty-eight theaters were spread across thirty-two cities. Only seven of these cities, Boston, Brooklyn, Chicago, Detroit, New York, Newark, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C. contained theaters from multiple studios using live performance as a competitive measure against each other. In the remaining twenty-five cities, only one major circuit booked stage shows in one or more of its theaters, maintaining a mini monopoly over the process. More important, however, 1933 marked the return of live performance into independently operated movie/vaudeville palaces, which had not largely occurred since the studio theater-buying spree of the late 1920s. It should be noted that a half week indicates that the theater only used live performance for two to four days at a time, not for an entire week.

<sup>27</sup> Bigelow, "End of 'Poor Vaudeville,'" 69-70; "G.V.F Unit for Loew," *Variety*, January 2, 1934, 86; "Confab on WB, Loew's, Publix, RKO Merging Bookings; Only 25 Vaude and 30 Presentation Weeks Left," 39; "Presentation Shows Making Definite Trend Toward Vaude," *Billboard*, December 29, 1934, 63; "Par Considers Producing Own Units Next Season; 'Name' Shows in 4 Towns," 49; *Booking Contracts (1936 - 1954)*, Balaban & Katz Collection, Theater Historical Society, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

<sup>28</sup> These contradictions suggests that *Variety's* data underestimated the persistence of live performance either by not including independent theaters, not paying attention to non-metropolitan markets, and/or miscounting major markets. I list examples of these that *Variety* did not regularly report in appendix A. This evidence reaffirms my argument in the introduction of the utility of *Variety's* data as a basic indicator of prevalence which is likely far more widespread.

<sup>29</sup> United States Department of Commerce, *Census of American Business: 1933* (Washington D.C.: United States Department of Commerce, 1934), 7, 14-5; United States Department of Commerce, *Survey of Current Business* 14, no. 1 (January 1934): 17. Unfortunately, the census supplies no indication of how often a theater needed to use live performance to qualify for the distinction. For discussions of the census's data regarding live performance during the its release see, Sam Shain, "Grosses in 1933 and 1934," *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 8; "Theater Grosses: Statistics Compiled by the Census of American Business," *The Film Daily Year Book 1935* (New York: The Film Daily, 1935), 41.

<sup>30</sup> Otherwise, there are very few noticeable trends regarding the relative prevalence of the practice which might indicate what influenced its continuation and how frequently theaters resorted to live performances. No regions (e.g. South, East/West Coast, Midwest) in the United States appear more or less represented: states with similar numbers of theaters and/or total population have wildly different percentages of theaters using the practice.

<sup>31</sup> Theaters on the West Coast and the South are also rarely reported in *Variety* data, while the census shows that they used the practice no less frequently than other regions.

<sup>32</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 26. "Theater Statistics for the United States and Canada," *The Film Daily Year Book 1931* (New York: The Film Daily, 1931), 706.

<sup>33</sup> United States Department of Commerce, *Census of American Business: 1933* (Washington D.C.: United States Department of Commerce, 1934), 7, 14-5. Other accounts are less drastic which estimate the number of theaters closed was closer to 4,000. See, Sam Shain, "Problems of the Film Industry," *Variety*, January 3, 1933, 12; Balio, *Grand Design*, 13-36; "Film Facts and Figures," *The Film Daily Year Book 1934* (New York: The Film Daily, 1934), 35.

<sup>34</sup> "Motion Picture Facts," *The Film Daily Year Book 1930* (New York: The Film Daily, 1930), 3; Film Facts and Figures," *The Film Daily Year Book 1934*, 35; Film Facts and Figures," *The Film Daily Year Book 1937* (New York: The Film Daily, 1937), 37.

<sup>35</sup> Shain, "Problems of the Film Industry,"12; "Ten Moss-GTC Closings," *Billboard*, May 27, 1933, 7; "Two Vaude Spots in RKO Dec. Closings," November 26, 1932, 6; "Mastbaum Closing Affects 250," *Billboard*, July 9, 1932, 9;

<sup>36</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Fred De Boudy to William P. Connery, Jr., January 28, 1932 in United States Congress House Committee on Ways and Means, *Revenue Revision, 1932* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government, 1932), 517.

<sup>38</sup> Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: BFI, 2008), 3-4.

<sup>39</sup> “Other Chains Taking RKO as Model, May Go Extensively in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, December 22, 1931, 25; Paul Young, “Synchronized Sound Comes to the Cinema,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, ed. Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 6; Crafton, *The Talkie*, 71-2; James Buhler and Hannah Lewis, “Evolving Practices for Film Music and Sound, 1925-1935,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Film Music*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and Fiona Ford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 12.

<sup>40</sup> “RKO-Warner Relations Will be Dropped Soon,” *Billboard*, January 11, 1930, 10. Some Stanley Warner Bros. theater booked through other corporations or agencies. In addition to Paramount-Publix, which I discuss below, other theaters, largely in the central Midwest (e.g., Wisconsin booked through independent agencies because they wanted an agent in closer proximity who knew the local and its patrons better.

<sup>41</sup> The other staff member was Lew Golder, who was the “head of the office.” By January 8, Harold Kemp replaced Golder while maintaining his head booker position. Warner Bros. incorporated the Warner Booking Office in January 1929, but it was not operational until April that year.

<sup>42</sup> “RKO Will Not Book Part of Warner Houses—Leaving Keith’s Next Week,” *Variety*, January 1, 1930, 35. Despite being in direct competition with them and squeezing their business, RKO surprisingly accommodated Kemp and his team. Not only did they not litigate, RKO welcomed the changes, allowing the Warner office to control the booking of the four theaters that remained contractually under RKO and invited Kemp into their six-floor office at the Palace Theater to conduct this work. Warner could also keep the five percent booking commission associated with these houses and could work with RKO franchised agents to book acts usually exclusive for RKO theaters. RKO’s gentle hand toward their new competition suggests they must have received gross revenue from the theaters and thus wanted them to succeed regardless of who booked them. However, RKO soon realized they were too generous. Toward the end of 1929, Warner’s booking office had yet to earn a profit on their new venture, but their revenues were apparently high enough that RKO wanted to renege on their informal arrangement. RKO offered to re-negotiate its 1923 contract with Stanley, re-absorbing the lost theater bookings and taking on Kemp and his team’s contracts and subletting their office space. Warner Bros. declined, and RKO requested Kemp’s removal from RKO’s offices by mid-January 1930. He obliged and moved into the booking office’s space on the fourth floor of the Warner Building (connected to the Hollywood Theater) on West 44th Street in New York. Kemp took with him two more theaters for the Warner office (now totaling twelve), as well as the relationships he developed with RKO agents from whom he secretly continued to make booking at least during the early part of the transition. Two Stanley-Warner Theaters in New Jersey, the Regent Theater in Paterson and the Ritz Theater in Elizabeth would remain RKO-booked. As for the Ritz, this would only last until May when their contract with RKO expired, but the Regent would remain

under RKO indefinitely unless Warner Bros. bought out RKO's fifty-percent ownership of the theater. In 1931, the booking office moved to the 8th floor.

<sup>43</sup> This included two new theaters in Hoboken and Philadelphia.

<sup>44</sup> "Warner Agency Out for All Booking Business with Open Door System," *Variety*, January 8, 1930, 98.

<sup>45</sup> "Presentation Preferred by Warners N.J. Houses," *Variety*, March 26, 1930, 49.

<sup>46</sup> "Five-Week Warner Units May Build in Pittsburgh," *Variety*, January 22, 1930, 35; "Resumes Vaudfilm," *Variety*, January 22, 1930, 35. Other theaters simply moved from vaudeville to presentations and still booked through Warner Bros.

<sup>47</sup> "See 20 Warner Vaud Show Weeks; 5 – Way Rivalry for Acts, Maybe," *Variety*, July 9, 1930, 39. Paramount and Loew's sent out similar surveys. "No Stage Show Policy for New Season So Far Declared by Any Large Circuits, Except Warners," *Variety*, July 30, 1930, 67, 70.

<sup>48</sup> "Spyros Skouras Admits Vaude Must Receive Attention in Sept.," *Variety*, June 18, 1930, 5.

<sup>49</sup> "Warner Vaudefilmers Doubled by the Fall," *Billboard*, June 7, 1930, 11.

<sup>50</sup> "Warner Out for Names," *Billboard*, August 16, 1930, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Theaters they recruited include: Warner Theaters in Pittsburgh and Newark, the Harris (also Pittsburgh), and the Strand in Waterbury, Connecticut.

<sup>52</sup> "Vaude May Come Back in Philly Through Warners and Indie. Mgrs.," *Variety*, July 30, 1930, 67; "Warners Dropping Use of Stage Vaude Acts," *Variety*, January 22, 1930, 34; "W.B. Using Acts in 3 Towns, 4-Turn Shows," *Variety*, October 8, 1930, 44; "Earle, Philly, Vaude, with Wash Come-back," *Variety*, October 29, 1930, 48; "WB Split, Waterbury," *Variety*, October 29, 1930, 48; "WB Playing Acts for 11 Weeks at Present," *Variety*, November 5, 1930, 39; "Harris, Pitt, Gets Warner Vaude Starting Nov. 15," *Variety*, November 12, 1930, 49.

<sup>53</sup> "Mentalist in WB Film Houses with Exploiting," *Variety*, December 10, 1930, 40.

<sup>54</sup> "WB New Year's Eve Specials for 35 Acts," *Variety*, December 17, 1930, 33; "WB's One-Week Vaude Try in Four Pa. Towns," *Variety*, December 17, 1930, 34.

<sup>55</sup> "Warner Likely to Drop Units," *Billboard*, December 27, 1930, 31.

<sup>56</sup> "Warners Expect to Play Vaude in 20 WB Houses in Fall—Maybe More," *Variety*, August 18, 1931, 37. Michalove continued, "What goes on in Broadway, even with plenty of editing, quite often flops in Newark, or Jersey City or Philadelphia." His explanation of what locally specific, however, appears no different than the reconceptualization of Hollywood's mass audience happening currently in film production based on ideas of regionalism: moving away from metropolitan benchmarks of taste and stardom to one of the "every man" of the suburban areas and the Midwest. See for example: Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 153-84; Richard Maltby, "Sticks, Hicks and Flaps: Classical Hollywood's Generic Conception of Its Audience," in *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: BFI Pub., 1999); Robert King, *Hokum!: The Early Sound*



*Slapstick Short and Depression-Era Mass Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 21-54.

<sup>57</sup> “Too Big for Vaude, Indiana Drops Acts,” *Variety*, February 4, 1931, 50.

<sup>58</sup> “Too Big for Vaude, Indiana Drops Acts,” 50.

<sup>59</sup> “‘Ideas’ Set for Warner and Loew,” *Billboard*, February 14, 1931, 16.

<sup>60</sup> “Warner Drops Sharon,” *Billboard*, February 14, 1931, 16; “Davis, Pitts, Back to Vaude After 2 Yrs.,” *Variety*, January 7, 1931, 47; “Vaudefilm Policy Takes at Davis, Pittsburgh,” *Billboard*, February 14, 1931, 17; “RKO Vaude in WB Houses,” *Variety*, March 4, 1931, 40; “Davis and Vaude,” *Variety*, March 11, 1931, 40.

<sup>61</sup> “Fox and WB See New Stage Unit List of Maybe 40 Wks. for Class B Houses if Unions Agree Upon Concessions,” *Variety*, March 11, 1931, 42.

<sup>62</sup> “Vaude Getting Big Play in Warner Talk on Fall Plans,” *Billboard*, July 11, 1931, 7.

<sup>63</sup> “Moss’ Broadway Vaudfilm at 4-a-Day on Full Wk. Bills-Warners Will Book,” *Variety*, September 8, 1931, 52; “Warners’ Vaude Booking Office Adding More Time by Next Season,” *Variety*, April 30, 1930, 43; “Circuits Holding Back on Adding More Time,” *Billboard*, August 16, 1930, 8; “Vaude Coming Back to Philly,” *Billboard*, April 18, 1931, 6; “Major Circuits Have Good Vaude Outlook for Summer,” *Billboard*, May 2, 1931, 12; “Warners Actless as Summer Economy Move,” *Variety*, June 2, 1931, 39.

<sup>64</sup> “Warner Wary Over Humans,” *Variety*, March 18, 1931, 49; “Coast Circuits Going Heavy for Stage,” *Variety*, March 18, 1931, 50; “2 Warner Midwest Houses Drop Acts,” *Billboard*, September 19, 1931, 5; “Vaude Coming Back to Philly,” 6; “Joint RKO-WB Vaude in Earle,” *Variety*, April 22, 1931, 37; “Warner House Joins Intact; Setup is Without Precedent,” *Billboard*, April 25, 1931, 7; “New Britain Drops Acts; Waterbury Might Follow,” *Billboard*, May 9, 1931, 9; “75 Weeks of Summer Vaude, Now 88, with 60 Deluxe Film House Dates--RKO 67% of Vaude,” *Variety*, May 20, 1931, 110; RKO-WB Talk New Deal for Earle, Philly,” *Variety*, May 27, 1931, 77; “Vaude Getting Big Play in Warner Talk on Fall Plans,” 7; “Philly Vaude Catching On,” *Billboard*, August 8, 1931, 6; “Warners Expect to Play Vaude in 20 WB Houses in Fall—Maybe More,” 37; “Warners or F&M. to Book for Moss,” *Billboard*, September 5, 1931, 6; “3 Vaude Circuits in Newark and 4<sup>th</sup> is Due, 450,000 Town,” *Variety*, September 8, 1931, 78

<sup>65</sup> “Other Chains Taking RKO as Model, May Go Extensively in Vaudeville,” 25.

<sup>66</sup> “Other Chains Taking RKO as Model, May Go Extensively in Vaudeville,” 25.

<sup>67</sup> “Warners’ Chi Booking Office Actors’ Lifesaver,” *Variety*, September 15, 1931, 38; “Michalove States How WB Stands on Vaude in Any Warner House,” *Variety*, September 22, 1931, 33; “Harris Asks 3 and 4 Acts Units for 34 Towns in his WB Penn. Division,” *Variety*, October 6, 1931, 36; “Warners List 36 Flesh Spots Where Movie Stars May Play,” *Billboard*, October 24, 1931, 8; All Vaude Offices Gain Houses But RKO,” *Variety*, November 17, 1931, 34; “F-M Units for WB Stanley, Jersey City,” *Variety*, December 1, 1931, 32.

<sup>68</sup> “New Acts,” *Variety*, January 5, 1932, 38. Titled “Warner Bros. Kiddie Revue,” it featured a group of nine child dancers (ages eight to sixteen), backed by a chorus of children, with each number introduced by Miss Vitaphone, Jane Graham.

<sup>69</sup> “F-M Units for WB Stanley, Jersey City,” *Variety*, December 1, 1931, 32; “Publix Takes Loew Units for Chi-Detroit in Economy Move; “WB-FM Deal Off Despite Staffs All Set to Combine,” *Variety*, April 12, 1932, 32; “Does Not Disrupt F-M Deal,” *Variety*, February 23, 1932, 25. Under the agreement, F&M would move to the Warner Building in New York and take over the operations of the booking office, placing their own personnel in general management positions, relieving Steve Trilling but keeping Kemp as head booker. Even in its tentative form, the deal signaled that Warner Bros. had established a foundation in variety entertainment worthy of conglomeration with even one the most established corporations in the market.

<sup>70</sup> Warner Bros. continued to book FM units in some of its theaters at least until the end of 1932.

<sup>71</sup> “WB is Checking Its Vaude Sites As Future Guide,” *Variety*, February 16, 1932, 49; “Warner Houses Switch,” March 5, 1932, 7; “Vaude Out of Two More Warner Houses,” April 5, 1932, 31; “WB Down to 5 Wks., With Pitts. J.C. Off,” *Variety*, May 24, 1932, 52; “WB May Abandon Its 2 ½ Weeks of Vaude and Go 100% Films,” July 12, 1932, 26; “Labor Scales Delay Par, WB Stage Policies,” *Variety*, September 6, 1932, 26; “Warner Vaude Experiment,” November 5, 1932, 6.

<sup>72</sup> Silverman, “25 Years Ahead—and What?,” December 31, 1930, 39; Joe Bigelow, “Vaudeville—Or What’s Left,” *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 115; Joe Schoenfeld, “Year in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 195; Joe Laurie, Jr., “At the Wake,” *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 192; Joe Schoenfeld, “Managers—or Bookers,” *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 192; Hal Halperin, “Do They Want Vaudeville,” *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 193; Shain, “Operating a Chain,”<sup>14</sup>. These articles describe how showman managers would never allow live performance to leave their theaters, suggesting a shift in dominate managerial strategies. They also compare picture theater managers to janitors, rather than showmen.

<sup>73</sup> Ross Melnick and Andreas Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theaters* (St. Paul (MN): MBI, 2004), 74; Sam Shain, “Operating a Chain,”<sup>14</sup>; Roy Chartier, “Year in Pictures,” *Variety*, January 3, 1933, 2, 48.

<sup>74</sup> Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 54-9; Douglas Gomery, “U.S. Film Exhibition: The Formation of a Big Business,” in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

<sup>75</sup> Fox also decentralized their theaters in 1932. “Knell of Chain Operation”, *Variety*, October 18, 1932, 7; “Ten Leading Headline Events of Motion Pictures During the Year 1932,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1933*, 47.

<sup>76</sup> “Vaude Getting Big Play in Warner Talk on Fall Plans,” *Billboard*, July 11, 1931, 7.

<sup>77</sup> “Warners Expect to Play Vaude in 20 WB Houses in Fall—Maybe More,” 37; “Michalove States How WB Stands on Vaude in Any Warner House,” 33; “Other Chains Taking RKO as Model, May Go Extensively in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, December 22, 1931, 25.

<sup>78</sup> “Franklin Hopeful for RKO Denies Operating Changes,” *Billboard*, April 16, 1932, 8; “Franklin, Watch Your Step!,” *Billboard*, June 11, 1932, 7; “RKO Palace, Cleveland, Booking Its 5 Acts, \$2,000, Away from RKO,” *Variety*, February 14, 1933, 39; “Need for Stage Attractions to Aid Weak Films, Says RKO,” *Billboard*, April 15, 1933, 9; “New Exec Setup in RKO: Franklin Oversees All Depts.,” *Billboard*, July 15, 1933, 6.

<sup>79</sup> “RKO-F&M Merger is Denied by Franklin, O.K.’d by Marco,” *Billboard*, September 24, 1932, 6; “Need for Stage Attractions to Aid Weak Films, Says RKO,” 9.

<sup>80</sup> “Franklin Has Vaude on Pan,” *Billboard*, July 29, 1933, 9.

<sup>81</sup> “Franklin Has Vaude on Pan,” 9.

<sup>82</sup> “H.B. Franklin Renewed with RKO; Stuart Also,” *Variety*, May 9, 1933, 5; “Franklin’s Contract Got No RKO Board Approval,” *Variety*, June 27, 1933, 5; “Hope for Vaude at RKO Revives as Franklin Out,” *Variety*, October 17, 1933, 49; “Discord Makes Franklin Quit,” *Billboard*, October 21, 1933, 6, 10; Franklin was particularly upset by his loss of control over the real estate department, which largely determined where to buy property for new theaters and how to manage their current real estate assets.

<sup>83</sup> “Michalove States How WB Stands on Vaude in Any Warner House,” 33.

<sup>84</sup> Joe Bigelow, “Vaudeville of 1930,” *Variety*, December 31, 1930, 21; Joe Bigelow, “Outlook of Vaudeville,” *Variety*, January 2, 1934, 87; “Predicts ‘Flesh’ Revival,” December 27, 1930, 3, 17; Silverman, “25 Years Ahead—and What?,” December 31, 1930, 39; Bigelow, “Vaudeville—Or What’s Left,” 115; Schoenfeld, “Year in Vaudeville,” January 1, 1936, 195; Laurie, Jr., “At the Wake,” 192; Schoenfeld, “Managers—or Bookers,” 192; Halperin, “Do They Want Vaudeville,” 193; Shain, “Operating a Chain,” 14; J Bigelow, “Vaudeville’s Outlook,” 19. See also chapter 3.

<sup>85</sup> “Percentage Film Contracts Block Vaude Revival,” *Film Daily*, October 2, 1933, 1.

<sup>86</sup> “Percentage Film Contracts Block Vaude Revival,” 1, 11.

<sup>87</sup> Andrew F. Hanssen, “Revenue Sharing and the Coming of Sound,” in *An Economic History of Film*, ed. John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny (London: Routledge, 2007), 86–120; Crafton, *The Talkies*, 111. In the silent era, percentage-rentals were occasionally used for road show productions.

<sup>88</sup> Frank H Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1938), 30-1.

<sup>89</sup> F. Andrew Hanssen, “Revenue Sharing in Movie Exhibition and the Arrival of Sound,” *Economic Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (2002): 380–402.

<sup>90</sup> Mark Glancy, “MGM Film Grosses, 1924–1948: The Eddie Mannix Ledger,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 12, no. 2 (1992): 55–73; Richard B Jewell, “RKO Film Grosses, 1929–1951: The C.J. Tevlin Ledger,”

*Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14, no. 1 (1994): 37–49; F. Andrew Hanssen, “Vertical Integration during the Hollywood Studio Era,” *Journal of Law and Economics* 53, no. 3 (2010): 519–43.

<sup>91</sup> Harold Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), 195. A later 1938 manual estimated that manager generally tried to keep the cost of stage shows down around 30 to 33% of gross revenue. Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres*, 29.

<sup>92</sup> Hanssen, “Revenue Sharing in Movie Exhibition and the Arrival of Sound;” Richard Maltby, “The Standard Exhibition Contract and the Unwritten History of the Classical Hollywood Cinema,” *Film History* 25, no. 1/2 (2013): 138–53.

<sup>93</sup> Except for the appearance of the most famous celebrities, theaters largely paid live acts flat fees.

<sup>94</sup> Billing Sheets, Stanley Warner Collection, Warner Bros. Archives, University of Southern California.

<sup>95</sup> Managers of Warner Bros. theaters in 1932 tried to negotiate the rental percentage down if a theater used live performance, but this does not appear to be common, nor does it appear to have worked. “Minutes – Zone Managers Meeting at Hotel Astor, May 9, 1932,” Box SW394, Stanley Warner Collection, Warner Bros. Archives.

<sup>96</sup> See chapters 3 and 4 for examples of this discourse. Rick Altman makes a similar argument about synchronized sound. See, Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 276-8.

<sup>97</sup> Sidley Pictures Corporation, “Sound Pictures Sold on Percentage Basis, 1928,” in *Harvard Business Reports, Vol. 8, Cases on the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1930), 330-5; Hanssen, “Revenue Sharing in Movie Exhibition and the Arrival of Sound,” 105.

<sup>98</sup> *Variety’s* “Variety Bills” Database (Appendix A). Comparing the information in 1930 to 1935 evidences many theaters continued to use combination policies between this period. Including many theaters which used live acts every on every program.

<sup>99</sup> Bigelow, “End of ‘Poor Vaudeville,’” 69-70; Shain, “Operating a Chain,” 14; Bigelow, “Vaudeville of 1930,” 21; Joe Bigelow, “Vaudeville in 1931,” *Variety*, December 29, 1931.

<sup>100</sup> Bigelow, “Vaudeville in 1931,” 21; *The Film Daily Yearbook of 1944*, ed. Jack Alicoate (New York: Film Daily), 791; Richard Jewell, *RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan is Born* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2012), 16.

<sup>101</sup> Bigelow, “Vaudeville in 1931,” 21.

<sup>102</sup> Sid Silverman, “What the Grosses Say,” *Variety*, December 29, 1931, 169.

<sup>103</sup> United States Department of Commerce, *Census of American Business: 1933*, 7, 14-5.

<sup>104</sup> Shain, “Grosses in 1933 and 1934,” 8.

<sup>105</sup> “Franklin Has Vaude on Pan,” 9; “RKO Palace, Cleveland, Booking Its 5 Acts, \$2,000, Away from RKO,” 39; “Need for Stage Attractions to Aid Weak Films, Says RKO,” 9; “New Exec Setup in RKO: Franklin Oversees All Depts.,” 6.

<sup>106</sup> Bigelow, "Vaudeville's Outlook," 19.

<sup>107</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 13-36; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 59-66; Crafton, *The Talkies*, 187-191. The other financially conservative strategy adopted by the studios was to encourage patronage and protect revenue was reducing admission cost. In early 1930, theater managers (seemingly unprompted by the studios at first) began reducing admission costs. By July, *Film Daily* reported that reducing the maximum price of admission across first-run theaters to as low as fifty or even thirty-five cents (previously prices ranged from sixty cents to well over a dollar) was "raging," and by December it was "an epidemic."

<sup>108</sup> Shain, "Problems of the Film Industry," 12.

<sup>109</sup> Roy Chartier, "Year in Pictures," 2, 48; Balio, *Grand Design*, 13-36; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 59-66; Crafton, *The Talkies*, 187-91. As early as mid-1930, studio heads pushed for cost cutting. Sam Katz, President of Paramount-Publix, issued requests to reduce costs to "rock-bottom" at the circuit theaters, and Fox West Coast reduced its advertising costs by 10% and banned billboard advertisements completely. A common method of reducing costs at individual theaters, according to *Film Daily*, was to hire female ushers, as theater managers paid them twenty to thirty percent less than their male counterparts. These early cost reductions focused largely on exhibition and promotion expenses, but even production resources were not immune, with several studios closing their remaining production studios in New York, leaving only three by the end of 1930. In 1932, for example, some United Artists employees took as high as a 40% pay cut, Fox and MGM reduced salaries by 35%, and the major production companies started to use stock footage where possible. Studios and theater chains even renegotiated how they paid electric companies, and Paramount restricted the "over-use" of stamps, telegraphs, and phone calls. Only the costs associated with marketing and booking feature films were deemed essential. Even live performance companies outside the studios utilized the same approach. Fanchon and Marco also reduced salaries of over \$25 per week by twenty percent.

<sup>110</sup> Harold Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, 195. A later 1938 manual estimated that manager generally tried to keep the cost of stage shows down around 30 to 33% of gross revenue. Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres*, 29.

<sup>111</sup> 1935 – Palace Theater, Cleveland, Billing Sheets, Stanley Warner Collection, Warner Bros. Archives.

<sup>112</sup> Bigelow, "Outlook of Vaudeville," 87.

<sup>113</sup> Sid Silverman, "U.S. Film Field for 1930," *Variety*, December 31, 1930, 7; Bigelow, "Vaudeville of 1930," 21; "Predicts 'Flesh' Revival: Expert Sees Big Comeback of Vaudeville in the Offing," 1; Bigelow, "End of 'Poor Vaudeville,'" 69-70; Bigelow, "Outlook of Vaudeville," 87; Bigelow, "Vaudeville—Or What's Left," 115.

<sup>114</sup> For a short period of time, Warner Bros. encouraged managers booking live acts to raise their admission prices. Memo to Managers, May 9, 1933, Box SW394, Stanley Theater Collection, Warner Bros. Archive.

<sup>115</sup> "Stage Shows Back in Frisco, Scales Up," *Variety*, March 20, 1934, 47.

- <sup>116</sup> Johnny Wilson, "Raise Vaude. Prices," *Billboard*, January 4, 1930, 49.
- <sup>117</sup> Bigelow, "Vaudeville of 1930," 21.
- <sup>118</sup> "RKO Palace, Cleveland, Booking Its 5 Acts, \$2,000, Away from RKO," 39.
- <sup>119</sup> Predicts 'Flesh' Revival: Expert Sees Big Comeback of Vaudeville in the Offing," 1.
- <sup>120</sup> Bigelow, "Vaudeville's Outlook," 19; Silverman, "What the Grosses Say," 169; "Network Raids Boost WC Talent Salaries," *Variety*, January 3, 1933, 59
- <sup>121</sup> Schoenfeld, "Year in Vaudeville," 195.
- <sup>122</sup> Dan Goldberg, "Units the Thing in Midwest," *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 197.
- <sup>123</sup> "Local Amateurs' Show Marks up \$10,000 Net," *Variety*, August 29, 1933, 49; "Labor: The rise of Amateur Shows," *Billboard*, December 28, 1935, 67; "Local Amateur Contests Will Take Place of 100 Pro Acts for RKO," *Variety*, June 7, 1932, 31, 63; "Amateur Shows in 43 Towns by RKO as Biz Stimulator," *Billboard*, May 14, 1932, 3, 8; Bigelow, "Vaudeville in 1931," *Variety*, 21; Schoenfeld, "Year in Vaudeville," 195
- <sup>124</sup> I discuss this in more detail in chapter 2.
- <sup>125</sup> Arthur Wertheim, *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 244-8; Mary Carbine, "'The Finest Outside the Loop': Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905-1928," in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996). The Pantages Circuit, in particular, would intentionally strand performers away from their homes so that they would accept a lower salary in order to travel home.
- <sup>126</sup> "Vaudeville Tour 1932 [for Hobart Boswarth]," Folder 63, Box 10, B'hend and Kaufmann Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California; "Vaudeville Tour 1933 [for Hobart Boswarth]," Folder 64, Box 10, B'hend and Kaufmann Collection.
- <sup>127</sup> Performing at the same theater for multiple weeks in a row (i.e., a "hold-over") was very uncommon in vaudeville and vaudefilm. Occasionally major stars, like Eddie Cantor, had hold overs at famous theaters like the Palace Theater New York. "E. Cantor at Palace; A Star in Vaudeville," *Variety*, December 31, 1930, 38; RKO Holds Option on Eddie Cantor," *Billboard*, September 19, 1931, 8. For an example of a four-year contract on one circuit see, "Look what Santy Brought Us: Hamtree Harrington and Cora Green," *Variety*, December 30, 1925, 42.
- <sup>128</sup> Map of RKO Tour for Irene Rich, Folder 81, Box 2932, B'hend and Kaufmann Collection.
- <sup>129</sup> Elias E. Sugarman, "Vauditorials," *Billboard*, March 15, 1930, 8; There is evidence agents ignored this and booked outside of circuits earlier. Include archival collection with monologists at Herrick Library.
- <sup>130</sup> Joe Schoenfeld, "Coffee without Cake," *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 195.
- <sup>131</sup> Joe Schoenfeld, "The Starvation Brigade," *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 114.
- <sup>132</sup> "RKO Booker Explains Why Lay-Off Acts Don't Work More Regularly," *Variety*, January 5, 1930, 44; Bigelow, "Vaudeville of 1930," 21; Davies, "What I Don't Know about Vaudeville," 62; Bigelow, "Vaudeville's Outlook," 19; Bigelow, "Outlook of Vaudeville," 87.

<sup>133</sup> Bigelow, “End of ‘Poor Vaudeville,’” 69-70; Bigelow, “Vaudeville of 1930,” 21; B&K Books Roscoe Ates,” *Variety*, December 29, 1931, 20; Epes W. Sargent, “Second Oldest Profession,” *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 114; Bigelow, “Vaudeville—Or What’s Left,” *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 115

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in Ross Melnick, *American Showman: Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908-1935* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 357.

<sup>135</sup> In 1935, only 302 bills had no multi-media headline star. In 1939, only 62 bills did not feature a headliner. Appendix A.

<sup>136</sup> RKO Booker Explains Why Lay-Off Acts Don’t Work More Regularly,” 44; Bigelow, “Vaudeville’s Outlook,” 19; “Scarcity of Acts,” *Variety*, December 29, 1931, 22; “New Year’s Eve Act Shortage,” *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 114.

<sup>137</sup> “The Theatre of the Stars,” *Variety*, March 19, 1941, 44. Loew’s also sometimes attached the slogan to its flagship theater, the Loew’s State Theater, in New York City. “State the Theatre of the Stars,” *Variety*, October 9, 1934, 28.

<sup>138</sup> See note 135.

<sup>139</sup> “Salary-cutting Pool Blowup Expected as Rifts Continue,” *Billboard*, April 29, 1933, 6; \$10,000 For Cantor at Chicago Theatre,” *Variety*, December 29, 1931, 19; “Palace’s \$16,500 Bill Lost \$3,100 in 2 Wks.; \$40,000 this Week?,” *Variety*, December 29, 1931, 20; Bigelow, “Vaudeville in 1931, 21; “What Makes Salaries Go Up?,” *Variety*, December 29, 1931, 21; INCLUDE OTHER PAY E

<sup>140</sup> Bigelow, “End of ‘Poor Vaudeville,’” *Variety*, January 3, 1933, 69-70.

<sup>141</sup> Bigelow, “Outlook of Vaudeville,” 87.

<sup>142</sup> *Variety*’ “Variety Bills” Database (Appendix A).

<sup>143</sup> National Recovery Administration, *Code of Fair Competition for the Motion Picture Industry* (Washington, D.C.: United States Printing Office, 1933), For more on government intervention in variety theater see, “ABA Asks Gov’t Sponsored Vaude 600 Dark U.S. Theatres Through NRA,” *Variety*, January 2, 1934, 1, 84. For a longer discussion of this act see, Balio, *Grand Design*, 18-21.

<sup>144</sup> National Recovery Administration, *Code of Fair Competition*, 233-6.

<sup>145</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 66-9; Andrea Comiskey, “The Sticks, the Nabes, and the Broadways: U.S. Film Distribution, 1935-1940” (Madison, University of Wisconsin, 2015), 40-52.

<sup>146</sup> Sam Shain, “Changes in the Theatre Map,” *Variety*, January 2, 1934, 6; Shain, “Operating a Chain,” 14; Stage Shows Back in Frisco, Scales Up,” 47; Bigelow, “End of ‘Poor Vaudeville,’” 69-70; Shain, “Operating a Chain,” 14; Bigelow, “Vaudeville of 1930,” 21; Joe Bigelow, “Vaudeville in 1931,” *Variety*, December 29, 1931; Silverman, “U.S. Film Field for 1930,” 7; Bigelow, “Vaudeville’s Outlook,” *Variety*, December 29, 1931, 19; Roy Chartier, “The Year in Pictures,” *Variety*, January 2, 1934, 3. A representative from Loew’s admitted to the United

States Supreme Court that theater using vaudeville generally had to use “second-run” pictures. *Records and Briefs of the United States Supreme Court*, October 1947, Volume 3, 1182-3.

<sup>147</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 73.

<sup>148</sup> Silverman, “U.S. Film Field for 1930,” 7.

<sup>149</sup> Company Releases During 1935,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1936* (New York: The Film Daily, 1936), 439.

<sup>150</sup> “A List of Motion Picture Theaters in the United States and Canada,” *The Film Daily Year Book 1933*, 751-2.

<sup>151</sup> Bigelow, “Vaudeville’s Outlook,”<sup>19</sup>. For another article that reiterates this argument see, Shain, “Operating a Chain,” 14.

<sup>152</sup> “Loew’s State, New York,” *Billboard*, November 22, 1930, 18; “Bands Still the Hottest Grossers at Minn. Orpheum,” *Billboard*, February 6, 1943, 14; “Orpheum Theatre, Los Angeles — Clippings 1942,” Folder 138, Box 4606, B’hend and Kaufmann Collection.

<sup>153</sup> Catherine Jurca and John Sedgwick, “The Film’s the Thing: Moviegoing in Philadelphia, 1935-36,” *Film History: An International Journal* 26, no. 4 (2014): 58–83; Comiskey, “The Sticks, the Nabes, and the Broadways,” 96.

<sup>154</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres*, 86-92.

<sup>155</sup> “Michalove States How WB Stands on Vaude in Any Warner House,” 33.

<sup>156</sup> “Other Chains Taking RKO as Model,” 25.

<sup>157</sup> Considering the different sizes of their theater holdings, the two booked live acts at similar scale. Loew’s never owned more than two-hundred theaters while RKO owned three hundred outright, meaning that fifty-six percent of RKO theaters booked live acts, compared to thirty-five percent of Loew’s. This does not include time that *Variety* classified as “Picture Theaters,” which could be from any circuit but referred to De Luxe size movie palaces showing primarily presentations.

<sup>158</sup> “Vaudeville as Issue in Looming RKO War,” *Billboard*, January 25, 1930, 46.

<sup>159</sup> “Wanted: A Leader,” *Billboard*, January 4, 1930, 8.

<sup>160</sup> “Loew Closes its Chicago Office,” *Billboard*, May 24, 1930, 8.

<sup>161</sup> Company Releases During 1935,” 439.

<sup>162</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 405.

<sup>163</sup> Jewell, RKO Radio Picture, 48; Balio, *Grand Design*, 405.

<sup>164</sup> Bigelow, “Vaudeville in 1931,” 21.

<sup>165</sup> Bigelow, “End of ‘Poor Vaudeville,’” 69-70.

<sup>166</sup> Skouras-RKO Pool in N.Y. and N.J.,” *Variety*, June 14, 1932, 5; “Anticipate No Union Difficulties in L.A.; FWC-Par Pool Mebbe,” *Variety*, November 14, 1933, 4; “Publix-RKO Pool in Ottawa and Winnipeg,” May 6, 1931, 44; F&M Operates St. L. August 1,” *Variety*, May 8, 1934, 35; Par and WB B’klyn Product Pool, Fox May be in Later; Al Reid at Helm,” *Variety*, August 28, 1934, 2; “100% N.H. Pool Under Harry Arthur,” *Variety*, July 5, 1932, 7; RKO-



Huffman Pool is Proposed for Denver,” *Variety*, May 31, 1932; “RKO-Publix May Pool Houses in 7 Cities, with Several Closing; Others to have Policy Changes,” *Variety*, April 22, 1931, 29.

<sup>167</sup> “Memphis Stage Shows on Pool Under Loew Direction,” *Variety*, April 19, 1932, 32. City law barred theaters from being open on Sundays.

<sup>168</sup> “No-Vaude Pool in Syracuse Shaken,” *Variety*, May 9, 1933, 43.

<sup>169</sup> “Loew After More Local Talent Shows in Syracuse,” *Variety*, July 11, 1933, 48.

<sup>170</sup> “Par-Metro B’way Pool Gives Capitol the ‘A’ Pix, but Stage Stays at Par,” *Variety*, June 19, 1934, 7; ; “Par-Cap B’way Pool 100% Cold,” *Variety*, June 24, 1934, 6; B’way Captiol Par Pool Against Radio City Off at Last Minute,” *Variety*, February 28, 1933, 11.

<sup>171</sup> B’way Captiol Par Pool Against Radio City Off at Last Minute,” 11.

<sup>172</sup> This number accounted for the Capitol to holdover a handful of very popular films longer than the usual week turnover.

<sup>173</sup> B’way Captiol Par Pool Against Radio City Off at Last Minute,” 11.

<sup>174</sup> B’way Captiol Par Pool Against Radio City Off at Last Minute,” 11.

<sup>175</sup> “Par-Metro B’way Pool Gives Capitol the ‘A’ Pix, but Stage Stays at Par,” 7.

<sup>176</sup> “Minutes – Zone Managers Meeting at Hotel Astor, May 9, 1932,” Box SW394, Stanley Warner Collection, Warner Bros. Archives.

<sup>177</sup> “Par-Metro B’way Pool Gives Capitol the ‘A’ Pix, but Stage Stays at Par,” 7.

<sup>178</sup> While their lack of enforcement is clear, it is unknown whether any centralized studio office sanctioned any pooling agreement in the first place.

<sup>179</sup> Comiskey, “The Sticks, the Nabes, and the Broadways:” 43-68; Maltby, “The Standard Exhibition Contract,” 138–53.

<sup>180</sup> “Syracuse Stage Shows Hinge on Par There,” *Variety*, June 13, 1933, 41; “Union Rule Hampering Syracuse Stage Shows,” *Variety*, May 23, 1933, 38.

<sup>181</sup> *Variety*’s “Variety Bills” Database, Appendix A.

<sup>182</sup> Silverman, “25 Years Ahead—and What?,” December 31, 1930, 39; Joe Bigelow, “Vaudeville—Or What’s Left,” *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 115; Joe Schoenfeld, “Year in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 195; Joe Laurie, Jr., “At the Wake,” *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 192; Joe Schoenfeld, “Managers—or Bookers,” *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 192; Hal Halperin, “Do They Want Vaudeville,” *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 193; Shain, “Operating a Chain,” 14.

<sup>183</sup> Wolfe Kaufman, “International Show Business,” *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 131.

<sup>184</sup> “Vaudeville Looks to Europe,” *Billboard*, April 11, 1936, 10-11; Robert Stern, “In Paris,” *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 199; Claire Trask, “In Berlin,” *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 199; “In London,” *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 199; “Find 10-Week Italian Tour,” *Variety*, October 31, 1933, 54; Wolfe Kaufman, “The International Show Biz Scene,” *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 121; “Arg. Exhibs Struggle to Live Up to Vaudfilm Law; Scour Legit Field,” *Variety*, September 1, 1954, 24. The author thanks Rielle Navitski for sharing the last citation and for a lively discussion about variety theater in South America.

<sup>185</sup> For an example for a short-lived attempt to revive straight vaudeville post 1935, see “Allentown’s Straight Vaude,” *Billboard*, November 14, 1936, 16. The Palace Theater (NYC) returned straight vaudeville bills after 1949 only on the weekends.

<sup>186</sup> Melnick, *American Showman*, 344-71. This section on Roxy largely draws from this source. Melnick notes that since at least June 1930, Roxy had grown frustrated with the increasing standardization of theatrical exhibition. The mainstream adoption of synchronized sound, in particular, disrupted his creative methods which involved using music, sound, presentations, and sometimes even the re-editing of Hollywood films to create “unified texts” which sometimes changed the meaning and/or narrative of the film text. By this point, he had also witnessed the first major cuts in the variety entertainment industry.

<sup>187</sup> “Roxy Turns Universal Sales Convention into Open Forum,” *Universal Weekly*, June 7, 1930, 19.

<sup>188</sup> “Rockefeller Begins Work in the Fall on Radio,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1930, 1, 5. Such plans excited critics who longed for an iconoclast willing to contradict the increasing homogeneity of American entertainment. As the *Toronto Daily Star* wrote: “Rockefeller and Roxy are a promising outfit[...]we are not living in an old world, but one so new that its very super-variety threatens to become a monotony of standardization[...]controlled by Roxy and Rockefeller, the average individualistic actor and producers and musician might as well go to sleep along with Rip Van Winkle.” “New Gotham Music Mecca Appears to be a Certainty,” *Toronto Daily Star*, March 29, 1930, 9.

<sup>189</sup> Melnick, *American Showman*, 351; “Post in Radio City Accepted by Roxy,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1931, 26; “RKO-F&M Merger is Denied by Franklin, O.K.’d by Marco,” 6; “Need for Stage Attractions to Aid Weak Films, Says RKO,” 9.

<sup>190</sup> “Roxy Will Not Mix Pictures and Plays,” *Toronto Daily Star*, December 12, 1931, 5.

<sup>191</sup> Samuel L. Rothafel, Untitled, *The Film Daily Year Book 1932* (New York: The Film Daily, 1932), 45. RKO likely also supported this plan because, as would become clear, they did not have enough stand-alone feature films to support one, let alone two, new mega-movie palaces in the most saturated theater market in the country.

<sup>192</sup> Melnick, *American Showman*, 356. This argument is Melnick’s and deserves reiteration, but mine expands it by explaining why Roxy was motivated to accomplish these separate venues.

<sup>193</sup> “First Radio City Show is Announced in Part,” *New York Times*, November 22, 1932, 24.

<sup>194</sup> “First Radio City Show is Announced in Part,” *New York Times*, 24.

<sup>195</sup> Roxy’s other plan to mitigate costs included holding the show for three or four weeks, instead of creating a new show every week as was typical for presentations.

<sup>196</sup> Melnick, *American Showman*, 365-8. In fact, at the time, critics and even RKO did not see Radio City’s premiere as a failure of variety theater in general, but of Roxy’s overblown and outdated iteration which did not consider the trends in live act programming. One review from the *New Republic* made this point explicit, writing: “a job lot of vaudeville turns which[...]do not add up into a vaudeville program, and they bored the first few audiences stiff. The net effect was

a series of movie ‘prologues,’ one after the other.” The only known complaint from RKO management echoed the *New Republic*’s claim that Roxy did not properly follow the current conventions of variety theater. During Roxy’s preparations there is no evidence that RKO dissented to his plan of utilizing variety entertainment. To the contrary, they were ready to distribute whatever he produced throughout its theater circuit. However, Terry Turner, head of exploitation for RKO reportedly challenged Roxy’s policy on the basis that they did not reflect the star-centered approach to programming that was increasingly dominant within the industry, citing the aforementioned poll of RKO theater managers. The *Syracuse Herald* reported that Roxy smugly rejected the advice, claiming “any attempt to tailor bills to meet the demands of audiences is the bunk.” Variety theater did not have to appear outdated, and it could be popular. RKO’s research and management team knew it. Roxy did not care. Evident in their changes to the theater’s programming strategy, RKO dissented to Roxy’s evocation of variety theater and not the entertainment form itself. Days after the failed opening, RKO announced a new policy that Radio City Music Hall would adopt a more standard “vaudeville-motion picture theater” policy, one which mixed elements of personal appearances with vaudeville turns and some dancing drawn from presentations. Because RKO’s supply of self-produced feature films in New York was already limited, the two theaters also screened features produced by Universal, Fox, and Columbia. RKO also (re)established prices more typical for movie palaces, a tiered scheme ranging from thirty-five to seventy-five cents which varied not by seat location but by time of day, placing the venue within reach of a mass audience. Even Roxy, usually reluctant to accept any personal blame for professional blunders, eventually accepted some responsibility for the early “failure” of Radio City if only to deflect away any aspersions about variety theater itself. Roxy remained unwavering that vaudeville “will be revived over the country[...]bigger and better.”

<sup>197</sup> See chapter 2.

<sup>198</sup> Balio, *Grand Design*, 26.

<sup>199</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 59-66; Balio, *Grand Design*, 13-36; Crafton, *The Talkies*, 201-210, 250-65.

<sup>200</sup> Jewell, *RKO Radio Pictures*, 69. Most secondary scholarship lists RKO’s theatrical holdings at never more than 300, sometimes 200 at most, however some reports in the trade press number them at up to 700 at the time of the company’s conglomeration. “700 Theatres Merged in Vaudeville Circuit; Keith-Albee and Orpheum Now Largest in Country—Final Papers Signed,” *New York Times*, January 27, 1928. Likely the discrepancies are caused by the difference between ownership and affiliation. I would guess that KAO Circuit booked 700 theaters for vaudeville, while only owning 300 theaters.

<sup>201</sup> Shain, “Changes in the Theatre Map,” 6; Sam Shain, “Changing Theatre Map,” *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 33. Warner Bros. also had smaller holdings in Chicago, Los Angeles, Cleveland, and Milwaukee.

<sup>202</sup> Shain, "Changes in the Theatre Map," 6; Roy Chartier, "Year in Pictures," *Variety*, January 1, 1933, 2, 48; Roy Chartier, "Year in Pictures," *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 3, 132; Shain, "Changing Theatre Map," 33. No film history book currently knows how many theaters Paramount sold. The exact number likely seemed less important in the trades than Paramount-Publux's decision to decentralize theater management.

<sup>203</sup> No secondary literature has even an estimation of how many theaters Fox sold during the Depression. Before the Great Depression, Universal Studios also owned a sizable theatrical chain, which they sold.

<sup>204</sup> Bigelow, "Outlook of Vaudeville," 87. Shain, "Changes in the Theatre Map," 6; Shain, "Changing Theatre Map,"

<sup>205</sup> Roy Chartier, "Year in Pictures," *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 3, 132; Roy Chartier, "Year in Pictures," *Variety*, January 1, 1933, 2, 48.

<sup>206</sup> "Marco in N.Y. for a WK to Huddle Over Roxy," *Variety*, February 20, 1934, 4; Roy Chartier, "Year in Pictures," *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 3, 132; Roy Chartier, "Year in Pictures," *Variety*, January 3, 1933, 2, 48.

<sup>207</sup> Tom Waller, "Indie Exhibs' Best Break," *Variety*, January 3, 1933, 11, 66.

<sup>208</sup> Joe Bigelow, "Outlook of Vaudeville," 87.

<sup>209</sup> Joe Bigelow, "Outlook of Vaudeville," 87.

<sup>210</sup> Melnick, *American Showman*, 343-5.

<sup>211</sup> They would not again reach 1929 levels until the war-time boom of the early 1940s.

<sup>212</sup> RKO once again booked the most theaters (18) followed closely by Loew (14), with Paramount (8), F&M (5), and Warner Bros. (2) trailing behind. At their lowest, only six independent theaters booked live acts, still up from the previous year.

<sup>213</sup> The industry never again reaching the 100-week mark which industry insiders once considered the bare bottom of sustainability. For example, 1935 averaged 62 weeks of booking, which by 1939 dropped to 33 weeks, but then rose again to 52 weeks in 1944.

<sup>214</sup> Joe Schoenfeld, "Fear-Chilled Vaudeville," *Variety*, January 4, 1939, 171; "Vaude Battles Toughest Odds in History, with Breaks All Bad," *Billboard*, November 5, 1932, 6.

<sup>215</sup> Gary D. Rhodes, *The Perils of Moviegoing in America, 1896-1950* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 200-2; Federal Communications Commission, *Federal Communications Reports* 17 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1966), 1018. Ricketson's regional office was headquartered in the company's exchange office in Denver, Colorado. Ricketson was also an experienced theater manager and independent entrepreneur. He had previously managed the Paramount Theater in (Downtown) Los Angeles, the De Luxe West coast flagship of the titular studio known for its live performances and appearances. In the apex of the Great Depression, Ricketson was also one of the major proponents of the "bank night" policy and was sometimes credited with its creation. He and a business partner formed Affiliated Enterprises in November 1933, which printed, copyrighted, and distributed bank night booklets for theater managers.

<sup>216</sup> Eric Smoodin, *Regarding Frank Capra: Audience, Celebrity, and American Film Studies, 1930–1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 12, 41. The book is part of the “golden period” of publication of textbooks and manuals related to the film industry published in the mid-to-late 1930s. The large number of these books together themselves suggest the realization of a mature studio system where guidelines and rules had been internalized and codified inside of the studio system, but were considered general enough knowledge (i.e. not proprietary information) to be shared between and outside the studios. *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, however, appears to be the only one of these textbooks to focus on film exhibition.

<sup>217</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 99.

<sup>218</sup> Silverman, “25 Years Ahead—and What?,” December 31, 1930, 39; Joe Bigelow, “Vaudeville—Or What’s Left,” *Variety*, January 1, 1935, 115; Joe Schoenfeld, “Year in Vaudeville,” *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 195; Joe Laurie, Jr., “At the Wake,” *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 192; Joe Schoenfeld, “Managers—or Bookers,” *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 192; Hal Halperin, “Do They Want Vaudeville,” *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 193; Shain, “Operating a Chain,”<sup>14</sup>. Gomery dates the full implementation of the mass retail system in exhibition and its disdain for stage entertainment to around 1929 with the full-scale implementation of synchronized sound, but little evidence supports this or any specific date. Instead, the process likely occurred more gradual throughout early 1930s.

<sup>219</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 89.

<sup>220</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 88-9, 97.

<sup>221</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 98.

<sup>222</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 88.

<sup>223</sup> Most first run theaters in the studio-era (and before) ran a continuous schedule from at least 11am to midnight, including at least four complete shows and sometimes as many as six if the program started earlier in the morning and concluded with a midnight show.

<sup>224</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 87-8. In this way, Ricketson flaunted cinema’s superiority at communicating with (and thus satisfying) large, paying audiences--the ultimate goal of any theater manager.

<sup>225</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 88.

<sup>226</sup> This norm lasted until the mid-1930s, a number of years after almost all of the American movie palaces had been built and in operation. They were, as William Paul demonstrates, “terrible places to watch movies.” William Paul, *When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>227</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 88. Ricketson and many stage people clearly agreed that motion picture palaces were not ideal for most live acts, but the entertainment ecosystem left little choice. Smaller theaters did not have the economy-of-scale needed to sustain expensive stage performances and they were further restricted by distribution policies like block-booking and blind buying.

<sup>228</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 89.

<sup>229</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 87.

<sup>230</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 87.

<sup>231</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 110-5. The book lists stage shows as a form of double billing, especially fitting for metropolitan audiences which expect a three-hour performance. In the chapter on booking and program costs, stage shows are noted to cost a larger percentage of revenue receipts than “A” features, which should range between 25% and 35%, and only rarely 40%.

<sup>232</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 113.

<sup>233</sup> In comparison, higher-run theaters, small theaters, and/or theaters in less competitive markets lacked stage shows not necessarily because audiences did not want live acts, but instead because the oligopoly functioned as intended, providing enough quality films in exchange for monopoly over their programming. Smaller theaters and/or theaters in less competitive markets had less incentives to book stage shows, both/either because they lacked the seating capacity to compensate for the extra cost and because studio distribution policies already saddled them with films they did not necessarily want but for which they had already paid for to secure “A” films. When these theaters did occasionally book live performances, they did so less frequently either because they believed an affordable act warranted the risk or simply to appease patrons who wanted the occasional “flesh” act.

<sup>234</sup> The big-time circuits—Keith, Albee, and Orpheum provided apt models still fresh in the minds of everyone in the industry, and many studio executives (especially those that worked in their circuits) worked for those organizations.

## Chapter 5

### **Bandfilm: Racialized Space, Jazz Spectatorship, and African American Stardom *inside* the Swing Era Movie Theater (1930 to 1948)**

In the contemporary imagination, most live jazz took place in either a seedy or swanky nightclub.<sup>1</sup> Most films, even those produced during the Swing era (approximately 1930 to 1948), presented jazz music in these venues almost exclusively.<sup>2</sup> However, variety palaces booked jazz as early as the 1920s, and became one of the most common venues that booked jazz by the 1930s. In 1935 at least twenty-five percent of theaters that featured live performance booked bands. As the golden ages of big band swing and the studio era progressed concurrently, the prevalence of jazz performances in these theaters continued to rise. By 1939 thirty-nine percent (or 688) of all week-long programs across the United States included jazz performances, and by 1944 this figure almost doubled to 1,102 programs, accounting for approximately 41% of bills featuring live performance in motion picture theaters.<sup>3</sup>

Whether jazz musicians appeared in a studio's flagship Manhattan theater (like the Paramount), or a theater that primarily catered to African Americans, like the Regal Theater in Chicago and the Howard Theater in Washington D.C., or any other variety palace in Los Angeles, Detroit, Miami, Texas or even Akron, Ohio, the programs followed a variety format. Bands performed for the first half of the two- to three- hour program.<sup>4</sup> Though sometimes bands were the lone live act, more often their musical numbers were interspersed with up to eight other live acts including dancers, other singers, magicians, and a medley of other vaudeville staples.<sup>5</sup>

After the finale (and sometimes an encore), the band and live acts went backstage while a full program of motion pictures unspooled, including a feature film, newsreels, and often a series of other live action or cartoon shorts. Theaters usually booked bands for week-long stints, during which audiences could attend performances usually four times per day: a morning show, a matinee, an evening show, and a midnight performance. Sometimes, managers even booked bands for additional shows, performing up to six shows per day.<sup>6</sup> Thus the amount of people who saw and heard jazz in conjunction with motion pictures during the 1930s and 1940s was immense. In 1944, for example, enough theaters across the United States programmed big bands in cinema theaters that could have attracted 71,956,192 attendees, more than half the population of the country in 1940.<sup>7</sup>

Because of their prevalence, music scholars and historians often mention bands' appearances at variety palaces, usually when referencing a particular performance or while tracing a bands' touring routes.<sup>8</sup> However, they rarely, if ever, include any mention of these venues' cinematic context. In fact, because this body of scholarship almost exclusively refers to variety palaces by the contemporary music industry shorthand, "theaters," a reader might have no idea that these venues also played feature and short films in conjunction with the headline band (and often other live acts).<sup>9</sup>

Other terms more conscious of the multimedia context of these performances were used during the Studio and Swing era. Some critics and advertisers often referred to and promoted these performances as "vaudeville" or "vaudefilm" which is what they had been considered since at least the 1920s, especially within the exhibition business, but also occasionally within the music industry.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the most explicit of these alternate terms was "Bandfilm," which *Variety* used sparingly from 1939 to 1948. Acknowledging bands' popularity in variety palaces,



Joe Schoenfeld, one of *Variety*'s top critics of the paper's vaudeville section, announced that "the coined word vaudfilm is now virtually a misnomer. Bandfilm would be more appropriate."<sup>11</sup>

This term more accurately accounts for the centrality and drawing power of the headline band and its combination with films. Despite its directness, the term was not common outside *Variety*.<sup>12</sup>

Though media studies scholarship rarely mentions these performances in movie theaters, histories of jazz regularly cite them as one of many venues in which swing bands performed, including hotels, night-clubs, fairs, warehouses, abandoned buildings, parades, and parks.<sup>13</sup> This chapter, in contrast, argues for greater specificity of this venue, as a unique site with its own industrial value, cultural significance, modes of spectatorship, and racialized politics of space, behavior, and stardom which shaped and were shaped by swing music. In particular, I examine the industrial and cultural affordances of this space for performers and audiences of color, in particular African Americans; showing how jazz effected where and in what contexts different audiences attended theaters and the meanings they attached to these experiences. Music historians contend that the swing era brought one of the first interracial cultural movements in the United States, and I extend the implications of that into studies of film exhibition.<sup>14</sup>

This chapter and larger argument is broken into three sections. I begin by tracing a brief history of jazz music within variety palaces. This history demonstrates continuities between exhibition practices of the late silent era and that of the 1930s and 1940s. Live music from bands, including jazz, was not a new phenomenon in movie theaters before the studio era. Yet I also demonstrate crucial differences between these periods, including the integration of black jazz musicians into variety palaces in which they were previously barred. This history demonstrates

how African American jazz artists and their music entered the cultural mainstream, facilitating engagement onstage, onscreen, and in the audience over spectatorial norms and racialized space.

The second section traces the industrial affordances of variety palaces for black bands. The most prominent bands leveraged contracts that were not only lucrative, but allowed them to turn some of Hollywood's monopolistic practices against them (such as block booking) and control their marketing and theater programming. This prominent bargaining position—as well as their celebrity and popularity-- allowed African American swing bands to not only break the color barrier in previously segregated theaters barring performers of color, but also to ensure the employment of and performance opportunities in motion pictures theaters for performers of color who were not themselves celebrities and would likely not have been programmed otherwise. Movie theaters also paid the most with the least racial pay disparity, and provided industrial prestige and local and national cross-media promotion when other more influential venues regularly barred performers of color. Lastly, movie theaters also worked to distance black stars from venues which reinforced racist stereotypes.

In the course of making these arguments I also explain the industrial underpinnings of Hollywood's demands for big bands. These include the lucrative payouts, promotional opportunities, and the nexus of agents, record companies, and local automatic-phonograph and record-store owners that fostered, and maintained the larger economic system of live big-band jazz in variety palaces and took full advantage of Hollywood's need for bands. Motion picture theater managers and circuit bookers benefited from bands too, and shaped stardom and success for bands. Performing well--or even at all—in variety palaces proved bands' financial viability in both and national and city-specific markets, making variety palaces a much-circulated symbol of success. This allowed motion picture theater managers, especially, but not exclusively, those in

New York, the music capitol of the era, to function as gate-keepers for mainstream music stardom. On the most basic level, big bands' nearly incomparable drawing power helped Hollywood to deal with its oversupply of unprofitable films by exhibiting them alongside big-name bands and other live acts on the program (discussed at length in chapter four).

In the third section, I focus on jazz's role in the racial politics of space and spectatorship within movie theaters. Relative to Hollywood, the commercial jazz industry was obsessed with actual audiences. Theater managers at theaters like the Steel Pier (Atlantic City, Independent) and bandleaders like Charlie Spivak reportedly took photographs of every one of their audiences.<sup>15</sup> While no full run of either series of these images survive, photographs of audiences attending jazz performances in movie theaters are far more common—both in newspapers and in archives—than those of audiences attending “movie-only” theaters, or even audiences in live performance-showing movie theaters when a band was not playing.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, because critics judged bands—swing bands in particular—not just on a subjective assessment of musical style, but also on more concrete observation of the actions of audiences (i.e. how much and loudly they clapped, how many encores, whether and how people danced and sang), their reviews act as a rare document of audiences and their experiences in variety palaces.

Though they are undoubtedly exceptions to the more typical movie-going experiences across the country, they are important sources for studying both the expected racial makeup of audiences and the norms of spectatorship in urban theaters. Music critics, trade press articles, and African American newspapers followed these performances and their audiences closely, noting and sometimes judging their success on how they differed from more typical “movie” theater experiences and audiences. These resources allow me to ask, and, to some extent, answer who attended variety palaces to see jazz performances, how these audiences differed from audiences

who attended theaters only showing movies, and what it meant for audiences of different races and classes to have variety palaces transformed temporarily into a dance hall or night club.

Using this evidence, I demonstrate that swing music of the 1930s and 1940s and primarily, though not exclusively, its African American stars were at the center of a contest to control and democratize spectatorship and the racial geography of movie-going. These struggles, which they won more often than not, included expanding the number of theaters that people of color could patronize and where they sat within individual theaters, as well as weaken the racially motivated restraints on their behavior when they were there. African American swing bands commonly used their cross-racial popularity and their dance music to bring together diverse audiences, pushing against a range of racial barriers, including keeping African American artists from performing on variety palace stages, and those that either legally and illegally barred black audiences. They also challenged spectatorial norms of movie theaters which regulated people of color far more than they did white patrons. In short, this section argues that the popularity of African American jazz musicians and swing's value on audience engagement helped racially integrate (however temporarily or partially) variety palaces for African Americans, even in the Jim Crow South, both for performers and audiences. By leading multiracial audiences to dance and sing, a few musicians also troubled spatially and behaviorally segregated modes of spectatorship that extended even to integrated movie theaters in Northern cities.

To make these claims, I rely on many socio-cultural and economic histories of jazz, as well as a wide array of archival sources, many created largely by and for the live music industry and theater managers, including: contracts, and managers reports, onstage photos and photos of

audiences, performance reviews, and theater coverage in the music trade-press, city-specific and African American newspapers.<sup>17</sup>

While my research examines many different theaters and jazz performers, this chapter presents Cab Calloway's career and performances within movie theaters as a case study. I chose Calloway, in part, because he was undeniably one of the hottest stars on the variety palace circuit regardless of race, being among the highest paid and most often booked. All African American jazz stars of the Swing era were exceptions since very few, including Calloway, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, and Jimmie Lunceford (among others) achieved mainstream stardom within the entertainment industries' (including Hollywood's) institutional racism. By his own account, contemporaneous critical reception, and audience polls, Calloway was not even the most famous, second (and sometimes third or fourth), to the esteemed Ellington. Some theater managers, critics, and audience polls also disagreed, placing Calloway above all others.<sup>18</sup> Choosing either Calloway or Ellington, for example, would achieve the goal of the essay to expound upon the specific the meanings of an African American star performing in movie theaters to black and white communities, a performance venue which not only paid lucratively, but came with class connotations and various types of racial barriers.

At the same time, no African American artist other than Calloway could be the focus of this chapter because it is about the engagement of multiracial audiences, on which he was paralleled only by Benny Goodman.<sup>19</sup> The performance style for which he was known to his fans, industry players, and journalists—his “hi-de-ho” based call-and-response—situates him as an ideal candidate for studying audiences within movie theaters and discourses around spectatorship. He led theater-going audiences across the country, even in the segregated South, into elations of song and dance, encouraging racially diverse audiences to disrupt the spectatorial

norms of silence and respectability ingrained in variety palace audiences.<sup>20</sup> Calloway's performances challenged dominant paradigms of spectatorship by democratizing the physical and sonic space of variety palaces in ways that his black contemporaries did not.

The choice of Calloway over other performers does come with specific considerations, as his stardom and music present a more racially complicated image of theater-going. Calloway has been seen as a more problematic figure than other black swing leaders. The reasons for this are evident from a quick comparison between Calloway and Ellington. Despite having the same manager, Irving Mills, throughout most of the 1930s, the music, marketing, and the discourse that surrounded them (both contemporarily and in jazz histories) largely anti-thesized each other.<sup>21</sup> Ellington's integration of European classical technique into his music, Mills' promotion of him as a distinctive composer, and his sophisticated, polished, and professional performance style brought him many comparisons to great classical musicians and artists. These qualities, and the re-canonization of his early "jungle style" pieces, have positioned him as the poster child for historians' traditional narrative of jazz on a continual path toward cultural uplift.<sup>22</sup>

Calloway, by comparison, is commonly dismissed as a "commercial" (i.e. primarily white-serving) musician, and thus does not fit cleanly within this paradigm.<sup>23</sup> Scholars have pointed out that Calloway's music and the marketing around it largely played into racist stereotypes, such as using references to drug use and illicit sex and depicting Harlem, where Calloway built his career, as an erotic, dangerous white fantasy. This was supported by disparaging discourses of Calloway's music and swing more generally as a style that flouted a kind of "jungle primitivism."<sup>24</sup> However, as musicologist and jazz historian Nate Sloan has recently argued, Calloway's persona, as constructed by his music, marketing, and other discourses, fostered a more complicated image of his stardom that both reinforced and upended

racial stereotypes, sometimes simultaneously. At times, part of Mills' marketing approach completely contradicted the primitivist discourse, emphasizing Calloway's talent, intellect, and other virtues.

Calloway's more complicated persona reveals a give and take relationship which allows us to see both his career and variety palaces differently. I argue that Calloway's performances in movie theaters at once disrupt the dominant understanding of variety palaces as promoters of middle-class respectability, as the marketing surrounding Calloway's stardom and performances claimed to bring the "slumming" usually associated with white, upper-middle class patrons of Harlem's nightclubs to a comparatively mass, theater-going audience.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, however, variety palaces endowed Calloway's persona and performance style with its own cultural legitimacy, distancing black musicians from venues whose policies and imagery reinforced racist stereotypes.

### **The Integration of Black Jazz in Movie Theaters**

Theaters showing movies and live acts showcased jazz since the musical style and form of social recreation was popularized in the mid-to-late 1910s. Jazz developed as a black cultural form in New Orleans in the early 1900s, and emphasized spirited syncopated rhythms designed to accompany and foster dancing usually in alcohol fueled dance halls, restaurants, and nightclubs. Originally referred to as syncopation or as "Dixieland" music, jazz proliferated throughout the United States in the early 1910s, spurred by the exodus of Southern blacks to Northern cities known as "the Great Migration." It was then adopted by other African Americans and appropriated by white musicians, especially in cities with booming black populations, including Detroit, Chicago, Baltimore, and New York. The term "jazz" gained its musical

association around 1915. Though some bands, advertisers, and critics continued to use its former names, jazz began to appear as a stylistic label for recordings around 1917.<sup>26</sup>

As showcases of popular culture, vaudeville theaters and picture palaces welcomed the novelty of jazz. Bands from New Orleans, Chicago, and New York began touring vaudeville theaters by at least 1913, around the beginning of the boom of variety palace construction. The majority of these venues, however, were not completed until the late 1910s and early 1920s—when jazz first entered into more mainstream middle class taste and was more welcomed in these venues.<sup>27</sup> Two detailed city-specific studies of exhibition, one by Richard Abel of Detroit (1916-26) and another by Mary Carbine of Chicago (1910-28), reveal that jazz became a common feature of theater programming in both cities by 1920. In Detroit, for example, programming well-known jazz bands differentiated variety palaces and other first-run theaters from neighborhood theaters as they offered prestigious nationally recognized entertainment.<sup>28</sup> In 1924, the demand for jazz bands in movie theaters had grown so that “over 200 bands...play weekly in pictures houses [in Chicago alone],” a sizable amount which merited its own coverage in the trade press.<sup>29</sup> *Variety* wrote in a featured article “Bands and Vaudeville” that, “The picture theater is another branch that utilizes innumerable bands,” so many that it had markedly inflated the expected salaries of bands, prohibiting many small -metropolitan and neighborhood vaudeville or picture theaters from booking them.<sup>30</sup> This concentrated control of live performance in the larger vaudeville and variety palaces that were, in turn, increasingly being controlled by the Hollywood studios.

The most crucial difference between jazz in theaters before the 1930s and after was that silent-era theaters racial segregated jazz performances, with white jazz musicians playing for primarily white audiences and black artists playing only at theaters catering to African



Americans. Though there is evidence that a select number of black jazz bands toured the major and minor vaudeville circuits—Keith, Albee, Orpheum, and Columbia—and performed for white audiences during the 1920s, this was unusual.<sup>31</sup> Instead, as studies of Detroit and Chicago movie theaters show, these venues' talent were racially segregated, with white jazz musicians playing for primarily white audiences and black artists playing only at theaters explicitly catering to African Americans.<sup>32</sup>

While Carbine's research suggests that white audiences never attended black theaters in Chicago because they had social and financial access to higher quality theaters in their neighborhood and in the downtown loop, there are notable exceptions. Though African Americans largely patronized their theater district outside the Loop, the Balaban and Katz theaters, the main regional chain in Chicago, were open to black audiences, who could technically sit anywhere they wanted though they would occasionally be forced to endure segregated seating.<sup>33</sup> This policy allowed the young Cab Calloway, living in Chicago with his sister during the late 1920s, to attend a performance by pop musician Paul Ash at the Oriental Theater in 1928. Ash, whom Calloway cited as one of the inspirations for his call-and-response technique, was especially known for, in Calloway's words, "hollering [at his band to...] turn audiences on," specifically in movie theaters.<sup>34</sup> So much so, that when Ash died in 1958, his obituary in the *Chicago Tribune* said that he "pioneered the introduction of stage bands and master of ceremonies in movie theaters."<sup>35</sup> Balaban and Katz's policy, then, helped Calloway develop a performance style built around other musicians like Ash who developed methods to engage the expansive audience of the variety palaces.<sup>36</sup>

Without access to white theaters, black jazz performers were primarily booked on the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA) vaudeville circuit, which consisted of a network

of theaters in the South and Midwest with predominantly black audiences. Jazz musicians and other black performers often referred to and remembered the circuit by its shorthand, “Tough on Black Acts.” White men owned and controlled most of the theaters and the TOBA booking office, and they used this power to exploit black performers, giving them low wages, bad treatment, grueling schedules, and promoting them using degrading stereotypes.<sup>37</sup>

Despite its many pitfalls, the TOBA circuit provided regular pay and performance work that had important consequences for jazz’s future celebrity culture and the unification of urban black communities. During the 1920s, black movie theaters, especially in Chicago, were one of the primary venues, along with nightclubs, that fostered the talent of many of the major jazz stars of the following decades. Calloway and other jazz legends, including Erskine Tate, Count Basie, Fats Waller, and Louis Armstrong all performed in bands that accompanied silent films, performed during intermissions, and played as separate acts on the bill.<sup>38</sup> Carbine has argued that the practice of programming African American live acts, especially jazz artists, with Hollywood films in Chicago’s black theaters connected movie-going to a relatively autonomous, new urban black culture which decentered Hollywood’s homogenized, white mass culture. These effects were especially intensified by the common practice of playing sporadic jazz music incongruously over Hollywood’s moving-images onscreen. Much to the dismay of those African Americans pushing for cultural uplift by embracing European classical music performed to match the tone and narrative of the films, Carbine argues that jazz accompaniment offered black spectators examples of ethnic differences and invention distinct from the norms Hollywood offered.<sup>39</sup>

The eventual integration of black jazz into these predominantly white theaters occurred in the early 1930s, in part because of the economic downturn. The Great Depression caused theaters in 1929 and early 1930—including flagship theaters in New York—to reduce their overhead

costs and other expenses, including talent salaries for live acts. As the weekly salaries of white jazz musicians and other bands were exorbitant due to years of variety palaces competitively bidding for their services, they were immediate casualties. As to not eliminate in-house performances of the in-demand music style completely, theater managers and circuit bookers chose to break the color-barrier by hiring African American performers who could be hired—or rather exploited—more cheaply; an inequality, at least for the top African American jazz musicians, that would not last long in movie theaters.<sup>40</sup>

Changing musical taste and the increasing domesticity and cultural legitimacy of jazz music also aided the transition. During the 1920s, jazz had not as a whole achieved a level of respectability. Its detractors found jazz immoral, primitive, drug-inducing and as a 1924 editorial in the *New York Times* contended, “prevent[ed] the formation of music taste.”<sup>41</sup> Even its supporters, including F. Scott Fitzgerald, characterized jazz as rebellious and pleasure-seeking.<sup>42</sup> This connotation was exponentially worse for African American performers, compounded by racist fears and fantasies that to many, black bands meant illicit, interracial sexuality and increased delinquency.<sup>43</sup> However, jazz became increasingly domesticated during the latter half of the 1920s, in part due to efforts of musicians, including Paul Whiteman, “The King of Jazz,” who attempted to promote jazz as a polite and sophisticated music style. The racist associations of black bands remained, but booking them became less controversial in most cases as the music became increasingly popular and less controversial with middle-class audiences.

While the domestication of jazz helped ease cultural anxiety about integrating black performers, African American jazz’s relative opposition to “polite” jazz also boosted their popularity. “Hot” swing big band music usually consisting of 8-12 musicians—rhythmically charged, energetic syncopation, often emphasizing improvisation, musical call-and-response, and

physically vigorous social dancing—grew in popularity in the early part of the decade more than Whiteman’s “sweet” symphonic jazz. In fact, while jazz historians largely mark 1935—when Benny Goodman’s success propelled swing into the mainstream with young white American audiences -- as the beginning of the so-called big band “swing era,” many also mark the late 1920s and early 1930s as a pre-swing era in which largely African American artists—including Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and Louie Armstrong (quickly followed by Calloway)—developed hot-style jazz thanks to their relative isolation from white performers during the 1920s.<sup>44</sup> “This vogue for hot jazz,” *Variety* explained in a 1930 article that explained the newfound showcase of black jazz performers in theaters, “built up by Cab Calloway, Ellington and other hotcha bands, is probably responsible in part for the demand for colored acts.”<sup>45</sup>

I would argue that Ellington, in particular, is the key figure responsible for moving black jazz music into movie theaters at least as early as this move occurred. Ellington was the first African American swing artist to perform in trend-setting New York City theaters, likely because his professional persona married well with the respectable mores and cultural legitimacy of the variety palace.<sup>46</sup> Scholars have described variety palaces of the 1910s and 1920 as a sphere of cultural uplift, blurring class lines to attract a mass audience by selling a fantasy of upper-middle class luxury and comfort through programming, architecture, and amenities, across lines of class, gender, and ethnicity (and unevenly across race, as people of color were often not admitted or faced segregated seating).<sup>47</sup> Similarly, since the late 1920s Ellington incorporated European classical technique into his music, and he and his manager, Irving Mills, promoted him as an artist, for example, by calling his band “Duke Ellington’s Famous Orchestra.”<sup>48</sup> These efforts culminated in the early 1940s when he played the prestigious Carnegie Hall, known for its showcases of classical music.<sup>49</sup> But even in the early 1930s, specialists and musicians associated

Ellington with classical musicians. Austrian-born composer, Percy Grainger, for example, said at a lecture at New York University in 1932, “the three greatest composers who ever lived are Bach, Decius, and Duke Ellington.”<sup>50</sup> These associations continued into the 1940s, when both music-specific magazines, like *Metronome*, and more general publications, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times* named Ellington as one of the most prestigious of American artists, regardless of the medium.<sup>51</sup> Even still, Mills reportedly struggled for some time to book Ellington into these prestigious venues because of racial segregation.<sup>52</sup>

Ellington’s increasing cultural legitimacy paved the way for other African American jazz musicians.<sup>53</sup> For Calloway, however, Ellington’s influence on the locations in which he performed and the contracts he signed was far more literal, actually transactional. Mills, Ellington’s manager since 1926, also became Calloway’s manager in late 1930. Under his guidance, Calloway incorporated his band, and both Mills and Ellington owned shares of the Cab Calloway Corporation. To ensure the success of both of his bands, Mills initially block booked them, packaging Ellington and Calloway together to managers and booking agents so that if they wanted Ellington they would have to book Calloway at a separate date. As soon as Mills finally booked Ellington into these prestigious venues he brought Calloway into New York and New Jersey variety palaces. Calloway also took over for Ellington as the bandleader of the Cotton Club in February 1931 when Ellington was the first African American to go on a national tour of which many of the stops were vaudeville theaters or variety palaces. The Cotton Club’s prestige and daily late-night national radio broadcasts helped establish Calloway as a celebrity to radio listeners across the country.<sup>54</sup>

## **Cab Calloway as a Star in Variety Palaces**

Calloway remained a star on such stages for more than twenty years, from 1930 to 1951, beginning on September 3, 1930 at RKO's Fordham Theater in New York City with his final variety palace appearance an October 10, 1951 show at Balaban and Katz's Regal Theater in Chicago, a Paramount affiliate. While Calloway's rise to one of the most in-demand and highest paid band leaders in movie theaters began almost literally on Ellington's coattails, with the color barrier loosening for black jazz in variety palaces, it did not take long for him to eclipse Ellington and other jazz musicians on the theater circuits. This was largely thanks to his eccentric, energetic, and engaging performance style. Following in Ellington's steps, Mills first booked Calloway to perform a few shows in smaller RKO theaters around New York. RKO was the offspring of the merger of the Keith, Albee, and Orpheum vaudeville empires and had a motion picture production unit as well as one specializing in radio and sound equipment. Not only was RKO the largest booker of vaudeville acts during the early 1930s, they were also the only circuit in this early part of the Depression willing to book jazz bands on an ongoing basis, which financially required booking performers of color. The fledgling studio's failure to produce financially successful films further entrenched their need for inexpensive live acts to supplement their lackluster cinema shows.<sup>55</sup>

Though RKO theaters may have only booked him to secure Ellington, Calloway immediately proved to be popular with audiences. *Billboard* reported that at his August 23, 1930, performance at the Jefferson Theater, his first at a vaudefilm theater, he "stopped the show cold," and had the audience "howling for more."<sup>56</sup> Similar descriptions of positive audience reactions, demonstrating Calloway's growing success, continued to appear after each show.<sup>57</sup> At Calloway's next week-long stint, at Proctor's 58th St. Theater, he reportedly stayed onstage for a

27-minute encore staying, “partly willingly and the rest by force of applause.”<sup>58</sup> Taking notice of him, RKO circuit bookers offered Calloway more shows and would continue to do so until he performed for nineteen weeks in thirteen of their New York City area theaters.<sup>59</sup>

The ever -growing number of performances did not disturb Calloway’s growing rapport with and control over his audiences. Immediately after signing additional dates with RKO, Calloway returned to the Jefferson Theater, where he received his most vivid, if not hyperbolic, review to date, detailing how he excited theater-going audiences: “If they come any hotter than this 12-piece colored band,” *Billboard* wrote, “they’ll have to wear asbestos suits, and so will the audience. Cab Calloway is a human dynamo [...] throwing a bomb into an audience could not have caused any more furore than did the playing of this frenzied aggregation.”<sup>60</sup> Despite the violent overtones of this review, characterizing Calloway’s technique as almost a threat to audience—a common feature of reviews of his shows—it was this very animated and interactive approach to audiences in movie theaters which enabled Calloway’s popularity to surpass Ellington’s and other bands in movie theaters. Even just after a month of performing in vaudefilm theaters, *Billboard*’s review of Calloway at the Palace Theater made the terms of his comparison clear, writing that Calloway and his Missouriians:

look and sound like they are equal to the job of supplanting [Duke Ellington’s band] in vaudeville. Calloway is a superlatively aggressive and talented leader as compared with Ellington’s extreme modesty. The 11-man band is about 100 degrees hotter and it’s cacophony of rhythm is more enticing. If real, low-down blues is what is wanted Calloway is the boy to serve it up.<sup>61</sup>

After an increasing number of critics proclaimed Calloway a star in his own right, other studio-run live performance circuits followed RKO’s suit. Loew’s circuit, which maintained a large number of New York City area theaters similar to RKO, was the second to book Calloway in November 1930.<sup>62</sup> Paramount and Warner Brothers finally booked Calloway and his band for

shows in the middle of 1931 (April for the former, August for the latter). By then, Calloway's bookings were celebrated in the trade press as a significant achievement and a boon to studio circuits' profitability.<sup>63</sup> His subsequent permanent stint as the bandleader for the Cotton Club, which began in February 1931, expanded his celebrity further beyond New York and into numerous U.S. regions through its nightly broadcasts.<sup>64</sup>

In March 1931, Calloway recorded "Minnie the Moocher," his first number one selling record and the first record by an African American artist to sell one-million copies. While Calloway's success in variety palaces pre-dated this song's fame, it cemented and expanded his celebrity and musical style. Calloway built his celebrity and the most popular portion of his musical repertoire on a call-and-response technique, most famously employed in "Minnie the Moocher." Since its debut, Cab Calloway has often been referred to as the "hi-de-ho man." While the name referred literally to the scat-style lyrics that he performed in his "theme song," it was more accurately shorthand for Calloway's signature style of call-and-response audience interaction which led audiences to gyrate excitedly in dance and echo the celebrated bandleader.<sup>65</sup> Calloway begins his 1976 autobiography, *Of Minnie the Moocher and Me*, by describing the typical pattern for a performance of this titular track. After presenting the opening verse, he introduces the quasi-improvised stanza and performative style for which he was known, heavily promoted, and of which he was deeply proud from the early 1930s until his death in 1994:

That's how I'd start out; then somewhere in the middle of it, when the band was swinging and the feeling got right, I'd start to hi-de-ho. You know, singing:

*'Hi-de-di-de-di-de-ho.'*

Then the band would answer:

*'Hi-de-di-de-di-de-ho.'*

Then I would sing back again:

*'Wah-de-doo-de-way-de-ho.'*

And the band would swing, and sing:



*'Wah-de-doo-de-way-de-ho.'*

When it really got to feeling good, I'd holler for the audience to join in.

*'Wah-de-wah-de-wah-de-doo,'* I'd sing.

*'Wah-de-wah-de-wah-de-doo,'* the band and the audience would holler back.

By now, the place is jumping, I'm dancing and leading the band. The horn section is hitting it. The drummer is driving us. The piano player is vamping. And the place is really rocking.

*'Bee-de-doo-de-dee-de-dow,'* I holler.

*'Bee-de-doo-de-dee-de-dow,'* everyone shouts back...

Then I'd bring it back home, with everybody stomping and clapping and singing:

*'Hi-de-hi-de-ho.*

*'Hi-de-hi-de-ho.*

Now here's a story 'bout Minnie the Moocher[...]'<sup>66</sup>

Throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, Calloway was known for leading primarily American audiences in vocally demanding call-and-response songs, of which "Minnie the Moocher" was just the most famous example.<sup>67</sup> Since top "hot" jazz artists like Calloway were expected to inspire dancing, his music and onstage antics encouraged audiences to shake their bodies freely or move to semi-improvisational dances like the lindy hop or the jitterbug. He also had audiences join him in song, belting out in response. With his national celebrity established by late 1931, Calloway and his band conducted three national tours per year with variety palaces as a majority of the venues.

Like other big bands, Calloway performed at many different venues throughout his career—including hotels, restaurants, parks, armories, cabarets, and nightclubs.<sup>68</sup> But variety palaces were collectively the venue in which he performed most frequently. Two-thirds of all Calloway's week-long stints during his career— three-hundred fifty-three — took place in first-run or black movie theaters. If played continuously, Calloway's bookings in movie theaters totaled just under seven years, tours that took his band into and in front of a wide range of theaters, geographic areas, and audiences. Every major studio—RKO, Warner Brothers, Paramount, Loew's, and Fox—booked him for over fifty weeks each, with RKO (98) then

Warner Brothers (73) being the most prevalent.<sup>69</sup> Calloway appeared at independent variety palaces just as often - 56 weeks between 1930 and 1951. Splitting his movie theater performances between all the available major circuits and independent theaters, each of which monopolized specific geographic regions (to collectively form their oligopoly), meant that he played in almost all available cities during this time. Calloway and his orchestra performed in sixty-seven cities in twenty-four states. Many of these appearances—about seventy-five percent—were in the main cities of live performance in movie theaters in the Midwest and New England, including New York (Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Harlem), Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit, Los Angeles, Boston, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Baltimore, and Washington D.C., all cities with populations over 600,000.<sup>70</sup> However, the remaining twenty-five percent of his bookings were spread across regions and smaller cities. The remaining of the fifty-six cities Calloway and his bands performed in were small to mid-sized cities with variety-palace sized theaters (at least over 1000 seats) in the Southwest, Northwest, Midwest, Northeast, with Cedar Rapids, Iowa, being the smallest city by population (62,000 in 1940).<sup>71</sup> Even with its strict Jim Crow segregation, Calloway and his band also performed in the Southwest several times, appearing in theaters in Austin, Memphis, Dallas, San Antonio, Omaha, Houston, and Fort Worth, among others.

The rest of the band's one-hundred eighty appearances were in nightclubs, and an overwhelming majority of these (one-hundred forty) were in the Cotton Club in Harlem, where he was the resident bandleader (which moved to Manhattan in 1936 and subsequently closed in early 1940). While his own club was by far Calloway's most recurring venue, it did not provide his band or him much visibility unless audiences lived in or visited New York in the 1930s and were white and fairly wealthy. Most would have seen Calloway and his band perform alongside

other live acts, short films, and feature films in a variety palace. Furthermore, when the Cotton Club closed in 1940, variety palace shows far outnumbered nightclubs almost fivefold.<sup>72</sup>

Much of the hype that Calloway generated during his early career never waned and followed him for over twenty years until the early 1950s. Calloway broke individual theater revenue records, including in cities like Akron (Ohio), Canton (Ohio), Hartford, Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Chicago, and he became the highest earning African American band in 1939. Three years later, he was the single highest paid act at the prestigious Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles, and was regularly among the most lucrative there during the early 1940s.<sup>73</sup> As his financial success indicates, Calloway was almost always marketed as the “A” part of the bill, and credited by *Variety*, *Billboard*, and local reviewers as the headline act, even over films with notable stars. A surviving photograph outside an unknown theater in 1937 shows Calloway and his beloved green Lincoln Series K below a billboard for the week’s bill. Per the poster conventions for star billing, “Cab Calloway” appears in the largest, boldest text. However, even his songs and the other African American acts on the program are billed more prominently than the accompanying feature, *A Family Affair* (1937), starring Lionel Barrymore.<sup>74</sup> Even as early as 1932, Calloway was billed over other major stars including Will Rogers and Bing Crosby.<sup>75</sup> The marquee of the Uptown Theater (Chicago, Paramount) not only featured Calloway in top billing over Rogers and his film, *Business and Pleasure* (1932), but also featured a huge banner with Calloway’s name that was far more prominent than Rogers’ more standard-sized advertisements.<sup>76</sup>

Even in the few known exceptions where Calloway was not the evident “A” attraction further substantiate his celebrity in variety palaces.<sup>77</sup> In one of them, Calloway and his band appeared on the same bill at the Chicago Theater (Paramount) as *Shoot the Works* (1934), a

Paramount film starring Jack Oakie and featuring Ben Bernie and his orchestra, one of the first generation of popular band leaders and jazz bands, along with Paul Whiteman. At sixty-four minutes, *Shoot the Works* was technically a “B” film, despite the attraction of Bernie’s orchestra. A surviving photograph shows that while the Chicago gave Calloway, his orchestra, and accompanying acts top billing on their marquee -- which meant prominent placement above the other acts – on the posters and lobby cards, both the live acts and the films received equal size typeface (headline acts often negotiated for “100% typeface,” which declared them as the unambiguous star of the program) and had equal amount of banners and posters all the same size under the entryway.<sup>78</sup> Calloway had thus already reached a level of stardom comparable to Bernie and Whiteman, and the bill’s financial success further shows their shared and equal celebrity. *Variety* reported that the combination earned the Chicago Theater \$37,000, “its best figure in months[...]. Both items on this bill figure as boxoffice magnets and the register is rising almost 10g above the previous week...heavy money making session even at this big house. Bernie and Calloway bands mean money.”<sup>79</sup>

Calloway and his band ensembles remained popular and well-paid for almost twenty years largely, if not exclusively, because of his call-and-response songs. This signature song was only one of a handful of singles that Nate Sloan has classified into Calloway’s “Harlem” group of seventeen songs.<sup>80</sup> They were recorded between 1930 and 1934; all had “hi-de-ho” choruses, almost all featured call-and-response between Calloway and the audience, and most were “hot,” “jungle” style jazz containing drug references that supported Calloway’s risqué brand.<sup>81</sup> Having produced ninety-six songs during this four-year period, Calloway’s “Harlem” songs were a small subset of his repertoire that also included many “sweet,” more classical, jazz that supported Calloway’s more polished and respectable brand. But it was the “Harlem” songs that comprised

most of Calloway's biggest hits, including "Minnie the Moocher," and that he would continue to play for the rest of his career. Even though Calloway only recorded a handful of new "Harlem" songs after 1934, one of those, "(Hep Hep!) The Jumping Jive," also sold one million records in 1939.<sup>82</sup> As reviewer at the Earle Theater (Philadelphia, Warner Bros.) noted, "there's nothing more needed but the curtain after "Moocher's final hi-de-ho."<sup>83</sup> Reviewers noted as early as 1935 that "Minnie" was becoming a classic of American jazz. In 1940, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) noted that this signature song was an important contribution to American music, and helped define Calloway as "a leader of [his] race."<sup>84</sup>

Audiences and reviewers' preference for Calloway's "Harlem" songs in movie theaters is suggested not only by the constant references to them in reviews, but especially by articles that compared his two styles of music. A 1937 review for a Calloway show at the Orpheum Theater in Minneapolis, for example, noted that while, "Peckin," a new soft melodic song about lovers tenderly kissing, "sounded pretty good to these ears, it can't hold a candle to the time-honored 'Minnie the Moocher' that has been bringing down Calloway audiences for years and was no exception last night as hundreds of shouting voices returned Cab's 'hi-de-hos."<sup>85</sup> Some audiences and critics reportedly believed that Calloway's performance of "Minnie the Moocher" or a similar "Harlem" song in movie theaters was a required part of his show, While performing at the Paramount Theater in New York City in December 1931, Calloway did not perform his signature song or anything in his "Harlem" repertoire. The reviewer lamented that while he "might have jazzed up a show that needed enlivening[...]instead the troubadours from Harlem chose to keep to doleful blue numbers."<sup>86</sup> Apparently learning his lesson, Calloway always appeared to play at least one of his call-and-response songs during every performance.

## **Industrial Consequences of Black Jazz Stardom in Variety Palaces**

Like Calloway, other black performers broke box-office records across the country, and received top billing. The popularity of and demand for jazz artists in movie theaters had many industrial consequences. African American performers strong-armed the conventional contractual and financial relationships between bands and theaters to expand opportunities for other black performers, who would not have otherwise been given access. Movie theaters were also the premiere locations for African American performers, even the most famous ones, who were regularly denied access to other prestige locations. While the forced reliance black bands had on movie theaters had its disadvantages that limited their national marketing, it also kept them in the most lucrative venues with little to no racial pay disparity which supplied its own unique cross-media publicity.

Understanding these consequences requires that I establish the economic and industrial relationships between movie theaters and the jazz industry, including bands, managers, talent agencies, and those in the broader record business. This discussion will provide a foundation for the sections that follow insofar as it explains the mutual financial and promotional benefits that fostered and maintained a system of 190 bands which played at movie theaters at its peak—and made possible Calloway and other black musicians' long and prolific career and stardom within variety palaces possible.<sup>87</sup>

### *Variety Palaces in the Big Band Economy*

The undeniable role theaters played for the “big business” of big bands was bolstering their financial bottom line.<sup>88</sup> Admissions at variety palaces were a principal source of revenue for the big band industry. In a 1945 article, *Billboard* called movie theaters a “Gold

Mine...[providing] a healthy wad of dough that's held up for some time.”<sup>89</sup> The article mentions that at RKO's Palace Theater in Cleveland, Warner Brothers' Earle Theater in Philadelphia, and in the rest of the Warner circuit a “typical [band]” would make \$8,500 per week prior to 1945 (just over \$121,000 dollars in 2019).<sup>90</sup> This impressive figure was paid to famous bands, not only in urban variety palaces but also in theaters across the country even as early as the 1930s.<sup>91</sup> Salaries for bandleaders like Calloway, Jimmie Lunceford, Vincent Lopez, and Paul Whiteman ranged from \$6,000 (\$112,361 in 2019) for one day of work to over \$11,000 (\$201,443 in 2019) for a week, often with bonuses for high ticket sales.<sup>92</sup>

As their large pay indicates, bands booked alongside other acts and films could produce massive revenues for theaters, often far more than from showing films. This was Harry Kalcheim's main selling point when trying to convince theater managers to book (more) bands into their venues in his article, “Bands are Box-office in Theaters,” featured in *Billboard's* annual music-focused supplement for 1942. Kalcheim had represented both bands and studio theaters. Kalcheim wrote the article after having recently become the head of William Morris Agency's band department, and his previous capacities included working as a booking agent for RKO, as the head of Paramount's booking department where he programmed the prestigious Paramount Theater in New York, and directing the bookings for other “de luxe” theaters across the country.<sup>93</sup> Kalchiem also supplied a few financial numbers to support his statement, noting that his Paramount Theater used to gross only fifteen to twenty-five thousand dollars per week with straight pictures, but after instituting their name band policy (sometime before 1931) “grosses kept building to phenomenal heights, as high as \$90,000.” He also notes that Harry James's bands recently grossed \$40,000 in a single week which was “probably an all-time high for that house.”<sup>94</sup>

Bands were breaking individual movie theaters' revenue records across the country, not just in New York. Kay Kyser's 1942 advertisement in *The Band Yearbook*, an annual supplement to *Billboard* dedicated to trends in music industry, boasted that he and his band had recently "broke one week all-time [box-office] records" at four theaters: RKO Golden Gate in San Francisco, Chicago Theater (Paramount), Circle Theater in Indianapolis (Independent), and the Fox Theater in Detroit (Independent).<sup>95</sup> For the Chicago Theater, this was almost double what *Variety* considered a lucrative week.<sup>96</sup> It was also common for bands to advertise themselves as continually surpassing theater box-office revenue records, even if they did not specify what theaters or the exact amounts. One example is the Clinton Orchestra's description of itself as, "the orchestra that has smacked out records wherever it has played--in theaters, ballrooms, proms, and spots."<sup>97</sup>

Despite flaunting sizable weekly revenues, how much bands benefited theaters' financial bottom lines is hard to determine, and likely varied greatly between theaters. Much of the trade press coverage celebrating the financial boon of bands to theaters was written during the war-boom of the early- to mid- 1940s and only covered the most prominent theaters in the country. *Variety* announced in a 1942 front-page article that bands had recently become the "no. 1" box-office generator, increasing theatrical grosses between 100-200% across the country. This helped the Metropolitan Theater (Paramount, Boston), for example, raise its weekly revenue from \$15,000 with only motion pictures to \$37,000 with bands.<sup>98</sup> *Billboard* published an article in early 1944, reflecting on the "zowie" \$23,000,000 revenue that the most celebrated vaudefilm houses in the country—"the Big Six" in New York, the "Big Two" in Chicago, and the "Big Single" in Los Angeles--earned during the previous year. Each theater's success was attributed to bands: "The factors that made New York a big year for vaudefilm policy operated in Chicago,



too. The Chicago Theater, for example, had 30 weeks of bands to help it go to almost the 2,000,000 mark.” The report in Los Angeles was the same, “Last year was a 1,000,000 gross stretch at the Orpheum Theater, but Sherrill Corwin, owner-manager has bands to thank for the million-figured amount.”<sup>99</sup>

### *Performer Contracts and Control of Programming*

Based on surviving contracts for Paramount, RKO, Warner, and independent theaters, bands’ drawing power helped them negotiate favorable contracts with revenue sharing and programming control. The most in-demand bands negotiated contracts in which they shared in a theater’s weekly revenue regardless of whether patrons came to see another attraction such as the feature film. The most prized rate a band could negotiate was a fifty-percent revenue share with the theater, examples of which exist for many different bands performing across American theaters.<sup>100</sup> Most contracts not paying a flat performance fee were riddled with stipulations, such as guaranteed pay, cost sharing, and deductions. For example, Duke Ellington’s 50/50 revenue sharing agreement at the Regal Theater in Chicago in 1935 began only after a \$250 deduction to cover the cost of the theater's bank night that week.<sup>101</sup>

Revenue sharing reduced theaters’ financial risk for individual engagements. Theaters had sizable fixed weekly expenses, which, for example, in prominent variety palaces showing bands in 1935—like the RKO Palace Theater in Cleveland—averaged \$6,911 without accounting for the cost of the onstage talent.<sup>102</sup> Thus, paying a band an expensive flat fee meant that the theater assumed significant financial risk if the program did not earn as expected.<sup>103</sup> As *Billboard* noted, theaters often complained that “one rainy or snowy day is enough to put a theater into the red on bookings of name bands.”<sup>104</sup> Revenue sharing between theaters and bands mitigated some

of this risk by dividing it with the bands, who were further incentivized to perform well and conduct their own local advertising to assure they could, at the very least, cover their own travel expenses and salaries.<sup>105</sup> If the band broke house attendance records, both the theater and the band might earn a healthy profit. However, revenue sharing could also lead to lower pay for the band.<sup>106</sup>

Negotiating figures and percentages in contracts between bands and movie theaters depended on many factors, but the one of the most deliberated was the amount of control theater managers and bands wanted (or were willing to give up) over programming.<sup>107</sup> These contracts reveal that the makeup of a theater's live entertainment was always up for negotiation and not controlled by a single party. Fairly often, big name bands, rather than anyone connected to the film industry, decided on the bills. By assuming the additional risk in a revenue sharing contract, however, headline bands often determined many, and sometimes all, of the live acts appearing alongside them on the bill. Performers including Bob Crosby and Duke Ellington sometimes had partial control of their bills, negotiating the right to supply one or two acts, with the manager choosing the others. Oftentimes, the additional acts that bands negotiated in their contracts with theaters were part of their own revue; a pre-constituted set of acts designed to perform as separate acts, which occasionally performed a finale together. This was especially the case for African American jazz musicians, including Calloway, Ellington, Basie, and Nat King Cole, who often traveled with a team of black comedians, vocalists, and eccentric dancers.<sup>108</sup> Many of their contracts stipulated the names and number of performers the band demanded on the bill. For example, many of Calloway's contracts in the Paramount circuit during the late 1930s stipulated that the band appeared "with Avis Andrews, Stump and Stumpy, and six (6) Cotton Club Boys."<sup>109</sup> As with Calloway and Ellington during the early 1930s, the demand for bands --

particularly a few star bands -- allowed talent agencies like the Musical Corporation of America (MCA) to use package deals to force theaters to book less popular bands into their premiere theaters. As *Billboard* explained, “you get one of their big bands if you take a couple of turkeys. That explains how certain bands got into the [New York] Paramount and Strand theaters.”<sup>110</sup>

Despite being able to negotiate for near-complete control of the acts included onstage, bands and other performers appear to have had little decision over the principal cinematic content (including shorts and features), at least until after the Paramount decree of 1948.<sup>111</sup> Popular bands wanted headline quality films because they had a greater chance of boosting attendance even further thereby boosting the amount the band earned. Choosing the film would also allow bands to more holistically shape audience experiences of their act by dictating the contexts of the entire program. However, I have discovered no contract from any of the major studios from before the early 1950s that indicates that the films were chosen by anyone other than theater managers and regional exchange offices. One reason for this is that the system of booking and distribution of bands and other live acts was separate from that of films, and theaters had their own contracts with studios which were negotiated separately from onstage acts.<sup>112</sup>

Some bands tried and failed to use their popularity to negotiate control over the selection of the feature film. *Billboard* presented one such example in 1939 to demonstrate the power bands had over theaters, and as well as what was non-negotiable. Kay Kyser reportedly refused an otherwise generous \$12,000 offer from New York City’s Paramount theater unless they would guarantee a “strong film on the bill” such as *Dark Victory* (1939), an “A” film starring Bette Davis, featuring Geraldine Fitzgerald, and with breakout roles from Humphrey Bogart and Ronald Reagan. Both Paramount’s head booking agent and the house manager refused, noting

that “will not do this [negotiate the picture] for any attraction.” However, its rival Manhattan theater, the Strand (Warner Brothers), lured Kyser into booking with them with a promise to show *Dark Victory* on the bill. The Strand did not live up to this promise, convincing Kyser to agree instead to *Yes, My Darling Daughter* (1939), an upper-tier “B” screwball comedy produced by Warner Bros.<sup>113</sup>

The Paramount Theater’s refusal to negotiate the accompanying feature and the Strand’s switch reaffirm the larger issues in the business of film distribution and exhibition regulating the use of live performance (discussed in more depth in chapter four). From the perspective of vertical integration and film distribution, Hollywood’s utility for bands, like all live acts, was to keep under-performing films in circulation and earning rentals in urban markets where there were not enough standalone features. Having a film like *Dark Victory* on the bill alongside Kyser would have surely drawn a larger crowd to the theater and generated significant revenues. As *Variety* noted, the very rare instances of “when a popular band and one of the better ‘A’ features are dualled, returns mount spectacularly.”<sup>114</sup> However, dual booking of “A” acts like this, or even giving the choice of any available film to the performer, contradicted the strategy that variety palaces used when featuring live acts: showing inexpensive features booked at flat rates. More than genre, studio, or stars, what the industry required from an “A” film in its first run was that generated revenues from which the studios would earn a percentage from twenty-five percent to forty percent.<sup>115</sup> Since bands often revenue-shared as well, the film would further absorb another significant portion of the theater’s share. The rent of some of these theaters, like the Orpheum in Los Angeles, even determined their rent by paying 10% of their receipts.<sup>116</sup> This could hypothetically leave theaters with only an insufficient fifteen-percent of the revenue (by already having 50%-25%-10% guaranteed to external parties), before expenses. Thus it was an

economic imperative for theaters to use name bands and other headline live acts as the “A” portion of the bill, while booking whatever “B” films they could secure for a flat fee, often as low as \$250.<sup>117</sup>

Theaters’ tendency to book bands with “B” pictures left a mark on Cab Calloway’s musical repertoire. In 1940, Calloway recorded the single, “Chop Chop Charlie Chan,” explicitly referencing the popular films featuring the titular detective. Calloway often appeared alongside one of the twenty-five Charlie Chan pictures Fox had produced by the end of 1940. Fox’s Chan films were exceptional “B” films in terms of their fairly large budget and their ability to produce the grosses of “A” films, but they too regularly accompanied live performance.<sup>118</sup> Two such instances featuring Calloway and a Chan film include a bill featuring *Charlie Chan in Shanghai* (1935) at the Fox Theater in Detroit, and another in 1946 with *Charlie Chan Shanghai Cobra* (1945) at the National Theater in Louisville, with Calloway being credited as the main draw above the films in both cases.<sup>119</sup> According to his biographer, Alyn Shipton, Calloway recorded the song in 1940 to appeal to the fans of the detective with whose films he frequently shared the audience, and to build on a growing repertoire of songs in which he impersonated and stereotyped the Chinese language.<sup>120</sup>

### *Contracts and Expanding Opportunities for Black Performers*

Black jazz musicians’ contractual affordances were one, however small, solution for the continually growing impediments for the employment of non-star black performers during the 1930s and 1940. Black star musicians including Calloway used their influence to open a space for lesser known acts to make their way in an environment where there were few opportunities. *Billboard* estimated that bookings of black performers across all theatrical venues decreased 25%

to 30% between 1937 and 1940.<sup>121</sup> The reasons for this sharp decline was a combination of racial prejudice and a lack of venues fostering black artists. Bookers and managers claimed that theater managers, circuit bookers, and hotel managers catering to primarily white audiences largely refused to book them because of their race and because they were not “strong enough to compete with box-office names, coming from the movies and radio.”<sup>122</sup> Both articles mention the exceptions, with the *New York Amsterdam* noting that “Broadway accepts only” six black stars, and *Billboard* listing fourteen.<sup>123</sup> They also mention those jazz musicians who were the most prevalent, with the ten major black bands (out of only twenty-five currently touring) allowed in “choice location jobs.” *Billboard* especially noted that, “Calloway, Ellington, and Armstrong are among the strong theater bands, each having appeared on the air and in pictures.”<sup>124</sup>

However, the venues in which non-star African American performers could potentially prove their box-office potential diminished during the 1930s. Even in Harlem, many of the night clubs featuring black acts that had fared well during Prohibition by enticing white patrons with illegal alcohol closed after patrons no longer needed to enter otherwise segregated black neighborhoods for booze. Even the Cotton Club moved to mid-town’s Broadway district in 1937 but closed in 1940. Though a few clubs featuring black entertainers opened and remained popular during the 1940s, including Cafe Zanzibar, which opened in 1943 in an attempt to replace the Cotton Club, another factor in the decline of black performance venues was the significantly reduced number of black movie theaters using live performance. *Billboard* estimated that while there were twenty to twenty-five black vaudefilm theaters in the early 1930s, only six black movie palaces remained constantly in operation by 1940 —the Apollo and the West End in Harlem, the Howard in Washington D.C., the Regal in Chicago, and the Royal Theater in Baltimore, and two theaters in Norfolk and Richmond, Virginia, that used a “Negro

policy” (i.e. programmed a bill in which all the live acts featured African American performers) occasionally, with the rest either closing or switching to film exhibition exclusively in an attempt to reduce costs and potential losses.<sup>125</sup> This growing issue helps to explain and justify Arthur Knight’s observation that black audiences principally valued stars who did not reach the cultural mainstream, but who used their stardom to facilitate and foster other black performers into the entertainment landscape.<sup>126</sup> With few options for developing their talent in major commercial venues, the opportunities to enter the mainstream that black jazz artists fought for and created for performers of their race were a significant exception to a growing problem. While even approximating their impact requires further research into the frequency of jazz artists’ control over bills and the exact acts and performers they chose, the number and the longevity of those acts Calloway headlined for in movie theaters his career provides some evidence. Calloway performed with 479 different acts across his career, a large majority African American. He carried at least 98 of these African American performers in his team for more than five weeks of performances, some even traveled with him for more than sixty weeks of work.<sup>127</sup>

### *Prestige, Publicity, and Equitable Pay*

Even for the most popular black bands, though, movie palaces were the most prestigious venues regularly available to be them. They were not, however, the most prestigious venues available to white bands. The music industry largely considered hotels with the capability of radio broadcasts as the most important venues, as they provided greater regional and national promotion. New York City hotels were even more important both for their prominent presence in the county’s music capitol and the national syndication of their radio broadcasts. However, most hotels bent to racist attitudes and would not book black bands during the 1930s and 1940s, or at

least did so very rarely. Hotel managers cited fears that black bands would offend tourists from the southern states currently staying in their hotels. They also feared that black bands, which to many meant illicit, inter-racial sexuality, would taint their hotel's brand to potential tourists as management viewed these broadcasts as advertisements for their business.<sup>128</sup> This policy, "justified" by racist excuses, kept even the classical Ellington out of these spots. *Metronome* (even to their surprise) reported in 1943 that Ellington had been booked into "only one major American hotel in this country" during the early 1940s.<sup>129</sup>

For Calloway the situation appears even worse. He and his band only played once at one major American hotel, the Sherman Hotel in Chicago, during this period, and were likely booked into this radio wired spot because Calloway fit into the hotel's promise of offering white patrons ethnic and racial tourism. These jazz performances took place in the hotel's Panther Room, which promised patrons "exotic" entertainment with dinners featuring meat on flaming swords served by waiters wearing turbans and other mock-middle eastern attire.<sup>130</sup> At other prestigious venues with radio hook-ups (a.k.a. radio wires) at which black bands performed, similar racist contextualization was built into the décor. As its name indicated, The Cotton Club also reproduced racist imagery of African Americans. Its facade featured a log cabin reminiscent of slave quarters, and its menu featured naked, indigenous black men and women dancing around a drum on the cover, with tribal masks lining the pages listing food and drinks.<sup>131</sup>

Unfortunately, very few motion-picture theaters (especially those that were a part of the first run circuit), by comparison, had radio hook-ups. In 1942, for example, only three theaters in the United States, the Orpheum Theater in Minnesota (RKO), the Earle Theater in Philadelphia (Warner Bros.) and the Fox Theater in Detroit (Independent), had the technological capability for broadcasts.<sup>132</sup> But even they did not regularly host broadcasts of their onstage entertainment.<sup>133</sup>



While the racial biases of hotels kept out African Americans, performing in theaters had its advantages. Because they were largely blocked from hotels, black newspapers considered theater dates “the most important item” for African American bands.<sup>134</sup> This belief can be justified in at least two ways. Theaters could not offer the same degree of widespread radio-driven publicity as hotels, but they offered far better pay. The pay for hotel engagements regularly did not cover a band’s expenses, sometimes barely covering a fourth of a band’s weekly salary.<sup>135</sup> The prestigious Hotel Pennsylvania only paid \$2,500 (\$40,119 in 2022) for a week of work. Of course, white bands gladly accepted these gigs for the publicity alone. Movie palace stints, as already established, paid significantly more and they did not pay lower because of a performer’s race, at least for major black bands.<sup>136</sup> In fact, my research shows the most popular black bands, including Calloway, Ellington, Lunceford, and Basie were among the highest paid in the industry. African Americans’ performance within movie theaters also disrupted the stereotypes and racist connotations other venues reinforced. On one hand, they removed the usual reassuring spatial and graphic markers of “proper” racial relationships that accompanied his performances at the venues like the Cotton Club and Panther Club. Despite some famous examples to the contrary, like Grauman’s Chinese and Egyptian Theaters, by and large movie palaces did not feature racialized architecture, decor, or imagery.<sup>137</sup> Almost none of them programmed bands.<sup>138</sup>

In addition to being lucrative, movie palaces played important roles in the local music economy by offering bands and entrepreneurs locally-based, cross-promotion that more nationally-oriented mass media such as films and radio could not. Syndicated radio broadcasts and studio produced short and feature films undoubtedly supplied bands with a platform to build a national audience for their music and their celebrity. In a 1942 article, music publisher Joseph

Carlton laid out what bandleaders could gain from taking part in the Hollywood publicity machine: “It is estimated that more than 80,000,000 people see one movie at least once a week. This, coupled with the exploitation which brings the name of the band and the leader before the public outside the theater by means of lobby displays, marquee billings, newspaper advertising, 24-sheets, etc., means prestige and publicity for the band leader that sometimes neither can measured in dollars and cents nor obtained thru any combination of other media.”<sup>139</sup> One press agent proclaimed that movies were “the greatest source of publicity ever developed for bandleaders.”<sup>140</sup> As Carlton noted, the effects of Hollywood’s publicity were not quantifiable, but industry discourse established it as a well-accepted fact that influenced both band managers and film producers’ strategies. Irving Mills’ desire to create as much media exposure for Calloway during the 1930s meant largely agreeing that his client would appear in as many movies as possible, with Calloway appearing in twenty-nine films between 1930 and 1959, including features and live and animated shorts, more than any other black jazz artist.<sup>141</sup> Likewise, animator Max Fleischer secured jazz artists, especially African Americans including Calloway, to star and sing in his cartoons by promising to double their publicity by requiring that Paramount Pictures screen the cartoons in theaters where the bandleader was to perform. “The performers jumped at the chance to appear on screens all over,” one of Fleischer’s animators recalled, as it supplied “coverage they could not get before.”<sup>142</sup>

In the broad scheme of managing and promoting their celebrity, bands prioritized film appearances and radio broadcasts over theater (or any live appearance) dates. Other than for compensation and control over the programming of non-headline acts, band contracts with individual theaters and studio booking offices were fairly standardized. However, the more famous bandleaders often negotiated riders that allowed them to cancel or postpone their

appearances in the event they received an offer to appear in a Hollywood film. A representative rider read:

It is distinctly understood that in the event \_\_\_\_\_ [insert band name] are called to Hollywood, California to make a motion picture at a time conflict [*sic*] with the date and terms of the engagement outlined here, this contract may be canceled (or postponed) by the Artist provided, however notice such cancellation will be give to you in writing at least four weeks before the opening date of the engagement.<sup>143</sup>

By contrast, theater engagements could not be canceled for radio broadcasts but instead contract riders mandated that theater managers adjust the band's schedules to accommodate all commercial broadcasts:

It is understood and agreed that, if the Artist, has a contract calling for its services on a commercial or sustaining broadcast(s) in \_\_\_\_\_, then the performance(s) called for herein must not in anyway interfere with this broadcast(s), provided, however, that notice of such broadcast(s) shall be given to Corporation [*sic*] at least one week prior to same.<sup>144</sup>

Especially for African American performers, prioritizing radio broadcasts and film work over theater appearances can be best explained as a desire for a national media platform, no matter the literal or figurative cost. Though the amounts that black bandleaders including Ellington, Calloway, and Armstrong earned for their film roles are largely unknown, their weekly salaries from the theaters appears to be higher than what Hollywood paid them. For example, Paramount paid Louis Armstrong \$7,500 in 1937 to shoot an undetermined film.<sup>145</sup> While this is certainly a non-negligible amount, it was still smaller than a week-long appearance in theaters albeit for less work.

A Hollywood contract also meant that bandleaders signed away control over their representation. This contract between Armstrong and Paramount (dated May 5, 1937) did even not specify the production Armstrong was to perform in and its language left no ambiguity that the studio and its staff dictated his representation: "To appear and/or take part in the photographing of screen footage suitable for us, as the Corporation may see fit, in one

production.”<sup>146</sup> Band leaders of all races complained that feature filmmakers narratively marginalized them, having them appear on screen only to perform a song or two and then disappear offscreen and out of the diegesis.<sup>147</sup> Even worse, Hollywood sound teams regularly re-recorded the music anyway, so what is heard in the film is not the work of the band leader.<sup>148</sup> For African American artists these conventions made it extremely easy for censor boards in the Jim Crow South to omit their numbers from the film without ruining the narrative.<sup>149</sup> Even still most feature films and live action and cartoon shorts (where bandleaders like Calloway had more headline roles) depicted African American jazz musicians as unambiguous racist stereotypes, as grotesque, animalistic (in cartoons, literally animals), sexual predators (at best womanizers), satanists, and inciting (white) delinquency.<sup>150</sup>

In contrast, the band and their managers controlled their onstage show almost completely, as well as their marketing for live appearances in many cases.<sup>151</sup> Mills, for example, produced detailed press kits—similar to those created by studios for feature films—for Calloway and Ellington during the early 1930s, which theaters and other venues could use to promote their appearances. Most used the materials unaltered, and even those that combined elements of different promotional materials together still largely maintained the imagery and messages Mills supplied.<sup>152</sup> As a result, the marketing and the representation of the band leader for onstage shows were far more in control of the band and their team.

However, important sectors of the commercial music industry during the 1930s and 1940s also relied upon barometers of local success and celebrity, which the movie palace -- not mass media -- more directly indicated and commercially influenced. To understand this function, it is first necessary to establish the urban ecosystem of live and recorded music of which movie palaces were a sizable part. While record sales and automatic phonograph machine revenue

suffered during the Depression, business boomed again by the mid-to-late 1930s. By 1939, *Billboard* estimated that there were 400,000 automatic phonograph machines across the United States, which required more than thirty-seven-million records per year to sustain, and record sales grew to one-hundred twenty million in 1941. Unlike much of the music business, automatic photograph ownership and operation was owned and operated by individuals or small companies (i.e. decentralized, not owned by a handful of companies headquartered in New York) and each of the 5,700 operators nation-wide owned an average of 70 machines.<sup>153</sup>

Collectively, these networks of small, localized businesses became a central focus of the music industry, and were the heavily targeted, if not single most important, audience of *Billboard* in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In 1939, *Billboard* began publishing a yearly supplement, “Talent and Tunes on Music Machines,” dedicated to the music industry, aiming the issues’ content explicitly at automatic phonograph owners and operators. The issues provided readers with band advertisements and original articles written by *Billboard* contributors, phonograph operators, theater managers, booking agents, and other industry stakeholders with insights into the ideal placement of phonograph machines, advice on selecting records, and exemplary advertising campaigns. Its principal function was to convince readers of *Billboard* to remain subscribers. As encapsulated by a caricature published in the 1942 supplement of an automatic phonograph operator and record retailer riding a darting horse composed of the titles of *Billboard*’s weekly columns dedicated to bands and the larger music industry, the paper promised loyal readers profits ahead of the competition.<sup>154</sup> These supplements include detailed accounts of the insider discourse around all aspects of big bands, which reportedly became a billion dollar industry in 1942 that “reach[ed] into and influence[d] practically every other [amusement] branch.”<sup>155</sup>

In trying to cater to the interests of local small businesses, the yearly supplements effectively encapsulated how the local ecosystems of the music industry functioned nation-wide. They also provide a cohesive account of the movie palace's role in this system during the 1930s and 1940s, including its prominent role as the symbol of success and popularity of bands in both local and national markets. This function is evident through an analysis of band advertisements in *Billboard* supplements, published annually during the last half of the big band era from 1939 to 1946. These supplements are by far the most prevalent recorded music publication where movie palaces were mentioned as compared to weekly trade press or music-focused fan magazines. This suggests that the movie palaces' importance was largely recognized by and discussed among insiders rather than form part of a marketing campaign for potential audiences. These advertisements appeared regularly in two sections. The first was the "Latest Record Releases and Pertinent Facts about Artists Represented in this Supplement." Here bands and their marketing teams under contract by the three major record companies, Victor, Columbia, and Decca, each had a short biography which listed the name of their management and/or agent, the instrumental make-up of the band, and a short resume of radio broadcasts and premiere live venues at which they had performed, including nightclubs, casinos, restaurants, and of course, movie palaces.<sup>156</sup> Calloway's 1940 bio, for example, proclaimed that he was "currently engaged in giving out his 'hi-de-hos' from the stages of a string of important Eastern theaters" of which the Strand Theater (Warner Brothers, either Manhattan or Brooklyn), the State-Lake Theater (Paramount, Chicago), The Stanley Theater (Warner, Pittsburgh), and the Palace Theater (RKO Cleveland) are named.<sup>157</sup> What is most notable about the many lists supplied in these supplementary sections are their geographic diversity. Many included theaters in New York City, the epicenter and metropolis of the music world, but bands also listed shows at movie palaces in

Baltimore (Howard Theater, Independent; RKO Theater, RKO), Memphis (Orpheum, Independent), Syracuse (RKO Theater, RKO), Washington (Earle Theater, Warner Brothers), Boston, Providence, Detroit, Columbus (in ads), Buffalo, Akron, Youngstown, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles among others.

The second place in which movie palaces are prominently mentioned are in the full- to half-page advertisements of bands spread throughout the supplements. While much of the information supplied here (about managers and record labels) is redundant, it had a distinct, yet interrelated, function. Every advertisement depicts its band as a cross-media celebrity, who were either triple, quadruple, or even quintuple-threats, appearing in theaters, radio, motion pictures, and other live performance venues. Louis Armstrong's 1942 advertisement even promoted his upcoming appearance in Orson Welles' never finished film *It's All True*: "Watch for the Orson Welles RKO-Radio Production featuring Louis Armstrong to be released soon!"<sup>158</sup>

Advertisements sometimes communicated performers' cross-media celebrity through simple tag lines such as Maxine Sullivan's "Star of Radio, Pictures, Theaters, and Night Clubs," Duke Ellington's "A star in music machines-just as on radio, screen, or stage," or Bea Wain's "Singing Star of RADIO, Singing Star on VICTOR RECORDS, and Singing Star in THEATERS."<sup>159</sup>

While these advertisements tried to indicate cross-media success, they often focused in comparatively extreme detail about bands' success and prevalent performances in movie palaces. As mentioned above, this often included listing box-office revenues and noting any type of broken box-office record. Spike Jones and his City Slickers' 1942 advertisement lists theater revenues in Omaha, Chicago, New York, Kansas City, Hammond, Indiana, and Milwaukee, and notes that their \$37,800 single day revenue at the Loew's State in New York was the "biggest Sunday in the State's history." Some artists printed letters from studio booking offices

congratulating them on their success at important theaters (such as the Chicago Theater and the Strand) and inviting them back.<sup>160</sup> Others would include detailed earnings and other data.

Calloway's African American contemporary, Louis Jordan, announced he had a "A FULL HOUSE IN THEATERS" in big, bold letters at the top of his ads and then listed the ten "top theaters" he had played that year including both famous movie palaces such as Loew's State (its flagship theater in Manhattan), Oriental (Paramount, Chicago) and such African American movie palaces as the Howard Theater (Baltimore) and Paradise (Detroit), noting how many times he played in each.<sup>161</sup> Other artists included just a single sentence about their achievements at movie palaces using vague, yet notably celebratory language. Stan Kenton advertised in 1943 that he had "just concluded smash engagements" at the Golden Gate (RKO, San Francisco) and the Orpheum (Independent/Fox Affiliate, Los Angeles).<sup>162</sup> Calloway's 1940 advertisement was even less specific, but clearly expressed the importance of his performances in movie theaters:

"Outstanding successful personal appearances in the nation's leading theaters."<sup>163</sup>

While *Billboard's* band yearbooks are the richest sources of this palace-centered discourse, they were preceded by at least half a decade by other industry-to-industry promotions. Press manuals designed for nightclub, hotel, and theater bookers that Mills and his team prepared for Calloway in 1934 includes three sections almost solely dedicated to showcasing his success in theaters across the country, and even includes several beautifully printed pictures of Calloway's name on the marquee of premiere theaters.<sup>164</sup> Like the advertisements in *Billboard*, the press kit describes Calloway's "dynamic box-office attraction in theaters" in a range of cities including Dallas, Boston, Minneapolis, Kansas City, Chicago, and New York, with the phrase, "Same stunt repeated in dozens of other cities," assuring bookers he could successfully perform in any cultural geography, even at "five shows a day for seven days" as he did recently in



Chicago.<sup>165</sup> The kit then quantifies Calloway's recent career accolades during the 1932 to 1933 season based on the number of different theaters (61), weeks booked (71 out of 104), and regions (sixteen states in all regions except for the Pacific coast) where he performed. The box-office grosses from this impressive tour reached almost \$1,500,000 (\$29.76 million in 2020).

While band managers and agents' apparent obsession with announcing and quantifying success within movie palaces in their advertisements was never directly addressed or explained in the trade papers, I would argue that, unlike movies or radio, movie theater appearances demonstrated that these acts had geographically specific, repeated success with large and varied audiences. Because of their large seating capacities--some as large as 5,000 to 6,000 seats---especially compared to small 100 to 200 seat clubs and restaurants, revenues generated from theaters were consistently impressive and easily quantifiable evidence of profitability. But the people and viewing patterns represented by these numbers are just as important. Small clubs and restaurants catered to largely middle and upper-class white patrons—especially couples—and were thus more expensive to attend. Promoting financial and/or critical success in these venues also indicates a very limited audience demographic. Movie theaters, by comparison, were cheaper to attend and aimed at cross-class, cross-race audiences of both children and adults. Because movie theaters almost always booked at least week-long engagements with four or more shows per day, a band's success there meant that they could continually attract a sizable paying crowd across multiple demographics without tiring. These ads also emphasize not only shows at nationally recognized theaters like the Paramount (discussed more below), but also ones in regional hubs like Chicago and Detroit, even smaller cities like Hammond, Indiana (70,000 population in 1940), and theaters primarily catering to African Americans including the Howard (Washington D.C., Independent), the Regal (Paramount, Chicago), the Apollo (Harlem,

Independent), and the Paradise (Detroit, Independent). Together, this information demonstrated a band's commercial viability across demographics and regions to anyone in the music business. Many advertisements were even aimed at locally based record buyers by including the catalog number of their records in the ads. In short, the movie palaces worked as symbols of regional and local success, communicating to record sellers and buyers and other bookers that the band was a viable candidate for their patronage.

While advertisements highlighting performances and success in movie palaces suggest that such venues gave bands a greater aura of achievement in the local circuits, one theater granted undeniable prestige in the broader music industry. The Paramount Theater in Manhattan was, by far, the most mentioned theater in bands' advertisements. Inna Ray Hutton even included a picture of the theater's marquee on her advertisements for the *Billboard's* "Band Yearbook."<sup>166</sup> Mills also included the Paramount marquee as the featured image in the Calloway's press manual he sent to theaters and other venues. Calloway's long-time pianist, Benny Payne, remembered the band's first appearance at the Paramount as the launching point of their career, and one that Calloway accommodated despite great inconvenience:

One week in 1933[...] we were playing at the Apollo Theater in Harlem and Fred Waring [a white jazz bandleader] came up to ask Cab if he would bring the band into the Paramount Theater downtown[...] We were already playing five shows at the Apollo, but the Paramount was big-time and we were just beginning to make a name for ourselves, so Cab said yes. For four days we played eight shows a day. I never will forget that. We played two shows at the Apollo, got taxicabs downtown to the Paramount, ran back uptown just in time for the next show at the Apollo, jumped in cabs again to get downtown for the second Paramount show, came back uptown, then downtown again, then back uptown for the midnight show at the Apollo.<sup>167</sup>

Mills and Calloway celebrated this momentous occasion by taking a full-page advertisement in *Variety* announcing their first appearance.<sup>168</sup>

Jazz scholars have noted that during the 1930s and 1940s New York City was the capital of swing music, and home to all the major booking agencies and record companies.<sup>169</sup> While this enabled all the movie palaces in New York City to book bands regularly during this period—the Strand Theater (Warner Bros., one in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn) and State Theater (Loew's)—as a generator of a band's stature, they were all in the shadow of the Paramount.<sup>170</sup> Famously booked by Harry Kalcheim, the theater was often credited with popularizing the “band policy” of booking Paramount movies almost exclusively alongside big bands in the early 1930s.<sup>171</sup> Each year since 1936, Kalchiem conducted an annual poll of his theater audience, which he used to determine which bands to book at the Paramount. However, theater managers outside of New York also utilized the polls to gauge band popularity. As *Billboard* reported in 1939, “Paramount Theater band popularity polls, which is supposed to be a barometer of public musical taste, shows that the public favors swing band for entertainment fare[...]the poll, nevertheless is an important factor in rating bands for out-of-town engagements and the big guys in the business are after an honest vote because it gives them an idea of just how popular they are and what they do to improve if they slip.”<sup>172</sup> Through the poll and the consequent promotion of the band's national appeal, Kalchiem and his audience functioned as tastemakers and gatekeepers of the big band industry, especially in movie palaces.<sup>173</sup> As further proof of Kalchiem and the Paramount's prominent status in the big band industry was the fact that William Morris talent agency poached Kalchiem in 1941, appointing him to the head of their big band office, when they want to add more big bands into its talent pool.<sup>174</sup>

## Swing's Impact on Variety Palace Audience Attendance, Experience, and Reception

Actual audiences in any theater or city are impossible to trace and were ever changing between (and even during) individual performances. However, the racial makeup of audiences of movie theaters is regularly assumed to have been determined by racial and cultural geography, which was circumscribed by various forms of institutional racism and legal and illegal segregation. Because of this, movie theater attendance, in particular movie palace attendance, is generally considered to have been a cross-class, but racially segregated practice. In the South, Jim Crow laws allowed theater owners to exclude black patrons or relegate them to a specific, often architecturally separate, seating location such as the balcony. Even in northern states with civil rights laws prohibiting separate theaters or separate seating, racial separation was still common. The primary reason for this was what is usually called neighborhood-based segregation, where segregated residential patterns assured that people of different races attended theaters primarily in their nearby area already prescribed by racist practices (economic, housing laws, etc.).<sup>175</sup> Of course, for the most part, black theaters were far fewer, smaller, and worse maintained than theaters in predominantly white areas. They were also always final run venues, so a movie that played in first-run theater would not reach a black theater for months or even a year later, if it did at all.<sup>176</sup>

While scholarship attests that these barriers kept moviegoing a racially separate practice, many sources evidence the regular attendance of African Americans *and* white audiences to see live performances of jazz in the same movie theaters. In comparison to the film industry, jazz more regularly documented its audiences, in part because bands were judged as much on the actions and reactions of audiences (especially whether and how people danced, vocalized, or sang,) then on the subjective quality of music. Thus bands and theaters regularly captured

photographs of audiences featuring clearly multi-racial attendees, reviewers would often describe the audience as a racially “mixed audience,” and black newspapers also occasionally wrote first-hand reviews of black jazz in these venues.<sup>177</sup> Some managers, both of studio-affiliated theaters and black theaters, explicitly aspired to attract multi-racial audiences to black jazz performances by publishing special advertisements for shows featuring black bands in both mainstream and black newspapers in their city, as the Loew’s Theater (Rochester, New York), the Paramount Theater (Austin, Texas, Interstate Circuit), and the Paradise Theater did.<sup>178</sup> In other newspaper accounts patrons of color are insinuated, rather than explicitly identified or enumerated. Calloway’s 1933 performance at Kansas City’s Mainstreet Theater is a good example of this. The reviewer specifically mentions “2,000 white persons” in attendance and that the theater was severely overfilled, amazed by the sold-out audience that flowed out into the aisles and even sat on the balcony steps.<sup>179</sup> However, the theater actually had a seating capacity of 3,049. This suggests that people of color occupied the remaining third, a speculation further supported by a later policy change at the theater. Management of the Mainstreet implemented a policy in 1937 only allowing black patrons for midnight showings in an effort to curb high African American attendance. The Kansas City African American community completely boycotted the theater in protest.<sup>180</sup>

Black newspapers also suggest that racially mixed audiences attending theatrical jazz performances were extremely common, if not the norm, especially in Northern theaters. Audiences are easiest to track in New York because of its heavy newspaper coverage of bands and theaters. In 1940, *The New York Amsterdam News* estimated that “two out of every five Harlem showgoers make it their business to go downtown to Loew’s State, or the Paramount, the Strand or the Musical Hall” to see live performances *and* movies [emphasis mine].<sup>181</sup> Black

newspapers like the *Amsterdam News* also encouraged African Americans to see black bandleaders in downtown variety palaces. Even in 1931, when the Harlem vaudefilm scene was comparatively rich, the *Amsterdam* wrote, “If, while strolling down Broadway one evening this week you should see Mr. Cab Calloway’s name in large and bright lights above the entrance of the Paramount Theater, we advise you to purchase a ticket and go in. For, even if you have seen and heard this famous gentleman of jazz and his orchestra, you will find them at their best this week.”<sup>182</sup> Such accounts also suggest the relative ease of access for African Americans to venture to and patronize downtown movie palaces.

Black audiences not only flocked to theaters to see (and hear) Calloway and other African American jazz artists, but also “hot” white bandleaders. Lamenting the promotional advantages white bands had over their black counterparts, Frank Marshall Davis of the Associated Negro Press, suggested in 1938 that when not accounting for racial biases, only “Goodman, [Bob] Crosby or Tommy Dorsey [are] on the same level as the topnotch colored orchestras. Goodman is the best of the whites and has a truly great band, but even Benny must bow to super-greats [Calloway, Ellington, Armstrong, and Basie].”<sup>183</sup> Evidence suggests that African American patrons especially flocked to performances of Benny Goodman, the clarinet-bearing “King of Swing.” The jazz magazine *Down Beat* reported that black patronage at the Paramount Theater increased from three to fifteen-percent when Goodman performed there in 1937.<sup>184</sup> Surviving photos of the front of the theater at least partly corroborate this.<sup>185</sup>

Clearly the cross-race popularity of swing was a deciding factor in the unusually high, and noticeable attendance of African Americans. But to end the explanation there would miss the extent to which variety palaces made attending jazz more accessible for people of color and those of lower socio-economic status. Variety palaces were some of the largest, most

inexpensive, and least segregated venues in which jazz appeared. The average variety palace showing live performance seated 2,332 and some even housed 5,000 to 6,000 seats, far surpassing the small capacity of 100 to 200 seat clubs and restaurants, which largely operated only at night.<sup>186</sup> Variety palaces, by comparison at least opened by 10am and could have up to six shows lasting past midnight. Small clubs and restaurants priced their entry fee and/or food and beverages purposely high to exclude most of the general population.<sup>187</sup> After the Cotton Club moved to Manhattan, club policy for Saturdays required patrons to spend no less than three dollars (fifty-five dollars in 2022) on food and drinks. Given the prices, this would not have been difficult. A glass of wine started at two dollars, a Pabst Blue Ribbon beer cost seventy-five cents, a shot of whisky also started at that price, and dinner started at one dollar and fifty cents.<sup>188</sup>

In comparison, during the studio era, almost all first run theaters had a tiered pricing system in adherence to a cross-class vision of theater-going.<sup>189</sup> In 1937, for example, the cheapest tickets in first-run variety palaces theaters ranged from twenty-five to thirty-five cents, depending on the city and the most expensive ranged from sixty to seventy-five cents, sometimes reaching a dollar or higher, especially in the New York City market.<sup>190</sup> During this time African Americans only earned a fraction of their white counterparts, never even two-thirds of the average white income and had double the unemployment rate.<sup>191</sup> However, twenty-five or even thirty-five cents, admission to these theaters was occasionally attainable.<sup>192</sup> Admission at some black theaters in the country was actually higher, at forty to sixty-five cents.<sup>193</sup> Surviving photos of audiences at Jimmy Lunceford and Goodman shows at the Paramount Theater in New York show some black audiences even purchased the most expensive tickets to see jazz stars.<sup>194</sup> Tickets started as low as twenty-five cents at the Paramount, but front row seats cost one-dollar (roughly equivalent to a price of \$19 today).<sup>195</sup>

Theaters were often one of the most inclusive spaces in which African Americans could attend a jazz performance. As already established, prestigious hotels and clubs often unofficially barred African American patrons, and hotels in particular would rarely book black talent.<sup>196</sup> Even in the clubs that allowed black patrons, there is evidence that they used segregated seating. The poet Langston Hughes wrote an article in 1944 in *The Chicago Defender*, in which he expressed his dissatisfaction that Calloway's current show at Cafe Zanzibar, a night club in the heart of Broadway where he performed at least two months a year from 1944 to 1946, seated African Americans along the edges of the club. Hughes notes that, in contrast, downtown movie houses in New York had not segregated audiences since 1929, after the release of MGM's all-black musical *Hallelujah* (1929, King Vidor). Hughes remembered that until that point, theater management "seated the Negro patrons all around the outer edges of the orchestra like a band of mourning. But that did not last very long."<sup>197</sup>

Another factor contributing to audiences of multiple races is that neighborhood-based segregation, based on the unequitable idea that a film would reach black consumers *eventually*, did not work with live performance. Performers always signed contracts that prohibited them from performing in other venues within the city limits (or a certain number of miles outside of them) for an agreed-upon period of time. Variety palaces were also generally located in heavily trafficked areas of the city where African Americans in surrounding neighborhoods could get to. In 1945, the RKO Downtown Theater in Detroit noticed a newfound "heavy proportion of Negro patronage" from the primarily black neighborhood called Paradise Valley, which increased gross revenue by thirty-three percent when they booked Duke Ellington and Count Basie on separate occasions.<sup>198</sup> White patrons also regularly ventured to black theaters in, or bordering, black neighborhoods. Some cities with high populations of African Americans, including in Harlem,



Chicago, Washington D.C., Baltimore, and Detroit, had black variety palaces, a rare, but important type of theater that resembled a movie palace in architectural grandeur and size but catered primarily to African Americans. These venues were a principal location where audiences of all ethnicities and races saw live jazz during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>199</sup> In Detroit's Paradise Theater, for example, reports in the *Michigan Chronicle* indicate that the theater had a nearly even ratio of white patrons and patrons of color when they booked black jazz bands.<sup>200</sup>

One exception proves this rule about neighborhood based segregation. Harlem's vibrant vaudefilm scene during the early 1930s made New York one of the few cities in the country where neighborhood-based segregation of live acts and motion pictures could occur. During this time, Calloway and other bandleaders regularly "doubled," performing in Manhattan variety palaces and Harlem theaters and nightclubs in the same day.<sup>201</sup> This allowed African Americans in and around Harlem to see jazz bands and other live acts with movies at less expensive theaters in closer proximity to their neighborhoods. When many of these theaters changed to a film only policy, the clubs closed or moved downtown and famous bandleaders appearing in Harlem theaters at all became very rare.<sup>202</sup> In fact, Calloway only performed in a Harlem theater twice after 1940, both times at the Apollo.<sup>203</sup>

Despite having no legal ground to do so, some northern theater managers still found unscrupulous methods to reduce or to bar black patrons from their theaters, due to the widespread belief that, as *Variety* reported, "mixed audiences sometimes result in unpleasant experiences."<sup>204</sup> One approach used for popular, though not major, black bands was to not book them at all, under the assumption that they would attract patrons of their own race. Another was to force these middle-tiered black bands to "send their musicians to the Harlem neighborhood of that particular town or city to discourage colored people from attending the affair [at a primarily

white venue],” thereby creating an artificial neighborhood based segregation.<sup>205</sup> For “strong theater bands” including Calloway, Ellington, Armstrong, and Lunceford (among others), theater managers wanted the revenues they generated and they could not strong arm them into performing extra shows at exclusively African-American venues. While many theaters thus accepted the necessity of “mixed audiences,” other theaters illegally barred black patrons, recognizing that they would face “several lawsuits by the end of the week charging discrimination.”<sup>206</sup> One such instance happened to Louis Armstrong sometime before November 1940 at the Lyric Theater in Indianapolis (Independent).<sup>207</sup> Another instance, more widely covered in the black press, happened during a Calloway show in 1934 when he returned to his hometown of Baltimore. Not only were African Americans not allowed into Calloway’s show at the Century Theater (Loew’s), the theater manager hired an African American from the community to spot other black patrons trying to racially “pass” to see the show:

Home to Baltimore this week came “hi-de-hoing” Cab Calloway, former newsboy and graduate of Douglass High School, to yodel his weird incantations at the Century Theatre. . . . For forty-minute periods long lines of patrons stood first on one foot and then on the other, waiting for a chance to see and hear him.... In the lobby of the Century Theatre was stationed a grandson of Uncle Tom, hired especially for the week. Purpose—to spot all residents of northwest Baltimore, former classmates, friends, and chums of Cab Calloway, who attempted to see him by “passing for white.”<sup>208</sup>

Despite the extra expense incurred to bar most black patrons from the theater, it did not stop all African Americans from seeing the performer they idolized. The *Afro-American* reported that, “In northwest Baltimore, however, many are chuckling. They passed the spotter, heard Cab sing, fooled the white folks, had a good time, and proved what a foolish thing race prejudice is.”<sup>209</sup> Scenarios like these do not appear to have been common, however. With the desire, and legal, and financial means many urban-located African Americans attended jazz performances in

variety palaces fairly frequently though assumedly smaller numbers than their white counterparts.

This was also true in some southern theaters, where the cross-racial popularity of African American jazz and its stars even shifted segregation practices. Though Ellington broke the theater color-barrier in northern theaters in 1930, it was Calloway who broke the even more deeply ingrained restraints in the Jim Crow South three years later. In the summer of 1933, Calloway agreed to become the first black performer to tour the Interstate Theater Circuit (affiliated with RKO), comprised of theaters in Dallas, San Antonio, Houston, Fort Worth, Austin, Galveston, and New Orleans. This was also celebrated by several black newspapers as the first black act - with very few exceptions - to perform in a southern movie theater in fifteen-years.<sup>210</sup> The RKO executive in charge of southern theaters, Charles Koerner (a future RKO president who is now best known for firing Orson Welles) reportedly thought of the idea, suggesting “to the RKO cabinet that Calloway could be booked into several of the Southern houses without offending the sensibilities of the[...]whites.”<sup>211</sup> Koerner’s suggestion, seemingly predicated on the idea that Calloway presented more of a caricature of racist tropes rather than a challenge to Jim Crow racial hierarchies, was not supported by all other RKO executives, especially the old guard from the largely racially segregated vaudeville circuit. Martin Beck, the former president of the Orpheum Theater circuit, then an advisor for the RKO booking office, was reportedly the loudest dissenter.<sup>212</sup>

No matter their beliefs about Calloway’s supposed inoffensiveness to southern sensibilities, booking Calloway proved a lucrative testament to his celebrity even in the segregated South. For his first week of shows at the Majestic Theater in Dallas, seven hundred African Americans, who reportedly regarded him “as a racial hero,” greeted him as he arrived at

the train station. The theater itself also treated this as a major event, debuting its new “sound-reinforcement equipment” which amplified sound from the stage more naturally and less conspicuously.<sup>213</sup> Racially mixed audiences “crowded the Majestic’s chairs, aisles, and window sills” for the five opening day shows, greeting him with “almost unprecedented enthusiasm” including “eight-thousand whites who accept Cab as the de facto king of Jazz.”<sup>214</sup> By the end of the week, Calloway’s show grossed an impressive \$20,000 (over \$407,500 in 2022), and continued to break box-office records for the remainder of the six-week tour.<sup>215</sup>

Calloway’s financial and critical success on the tour set a precedent for other black acts performing on the Interstate Circuit. It also encouraged other theaters in the South not affiliated with the circuit to open their stage doors to African Americans who were previously shut out. In a reversal of their original situation, it was now Ellington who rode on Calloway’s coattails. Seeing Calloway’s warm reception in the South, Mills routed Ellington through there in 1934. This included stints at theaters on Interstate Circuit, as well as at other theaters in other states where notice had been taken of Calloway’s tour the previous year. The importance of this precedent was still discussed even four years later. In 1937, *The New York Amsterdam* reported that the 1933 weeklong stint at the Majestic Theater in Dallas, “Cab Calloway and ‘Minnie-The-Moocher’[...]established a precedent [of financial success by black performers]” and which had reduced racial restriction for African American performers, including Ellington, and Aida Ward, at theaters in Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. This finally culminated in Memphis, Tennessee, where Ellington played the “beautiful and exclusive” Orpheum Theater for a “mixed audience.”<sup>216</sup>

Calloway’s earliest foray into the South also proved that seating-based segregation was—up to a point—fluid and negotiable, rather than fixed. While Calloway often had to play

separate performances for white and black audiences during his southern tours, especially in Atlanta where state and city laws prohibited racially shared leisure spaces, many other Southern theaters allowed white people and people of color in the same theater for live performances while still maintaining segregated seating policies.<sup>217</sup> Most theaters operating either officially or unofficially under Jim Crow policies separated patrons of different races architecturally, mandating that they use separate entrances, ticket booths, bathrooms, concessions, and seating areas. The division generally separated white patrons from all others, lumping all non-white ethnicities and races together. In some cases, however, theaters had separate spaces for more than two racial categories.<sup>218</sup> These spaces were hardly equal in size, luxury, and amenities. African Americans theater-goers in some theaters, for example, would have to trudge to the back, climb a fire escape, where they bought tickets and concessions from an employee working in a small coat closet, and were relegated to a small balcony. When these limited seats sold out, black patrons were turned away, regardless of how many available seats remained on the floor or mezzanine levels.<sup>219</sup>

When Calloway performed in Houston, the second leg of a six-week tour of Interstate Circuit, the usually rigid segregation, physical and architectural, changed at least for several days. After four days of constantly turning away African American patrons because the “colored balcony” was full for each of the five shows per day, the management of Houston’s Majestic opened the white mezzanine on the fifth day to accommodate the demand for tickets by African American patrons. This was, according to Calloway, the first time the theater had done this - a likely claim given the several reports confirming he was the first African American act ever to perform at the theater.<sup>220</sup>

The Majestic theater's temporary change of seating policy reverberated through the rest of the Interstate Circuit, which tried to accommodate the demands of African American patrons. One of the advertisements for Calloway's week of shows in San Antonio (either at the Majestic or Empire Theater), announced that the "entire white balcony will be open to Colored people."<sup>221</sup> While this could have meant that people of all races could sit in the balcony together, more likely it meant that they just extended the available space for African Americans only. Not only had some of the racial barriers for spectatorship been partially alleviated, but the San Antonio theater's management also welcomed local African Americans onto the stage as performers for the first time. As part of an extra long show, Calloway acted as the emcee for a "colored amateur show," and African Americans in the community were welcome to register for a slot. Of course, many reminders of racial hierarchy and spatial separation remained, even though some important barriers were temporarily dislodged. Those interested in performing still had to register at the "colored box office."<sup>222</sup>

Whether or not some of the loosened racial boundaries, especially the altered seating policies, that Calloway provoked during his initial tour to South were lasting or not during his later tours of the South is hard to determine. Because black newspapers around the country and the national trade press viewed this initial tour as a momentous shift in industry's racial decorum, Calloway's early tours were covered in unusually vivid detail, largely by black newspapers outside the South.<sup>223</sup> Nationally circulating papers like the *Afro-American*, *The Chicago Defender*, and the *New York Amsterdam*, which regularly followed Calloway's career, relied on correspondence from those in the area. Some of these letters were printed in the newspapers and still exist, but they lack details.<sup>224</sup> A Mrs. J.O. Clarke wrote to *New Journal and Guide* after seeing Calloway in a return performance to Houston's Majestic Theater in 1934 to state that his

band included a man nicknamed, “Crisp” from Norfolk, and that this was “another feature in the cap of Norfolkian achievement.”<sup>225</sup> Like Clarke’s letter, letter writers usually attested that they attended his show, enjoyed it, and then they brought up matters of local significance. The casual manner in which these letter writers discussed these shows further suggest that this programming and their attendance was not an unregular event, albeit one still important enough to note in correspondence with a newspaper.

Another factor limiting the effects of black jazz on Southern audiences and theatergoing were the relative infrequency of their appearances. The region did not have sizable live performance circuits like the rest of the United States, despite several short-lived attempts to create them.<sup>226</sup> Their sparseness and temporariness was likely the result of several factors, including comparatively having less theaters and less populated cities characteristic of most areas with combination policy theaters. Calloway and his contemporaries also intentionally limited their trips to the South. While audiences treated bands in line with other big-time celebrities *in* the theater, outside of the venue band members faced the same Jim Crow racism as others which made travel difficult, uncomfortable, and occasionally dangerous. Instances of racial violence by audiences against band members, though rare, were not unheard of, and threats of it abound.<sup>227</sup> Calloway and others thus preferred to perform in venues outside of the South, where movie theaters were also more prevalent

### *Meanings of (Black) Swing in Movie Theaters*

This broader appreciation for the diversity of variety palace audiences prompts a deeper analysis of the socio-cultural experience of attending theaters and the meanings of black stardom in these venues. First, despite being uncommon, I focus on the meanings some African

Americans attached to being illegally barred from movie theaters to see black jazz stars, as some surviving evidence regarding one of these instances both corroborates and challenges current understandings about the meanings of black stardom to black audiences.

### *Black Audiences' Reactions to Being Barred from Calloway's Performances*

For African American audiences and critics, the importance of Calloway's stardom in primarily white variety palaces was ambivalent, especially when they were banned from such venues. On one hand, his early appearances in these theaters, like his tenure at the Cotton Club, were regularly covered with pride in the black press. This suggests that performances in movie theaters — like at the Cotton Club and or in his first feature film appearance, *The Big Broadcast* (1932) — marked Calloway's ascension into mainstream (white) stardom. As in other studies of the reception of black stardom in black communities, reaching this level of stardom sometimes led to debates about whether it marked a selfish abandonment of black communities or a kind of cultural uplift for African Americans. The Baltimore *Afro-American* hosted one such debate via letter writers in their August 13, 1932 edition. In particular this debate was spurred on by the illegal segregation during 1932 performance at the Hippodrome Theater (Baltimore, Independent) mentioned above. Letter writers also saw him as a case to debate the responsibility of African American performers to further civil rights, especially regarding the segregation of movie theaters as the letter submitted by an anonymous reader which incited this debate stated:

Artists-actors like Cab Calloway, playing a local white theater, should not accept an engagement where colored people are denied admittance. Do you agree with the writer that a colored artist should not play in a white theater where members of his group cannot enter?<sup>228</sup>

The paper printed twenty responses, written by an eclectic group of people, including an artist, hotel clerk, a trainer at the YMCA, an attorney, a “business man,” and three unmarried women



(one listing herself as a student).<sup>229</sup> Most self-identified as black, but two writers, both theatrical agents, identified themselves as white. Twelve disagreed with the question, seven agreed, and one did not have an answer. Although those who argued that Calloway should not play in white-only theaters did not offer their reasoning, the two most detailed replies noted that he had reached what one writer called, a “point of prominence” and another called “state of success” to make demands and “that members of his own race should be allowed to enjoy his talents should be one of his terms.”<sup>230</sup>

The twelve who disagreed with the question were far more descriptive in their responses. While one felt Calloway’s stardom had in fact benefited the black community because his act actually involved and employed many other African American performers, a majority defended their opinion by viewing Calloway not as a star, but rather as a laborer—who, like many black workers, had to cater to white patrons, sometimes exclusively, to survive, a view that resonated in the Great Depression. Variations of the phrase, “he is earning a living,” were common. One writer suggested that his appearances in white movie theaters was not a matter of racial rights, but of survival: “In these times a performer should take a job wherever he can get one[...even]white musicians are starving.” Other writers compared Calloway to other well respected, lay-person jobs in the community that catered to white clientele. Two compared Calloway to a bellhop. One read: “It is illogical to ask an artist to make such a vain sacrifice. It would be the same as asking bell boys in downtown hotels to give up their jobs because Negroes can’t stay in the hotels.” Another writer echoed the same sentiment, comparing him to a barber: “It seems to me that we must start at home in order to accomplish the thing we want. For instance, there are Negro barbers who open shops exclusively for white patronage. They are considered substantial

citizens in the community and are responsible. Many of us would like to have the benefit of their expert services, yet we don't ask them to close up their shops."<sup>231</sup>

While specific to a certain time and place (Baltimore), this snapshot taken at the onset of Calloway's national stardom during the depths of the Depression challenges several accepted notions about the values black audiences had for black stars. Arthur Knight's essay "Star Dances" posits several pertinent claims about African American stardom using the analogy of a circle dance, only some of which apply to Calloway's case.<sup>232</sup> One is that, analogous to a circle dance, African American stars took turns as highlighted performers, and ideally helped other black artists to achieve a degree of fame. To one letter writer, Calloway fit this definition as he employed other black performers in his revue, bringing them into his analogical circle. Knight also argues that a majority of African Americans viewed mainstream stardom (i.e. largely appealing to the white mass audience) as disappointing only if the performer did not continue to engage with and bolster local black communities. This, however, was not a stated problem for a majority of the letter writers. Instead of disappointment, in contrast to Knight's claims most letter writers viewed Calloway's ascent into mainstream stardom, with its barriers or complete blockage for black patronage, as a necessity for African American performers.

What being denied access to Calloway's performances reminded many of the writers of — and what they viewed as the underlying issue — was their lack of political representation and control over local businesses. In other words, variety palaces and movie theaters more generally represented institutionalized white control. "The locality [city of Baltimore] of the engagement is to blame, not the performer,"<sup>233</sup> read one letter's conclusion, while another stated, "Had he refused to play [...it] would not have helped the Negroes of this city. They have to use their votes to do that." One writer, a student named Lillian White, seemingly well-versed in the political

economy of stardom and theatrical exhibition, suggested that boycotting movie theaters was counterproductive both because the conditions of mainstream stardom *required* a primarily white audience because African Americans did have stake in entertainment infrastructure:

We haven't reached the place in theatrical development where we are able to give entire support to our actors and actresses. Even the so-called colored theaters are in most cases owned and operated by whites. The outstanding artists of the stage are mainly supported by whites. Then is such talent to go to waste, or is a career like Cab Calloway's to be limited because of that face? Until we get to the place where we are able to carry the idea of self-maintenance through everything, then why continue to harp upon a few instances.<sup>234</sup>

According to White, what was at stake with Calloway's rise to fame and his appearances in movie theaters was not only sustaining a livelihood, but also the fulfillment of his talent and potential. Given the economic inequality of exhibition and stardom—in which African Americans did not own the theaters dedicated to them—there was no feasible way for blacks by themselves to support the stardom which few of their race enjoyed. Asking performers like Calloway to take a stand in this way might severely limit or completely ruin his career, and it would also be fruitless as the black community would continue to support the white theater owners. According to many of the letter writers, the black community in Baltimore needed to be bolstered in other ways, both economically and politically, and theatergoing did not appear to play a part in their plan.

### *Jazz Spectatorship*

Debates about the importance and meaning of accessibility (or its lack) to Calloway's performances like this, however, were uncommon because African Americans regularly attended variety palaces to see and listen to jazz performances. In turn, I focus the rest of the chapter on other ways that swing in movie theater affected the socio-cultural experience of theater-going for

multi-racial audiences. One such way is evident by focusing on spectatorship and the actions of audiences. Specifically, I contend that jazz sometimes afforded patrons an engaged and interactive event that movie spectatorship had disciplined away in the 1910s and 1920s. This phenomenon had sometimes contradictory effects, with marketing around it further entrenching racist black stereotypes while at the same time the actual act worked to destabilize racial restrictions unequally policing the actions of people of color.

Histories of cinema spectatorship recognize that by the late 1920s and early 1930s, spectators had been positioned and disciplined (by architecture, musical practices, theater policy, standardized entertainment etc.) to be homogenized silent, static, passive attendees ideally absorbed into the illusion of a narrative. The normalization of silence and the erasure of locally-specific or alternative live experiences de-democratized the theatrical soundscape, reducing many of the social functions of theatergoing, suppressing locally specific linguistic environments, and supported individual contemplative experiences of watching films. These norms still largely exist today in theatrical spectatorship.<sup>235</sup>

Swing, by contrast, valued engaged spectatorship, judging bands largely on the actions of audiences especially whether and how people danced, vocalized, or sang. However, the spectatorial norms and architectural confines of movie theaters generally made them the most passive place audiences could partake in jazz. Reviews and descriptions of most live acts and even most jazz performances indicate that applause and the occasional encore were the only common and acceptable mode of reception.<sup>236</sup> The earliest history of big bands, written by George T. Simon in 1967, suggests audiences attended in jazz in theaters when they “didn’t feel so much like dancing but more like sitting and listening and maybe taking in a movie too.”<sup>237</sup>

Attending jazz in these venues thus largely operated in accordance with the institutionalized norms of middle class respectability under which movie spectatorship derived.

Though audiences yelling, dancing, and singing in movie theaters were not common features of jazz performances, some performers, most notably Calloway, Goodman, and Harry James, regularly incited it in these venues, developing celebrity personas that relied on pushing against the norms of stasis and silence.<sup>238</sup> Reviewers often characterized them as spurring significant departures from theatregoers' usual behaviors, crediting them for leading audiences to abandon stillness and individual observation (i.e. their seats) and “shimmy” and “shag” into the theater's shared spaces. One review of a 1937 performance by Calloway at the State Theater (Manhattan, Loew's) noted that, “per usual, Cab wrecks the stillness of the great street [Broadway] with his “Minnie the Moocher.”<sup>239</sup> While another noted at the Mainstreet Theater (Kansas City, RKO) in 1935 that “the only thing that keeps the [Calloway's] audience from turning the theater into a dancing academy is the lack of space.”<sup>240</sup> Similarly, the 1943 edition of *Billboard* music supplement hailed Harry James's 1942 stint at the Paramount Theater as an ideal personal appearance, which led “New York hepcats” to “jump from their seats and take to the aisles during Harry James' frenzy-full engagement at the Paramount.”<sup>241</sup> Likewise, a widely circulated 1938 article described the audience at a Benny Goodman performance:

When Benny Goodman's band appeared at New York's Paramount Theatre [in March 1937] recently the customers were so carried away by the swing music that some of them danced in the aisles. A few still more intoxicated by the rhythm swarmed up on the stage where the orchestra gave impromptu exhibitions of the shag and other swing tempo dances.<sup>242</sup>

From this, Goodman developed the promotional tagline “Dancing in the aisles” for his theater tours, and his shows could get so rowdy barriers of ushers would have to line the stage and try to calm dancers so the show could continue. Some newspapers even published playfully fearful

announcements that Goodman would soon be performing in local theaters and that emergency crews should prepare.<sup>243</sup> In each instance patrons became so engrossed by the swing music and the bandleaders' celebrity that they broke the norms of theater-going inscribed socially, in the architecture, and in theater policy. Bandleaders and their music instilled in their audiences a respite from social conventions of theatrical spectatorship. Patrons who danced or shimmied altered what was meant to be a transitional space designed to allow them to enter and exit into a space for social release.

Unlike Goodman and James, Calloway's performances encouraged audiences to disrupt the norms of silence *and* stasis by eliminating the assumed distinction between listeners in the audience and the noisemakers onstage. Goodman and James, for example, played instruments (the clarinet and the trumpet respectively) and were not known for anything but instrumental songs. Likewise, though other black jazz bands utilized call-and-response techniques, they did not involve the audience. Instead, Armstrong, Ellington, and Basie's iterations of call-and-response were largely instrumental and centered around interactions between the band and the leader, with the ensemble returning the bandleader's instrumentation.<sup>244</sup> In contrast, the popularity and demand for Calloway's "Harlem" songs, especially "Minnie the Moocher," not only kept Calloway lucratively employed for two decades, but also assured movie theaters that audiences came back to sing and dance. Calloway's singing-based audience was celebrated in the industry as a rarely imitated tool for audience building and gauging audience interest. In 1940, *Billboard's* weekly "Selling the Band" section, which supplied tips and tricks for promoting bands, featured Calloway's call-and-response technique. They wrote, "one of the surest ways to gauge audience response is to get the hearers to join in the band antics. Cab Calloway used that

simple trick with his Minnie the Moocher music, building audiences that became hi-de-ho-conscious and at the same time boosting the maestro's stock."<sup>245</sup>

Several musicologists argue that Calloway's hi-de-hoeing functioned as a game, working as a "cultural bridge" to the audiences with whom he engaged.<sup>246</sup> Musicologist and jazz historian Nate Sloan, in particular, argues that this contest simultaneously fostered intimacy and distance between Calloway and his audience, both of which push against racial hierarchies by reinforcing Calloway's stardom. The performance created intimacy through reciprocity with the audience following the bandleader. The distance, however, is created through a more literal contest, captured in the film *The Blues Brothers* (1980).<sup>247</sup> As the song progresses, Calloway makes the speed and variation of the hi-de-hos more and more complex; eventually so much so that the audience can no longer match his verbal acrobatics.<sup>248</sup> As a reviewer for Calloway's March 1938 show at the Earle Theater (Washington D.C., Warner Bros.) wrote, "Before the show is over Cab has the audience enthusiastically joining in 'Hi-de-hi's' and 'ho-de-ho's,' also his new 'Whooop-boom!' But no brave souls attempted to follow Cab in those complicated syllabics that sweep Calloway music to plumb frenzy."<sup>249</sup> By controlling the terms of the engagement in a playful and good-willed manner, Calloway's hi-de-hos affirm his superior skill and reinforce his celebrity.

What these analyses of Calloway's scat style miss when they assess the relationship between Calloway and his audiences, however, is the relationships between audience members. While Calloway's game worked to foster intimacy between Calloway and his audience (before he asserted his performative superiority over them), so would the audience: first through their shared engagement with Calloway and second in their shared (albeit playful) inferiority to his ability. This theoretical understanding of Calloway's call and response technique adheres to what social and music historians, including Lawrence Levine, have described in other forms African

American music of the period. Spread across jazz, blues, and gospel music, the call-and-response technique served as a community-oriented form of communication and engagement in which there were “no audiences, just participants.”<sup>250</sup>

Rick Altman has noted that, at the turn of the nineteenth century, audience activity and reactions in theatrical entertainment were considered important enough to be reviewed along with the performers.<sup>251</sup> With audiences dancing and singing call-and-response in Calloway’s theater shows, Calloway and other jazz performers rekindled this method of review, with reviewers describing the audience as everything but inactive; (re)actions in theaters, include “stomping,” “chanting,” “grabbing,” “hand-clapping,” “singing”(and its many variations), “cheering,” “dancing,” “whistling,” “howling,” “yelling,” “feet-shuffling,” “cavernous yowling” which were often described further as “wild,” “boisterous,” “enthusiastic,” “energized,” “excited,” and “nothing short of tumultuous.”<sup>252</sup> They also often tried to assess audiences’ moods, which they described ranging from “frantic knots of enthusiasm” and ecstasy to “nervous exhaustion.”<sup>253</sup> Calloway’s theater audiences were known to be so vocal that a reviewer in Boston joked after a 1943 performance at RKO’s Boston Theater that, “for once the band made as much noise as the audience.”<sup>254</sup> One reviewer in 1936 even mentioned that he engaged with Calloway’s music.<sup>255</sup> It was Calloway’s tendency for “wild, carefree, riotous, and engaging” entertainment that lacked restraint and disregarded the “rules and regulations [of theaters]” that accounts for “the largeness of his popularity with the rank and file of cinema addicts who look upon his presence as a real event.”<sup>256</sup> In 1943, the *Chicago Defender* noted that Calloway’s theater tours had become a “national institution not only with the millions of Calloway fans but with the theater managers” who could expect the “utmost in showmanship.”<sup>257</sup> It is this “wild, carefree, riotous, and engaging” entertainment that lacked restraint and disregarded the “rules



and regulations [of theaters],” one reviewer wrote, that accounts for “the largeness of his popularity with the rank and file of cinema addicts who look upon his presence as a real event.”<sup>258</sup>

Though only a few artists (who were also among the most popular in theaters) regularly incited jazz spectatorship in these venues, I would argue they have added significance in the history of racialized politics of theater-going. By altering behavioral expectations, some evidence suggests that they further impacted racial relationships and barriers. Calloway’s engagement with audiences in the South also affected another racial barrier. Insofar as segregation intended to foster the illusion that white patrons could enjoy entertainment in isolation from non-whites, even as the theater reaped the financial benefits of African American admission, architectural segregation assumed and relied on the norms of theatrical silence. Without it, white audiences would have an auditory reminder of those in the “roost roast,” even if they faced toward the stage the architecture prohibited their view. Like any other venue, however, Calloway disrupted these norms. Reviews of his first show in Dallas explicitly mention the bi-racial audiences that joined him to sing: “warmed by his reception, which apparently did not draw the color line, Cab proposed that the huge audience bathe their spirits in ‘hi-de-ho’ as he sang ‘Minnie the Moocher.’ The crowd answered back in the new jazz cries of the day.”<sup>259</sup> Returning Calloway’s song not only functioned as a constant reminder of usually silent and otherwise invisible patrons in the balcony, but also as a unifying (and somewhat spiritual in the eyes of the reviewer) act between races which thousands of dollars of architecture and constant social policing attempted to keep delineated and hierarchical.<sup>260</sup>

Evidence also suggests that the impact of jazz spectatorship were further intensified in Northern theaters where audiences sat in greater proximity. Despite being able architecturally to

sit where they wanted, patrons of color in Northern movie theaters still faced similar racist social policing to those in the Jim Crow South. The norms of theatrical silence and respectability applied to all northern patrons (as they did in all theaters across the United States), but spectators of color faced even greater social constraints and policing, what is commonly called behavioral segregation. People of color had to be especially careful not to appear as though they were starting a commotion or breaking theater policy, and they had to maintain a respectful appearance and attitude toward white patrons. Otherwise they could face expulsion. Even if African Americans upheld these regulations, white patrons sometimes avoided sitting near them. These racialized social pressures meant that for African Americans attending a variety palace, or any primarily white motion picture theater, was an isolated activity in which patrons of color did not enjoy the same access to space or social behavior as white audiences. Thus, even without seating-based segregation, these social pressures minimized racial inter-socialization of movie going.<sup>261</sup>

Integrating swing into theaters loosened these tense social and racial restraints, however. Jazz historians and contemporaneous commentators have noted that in other venues, especially nightclubs when segregation was not price-induced or illegally-enforced, hot jazz sanctioned a closer physical proximity and more casual social relations between white and black patrons. A young Malcolm Little, the future Malcolm X, recalled dancing uninhibited with white women at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom and Boston's Roseland State Ballroom during the 1940s.<sup>262</sup> Though such explicit jazz-fueled interracial intimacy does not appear common, dance-inspired proximity was. Put simply *dancing* to jazz music did not face the same social restrictions as *sitting*. As poet Langston Hughes noted in his 1944 article about jazz clubs and movie theaters: "white and colored people dance all over the same dance-floor there, and jitterbug and bump all up against

each other, and nobody seems to mind it in the least.”<sup>263</sup> While commingled dancing in theaters was undoubtedly not common because the architecture of theaters (seats, aisles, orchestra pit, etc.) prevented any fully developed, centralized dancing which allowed patrons to circulate, what jazz spectatorship in theaters shares with those accounts in other venues is that it weakened the behavioral segregation that restrained patrons of color. In this way, Calloway and the few other bandleaders that regularly encouraged dancing sanctioned African Americans to “act out,” the same as all other patrons in the space.

A 1938 article in the Atlanta Daily World about a Goodman performance at the Paramount Theater includes the most explicit discussion of the racial implications of this spectatorship.

‘Slap-happy about the whole thing’ about describes the [racially] mixed audience that began gathering as early as 5 a.m. to hear Benny Goodman swing out at New York’s Paramount Theater last Wednesday (Jan 26). The audience began by drawing out the commentator's voice during the news reel [*sic*] with cries of ‘We want Benny! We want Benny!’ And when the Clarinet King himself appeared in person at 10 a.m. which to the veteran 52nd-streeter is the middle of the night they went officially mad. They trucked, apple-jacked, pecked, and bore down the aisle, singly and in couples, white and colored and the party reached the climax when the ‘King of Swing’ began ‘Bei Mir Bist Du Schon’ and the dancers began to invade the stage, forcing Benny back to the band platform. In vain the ushers tried to bag the slap-happy steppers, but they were beyond containing, and Benny was unable to announce the numbers—he just played. The craze was still raging after Benny had faded into nowhere, and two squirts were still muggin’ in the aisle during the picture and had to be ejected”<sup>264</sup>

The author ended the article by reflecting on how the multiracial audience changed behavioral politics of the theater, “Those folks were really having their kicks, but I cannot help being happy about it’s [*sic*] being a mixed audience because if those had been just sepias I can see the headlines. Since it was cosmopolitan, however, it was quite all right [*sic*] and rather amusing.”<sup>265</sup> In this example, Goodman’s music did more than incite delinquent, jazz spectatorship. It also unified African Americans and white patrons in dance against many of the norms of theatrical

entertainment, including the behavioral segregation endured by patrons of color. It also unified them not only against the theater's silence and stasis in general, but during both the short and feature cinematic program--another indication about just how little the film program usually mattered in these contexts. It is clear, however, that swing did not alleviate racial restrictions as much as it did tie the threshold of acceptable behavior to white audience members. Photographic evidence of Goodman's shows in particular corroborate these claims, showing African American patrons skirting theatrical norms as much as white patrons. Even if Goodman's performance is an extreme case, Calloway's performances went beyond dance and added vocals. In this way, Calloway's engaged spectatorship likewise regularly dispelled the theater's behavioral segregation by encouraging the entire audience to sing, belting their 'hi-de-hi's' and their "ho-de-hoes' together in unison.

#### *Marketing Call-and-Response as Racial Tourism*

As I have just demonstrated and argued, variety palace attendance, especially with live performance and above all when featuring jazz bands, was a multi-racial experience, one that, especially for Calloway and a few other artists that engaged audiences had racially progressive effects, especially regarding the politics of racialized space and behavior. My account counters claims that the king of hi-de-ho was mainly popular with white audiences; an assumption that has led some scholars to claim that Calloway's "hi-de-ho" was "culturally bankrupt," meaningless, or derogatory, as it only further played into black stereotypes for the enjoyment of a largely white audience.<sup>266</sup>

However, like the racial politics in the sex and drugs innuendo-laden lyrics of Calloway's Harlem songs, the cultural effects of his call-and-response technique—his aural signature and the

center of his celebrity image — are ambivalent. While the technique itself and Calloway's stardom fostered progressive, multi-racial experiences which troubled racial delineation, the same cannot be said about its marketing.<sup>267</sup> The reviews of white critics and the marketing of Calloway's own management team spun and sold his jazz spectatorship as a form of slumming marketed as white tourism, which variety palaces brought to their live, mass audience who did not or could not patronize clubs and other such venues. While this certainly is not an accurate reflection of the undoubtedly diverse motivations patrons had to attend his shows and experiences they had while they were there, commentators at the time regularly portrayed Calloway's "hi-de-ho" as providing a risqué, yet amusing experience of primitive and/or slave-era blackness, which simultaneously exoticized Calloway and devalued his skills as a performer.

To be clear, the dominant discourse around swing in general during the 1930s and 1940s was that it derived from a "primitive," animalistic black culture, even when performed by white artists. Goodman was often praised for satisfying his "alligators" [one of the many names for young jazz fans] appetite for that "indefinable, primitive and captivating type of alleged music called 'swing,'" and that Goodman had helped audiences get "bitten by a swing bug. And what a bug it is stinging white man and black man alike."<sup>268</sup> With African American bandleaders, however, these primitive metaphors often emphasized violence and uncontrollability, with Calloway portrayed as the most extreme among them. When comparing Ellington to Calloway, one reviewer wrote: "If Mr. Ellington's music is a syncopation of savage rhythms, it is much more musical than Mr. Calloway's. But, have no fear; we, as we have said before, more than enjoy Mr. Calloway's music. For the playing of this orchestra is savage enough to satisfy our most aboriginal instincts. And even though it often sounds as if it will lift the roof from the auditorium in which they are playing... there is something in it which reminds one of a nocturnal

jamboree in darkest Africa.”<sup>269</sup> Calloway’s music is described as a primitive fantasy that surpasses that of other black artists. However, his effect on audiences is described in far more violent terms. One example includes a reviewer who called his effects on spectators the same as “throwing a bomb in the audience.”<sup>270</sup> Critics, describing the singing and dancing audiences, converted the biting “swing bug” analogy into far more destructive plagues and germs. As one explained in 1938 at the Earle Theater (Washington, Warner) ““That Calloway infection is rife at the Earle this week and should be epidemic throughout the town this week. Because Cab is plumb busting, not only with zap-u-zaz and hi-de-ho germs, but has a new microbe, the ‘Whoo-op-boo-om.’”<sup>271</sup>

The constant associations of swing music and jazz spectatorship as a kind of black danger or disease was just one part of the marketed fascination and desire to attend one of these performances. The most common explicitly racialized discourse attached to Calloway was a combination of the “magical negro” and “noble savage” tropes. Calloway was often exoticized as a “voodoo priest” or some variation thereof (“medicine man of music,” “sorcerer of skat”) whose “black magic” transformed audiences into “African aborigines” whose dancing was a “war dance” and their singing “voodoo rites.”<sup>272</sup> While this idea emanated from the concept of swing as a “primitive” art form, the image of Calloway as a mystical being turning his spectators into stand-in African aboriginals continued to circulate in part because his manager included it as a suggested promotion tactic in the press kit given to theaters and other venues.<sup>273</sup> This particular iteration of the primitivist spectacle (all of which dehistoricize and devalue the skills and innovations of black musicians) attempted to reconcile the unique hierarchized racial power dynamic that Calloway’s jazz spectatorship created. Unlike Goodman, Calloway’s audience were not primarily adolescents and thus his ostensible “control over” audiences could not be explained

away as a result of his actions over impressionable minds. While Goodman's audiences reacted to his music by dancing spontaneously, Calloway actively encouraged and modeled both the singing and the dancing of his audience. Thus Calloway's jazz spectatorship was the result of an orchestrated engagement with a participating audience, rather than simply their individual reactions to his music. In theaters and other venues he was both a leader and a role model, but this relationship was often marketed as an experience in which attendees could, for a couple hours, experience the dangers of racial mixing and connect to so-called primitive black expression both physically and vocally, only to have the fantasy (both of their supposed embodiment and their inverse power relationship with Calloway) immediately dissipate.

A less frequent discursive iteration of Calloway's jazz spectatorship sold his performances as a slave experience. Amazed by the sold-out audience that flowed out into the aisles and even sat on the balcony steps of a theater in Kansas City, one reviewer in wrote:

Perhaps a professor of psychology could explain the reactions that cause 2,000 white persons to crowd into a theater on a broiling hot day and raise their voices in a chant of Hi-de-hi-de-hi! Ho-de-ho-de-ho! Skinny-we-e-we-de-we-de! As a dapper young Negro bandmaster leads them from the stage in that intelligent refrain. That was what happened at the Mainstreet theater yesterday afternoon when Cab Calloway and his orchestra opened at the house. The audience was as much fun to watch as the musicians[...]When Calloway and his men appeared, the whistles and cheers from the crowd sounded more apropos of a ball game than a theatrical performance. And when he suggested that the spectators sing 'Minnie the Moocher' with him they obeyed.<sup>274</sup>

Of course, the reviewer implicitly answers his own opening rhetorical question by describing the audience reactions--both their boisterousness and their willingness to be controlled by a black man--as playfully irrational and unintelligent and could not be explained or justified by human psychology. By including "bandmaster," a less common version of usual "bandleader," the reviewer also insinuates the relationship between Calloway and his audience resembles that of a racially reversed slave owner, with the audience obeying their leader. While Calloway is

positioned as the empowering role of “the master” in both the primitive and slave narratives, in the latter it is done so ironically and the former it is used to dismiss his skills and popularity and credit it to a particularly black and unexplainable connection to pre-modern mysticism.

### *Jazz Spectatorship and Cinematic Reception*

Despite the regular racist discourse that even his management encouraged, positioning jazz spectatorship as a form of interactive white tourism, another fairly common discourse around Calloway’s performances in variety palaces neither explicitly racialized nor contained negative connotations. Rather, Calloway also offered audiences an affective euphoria. After a show at the Kansas City Mainstreet Theater in 1935, another reviewer wrote,

Cab Calloway is packing them in at the Mainstreet theater this week. Whether it is 90 in the shade or 169 below, he keeps them broiling![...] Cab is like a ray of sunshine after nights of storm. He makes everybody happy! The audience would sing a lullaby just as lustily as they do ‘Minnie the Moocher’ if Cab would divert, but why divert when they’re getting what they want—the classics of hi de ho with Cab Calloway waving the baton and doing the hi-ing.<sup>275</sup>

The reasons reviewers (and audiences) derived pleasure from Calloway’s performances was not always clear, it could have been the racial tourism, Calloway’s humor, ecstatic vocals and physical release of singing and dancing, the opportunity to see and meet one of their favorite celebrities or perhaps a combination, but its effect on movie-theater audiences should not be underestimated.<sup>276</sup> While my concern in this chapter is on the socio-cultural experiences of theatergoing rather than the effects of variety programming and live acts on the reception of cinematic texts, my research suggests that Calloway’s effects on audiences could complicate the intended emotional experiences of certain films and film genres.<sup>277</sup>

Reviews in the “Vaudeville” section of trade papers from the 1930s through the 1950s including *Variety* and *Billboard* and local newspaper reviews are unique resources in that, unlike



reviews of individual films, they attempt to account for the whole theatrical experience in a given theater.<sup>278</sup> For each program, critics reviewed each of the acts and the screened films together in the same article, judging them individually as well as collectively. They would also attribute which act or film attracted the majority of the crowd, presumably based on observing the audience's reactions. Critics might have consulted with theater managers who were supposed to observe and poll audience members' opinions on performers and films, and report them to the studio offices to share with other managers.<sup>279</sup> What is most obvious from these reviews is the extent to which feature films were decentered as the main attraction in variety palaces, though this should be unsurprising given they were generally inexpensive "B" films. Feature films are rarely credited as drawing or interesting either the crowd or the reviewer, and are usually only mentioned in a single sentence or sometimes not at all. As a review for Calloway's 1933 performance at the Hippodrome Theater (Cleveland, Warner Bros.), "The picture is *Tomorrow at Seven* and will be reviewed tomorrow, as if that matters with Calloway there!"<sup>280</sup>

Occasionally, however, reviews in the trade press and local newspapers indicate the collective effects created by variety programming that film historians often mention but can rarely trace.<sup>281</sup> One such example is a review of a program during the week of November 18, 1932, at the Capitol Theater in Manhattan (Loew's), pairing Calloway with *Faithless* (1932).<sup>282</sup> Similar to the review in *The New York Times* and *The Film Daily*, *Variety's* vaudeville reviewer at the Capitol Theater also found *Faithless* unnecessarily depressing.<sup>283</sup> However, he credits Calloway and his band for mitigating the film's melancholic effects: "the Calloway group was set luckily for the show as a whole, its jazzy music and comedy interludes being just the thing to redeem the sometimes depressing effect of the screen feature." Reception, however, is always a subjective experience since what affects audiences usually cannot be definitively traced or

known. The vaudeville reviewer for *Billboard*, Sidney Harris, attended the exact same performance (Friday evening) and made no connection between the stage show and the feature film.<sup>284</sup>

### *Jazz Spectatorship and Swing's Cross-Generational Appeal*

Focusing on the differences in marketing and critical discourse between coverage of Calloway and other performers who incited jazz spectatorship in theaters also suggests another defining feature of theater audiences: attending swing in theaters was not simply a youth phenomenon. In the only other essay on big bands in movie theaters in media studies scholarship, Tim Snelson argues that growing prevalence of live bands performances in movie theaters indicates Hollywood shifted away from its balanced program focused on a mass, undifferentiated audience to one more centered on the growing youth market.<sup>285</sup> Snelson's claim and his primary (though not sole) focus on Goodman's career in theaters adheres well to dominant narratives of swing history. When jazz historians use Goodman's "riot" at the Paramount theater during the mid-1930s as one of the key moments in the commercial mainstream rise of swing—a style of music already developed by African American artists—they mean that he popularized it by primarily appealing to adolescents and young adults. As Lewis Erenberg notes, Goodman's "raucous engagement at Broadway's Paramount Theater set the tone for the intense youth culture that grew up around swing," creating what he calls a "mass youth audience" which positioned swing in the center of American culture.<sup>286</sup>

While jazz musicians like Goodman appealed to youth, that is hardly evidence of widespread shift in Hollywood's mass market programming strategies. Such an argument ignores the 150 to 200 other big bands that toured theaters during the 1930s and 1940s, many of whose

promotional materials or musical styles were not catered to youth. “Sweet” bands and “novelty” bands continued to tour during this period, whose “soft,” “flowery” and/or “gimmicky” music and personas differed greatly from swing and targeted different audiences. For example, Paul Whiteman redesigned his orchestra and musical ensemble in 1942 to appeal to children and their families, even adding Donald Duck “in-person” to the bill as he toured theaters.<sup>287</sup> This argument also ignores the other acts on variety bills, including a Hollywood-made feature, which could target other demographics and/or aim for a broader mass appeal, even if the swing band was the main attraction. In short, even if some bands appealed directly to the preferences of a youth market, theater managers had other options to “balance” the program with facets appealing to a wider range of audiences.

More to the point, not all swing bands were primarily popular with or targeted themselves to the burgeoning youth market. Calloway is one example. Though he did perform at college campuses early in his career, he stopped doing so during the mainstream swing era. Nor did Calloway ever place in *Billboard's* “Annual College Poll” for the “Collegiate Choice of Orchestra” which acted as a litmus test for bands’ popularity with the mass youth market and on which Goodman and James regularly topped or placed.<sup>288</sup> Instead, as Calloway biographer Alyn Shipton (among others) corroborates, his core popularity was a racially-mixed, multi-generational audience, and not the youth market in which Goodman and others heavily invested, and that he catered to through his non-essentialist celebrity persona, music, and marketing strategies.<sup>289</sup>

The different audiences of these three bandleaders affected the dominant discourse around jazz spectatorship in variety palaces, with Goodman and James’s catering specifically to youth audiences leading to the return of the “gallery gods,” a term from vaudeville and silent era

theaters used to delineate the supposedly rowdy lower class audience sitting in comparatively inexpensive balcony seats from the upper-middle class audiences sitting near the front of the theaters. Unlike the silent era, though, audiences and spectatorship were divided primarily by age rather than class. Reviewers, critics, and bandleaders alike explained away “dancing in the aisles” not as a common experience shared among age groups, but one that segmented young adults who lacked social training. In 1938, when Tommy Dorsey was asked by a concerned reporter, “what about the devotees who are beginning to dance in the aisles of theaters from coast to coast?,” the bandleader reportedly dismissed it as a carefree lack of self-control: “the emphasis for swing’s present rise to popularity on the eagerness with which the high school and college group have welcomed it. Not being restrained itself, youth likes a music that sings its own language. That accounts for dancing in the theater aisle for one thing.”<sup>290</sup> Goodman echoed Dorsey when asked the same question in 1942: “It is true that our modern music has caused actual riots of acclamation among swing audiences. In theaters young people have jumped up to cavort in the aisles. But that is the way kids their age act under all the circumstances.”<sup>291</sup>

Photographs of Goodman and James’s spectators that circulated in newspapers further reinforced swing’s age-driven appeal. A photograph of James’s audience features a sea of young “hep cats” in such tightly packed quarters that one wonders how they would have danced at all. Despite many references to “riots,” images of Goodman’s dancing spectators that accompanied articles about the bandleader in the late 1930s are fairly benign. Unlike other audience photographs, these resemble poorly staged stunts in that they only feature a single young couple dancing politely in the main-floor aisle. The audiences are also noticeably young, but they do not seem at all frenzied by the music. Instead, most remain seated and many of them (especially the few that stand) stare toward the camera, as if far more entranced by photography than the music.

Though these images visually affirm Goodman and James's primarily youthful audiences, they also feature a few stolid adults in these likely staged photo-ops. In the photo of Goodman, a middle-aged couple sits smiling at the dancing couple, and in the one of James, a lone adult male wades through the crowd apathetically, baring a noticeable frown. In both textual and visual discourse, then, Goodman and James's swing music created jazz spectators only out of younger people, who would presumably come to realize and acknowledge the norms of theater-going. This discourse continued even after the decline of big band jazz. Abel Green and Joe Laurie Jr.'s 1951 history of entertainment, *Show Biz: From Vaude to Video*, even claims that many of the formerly crazed young fans of jazz -- who were now full adults -- were embarrassed of their actions.<sup>292</sup>

In contrast, Calloway's excited spectators did not produce a discourse of the "gallery gods." My research into reviews in both local papers and in national trade press, including *Variety* and *Billboard*, has not revealed any distinctions between audiences across race, class, gender, or age. Instead dancing and singing audiences are usually described in broad, collective, and sometimes racist terms (e.g. the audience, crowd, theater-goers, mob, savages) or quantified in the hundreds or even thousands. The closest to any delineation found that I have discovered (in fact the only attempt found at all), also reaffirms Calloway's cross-demographic popularity, however reluctant the writer seems to admit it. In 1943, during the height of swing's popularity with youth audiences, a reviewer of Calloway's show at the RKO Theater in Boston wrote:

To judge by the cries of mad enthusiasm when Mr. Calloway makes his appearance on the stage with his beloved "Minnie the Moocher" number, it is the dark-skinned gentleman[...]who attracts the crowds. Mr. Calloway has his own particular type of musical entertainment. The younger generation sways like African aborigines when Calloway's band gets into action. The youngsters gesticulate as if they were in a war dance; they mutter strange sounds as if indulging in voodoo rites. And when Mr. Calloway comes on the stage in a startling white zoot suit there are roars of applause and appreciation. He is the idol of the zoot suiters, as well as some of the young in better

brought-up families. To tell the truth, there are plenty of adults who [also] get thrills of delight.”<sup>293</sup>

Though the reviewer originally tries to delineate Calloway’s swing audience by the usual and fashionable age-based explanation, the writer ends up including a far more diverse population. By the early 1940s, “zoot suiters” became shorthand for African American, Latinx, and Filipino men (and sometimes women), who adorned the suit popularized by Calloway as a symbol of ethnic and racial pride.<sup>294</sup> By those in “better families” the reviewer also appears to mean middle and upper class (presumably white) audiences enjoying the show. Lastly, the reviewer seems almost surprised to admit that adults get into the performance. In short, the delineation the reviewer tries to make on the basis of age and audience action falls apart, suggesting once again that Calloway was thus distinguished from his crowd inciting contemporaries by his cross-generational audiences.

## **Conclusion**

I have demonstrated that continued live performance practices, in this case jazz, in movie theaters had powerful effects in shaping patterns of onstage programming and attendance. It even sometimes provided alternative, more engaged spectatorship, which temporarily skirted the norms and policies that segregated viewership and unequally policed the actions of people of color. Big bands’ nearly incomparable drawing power in these prestigious venues also helped promote a center-stage black stardom which existed only on the margins of Hollywood films. While movie theaters offered largely progressive affordances for black stars, the focus on Calloway demonstrates that these venues still existed within and could further extend racist stereotypes extenuated largely through reviews and marketing.

How applicable these findings are outside the Swing and Studio eras requires further research. Calloway's career performing in movie theaters ended at the same time as his stardom faded, with his last live appearance taking place at Chicago's Regal Theater in October 1951. Scholars and Calloway himself attributed his fall from the mainstream to the declining popularity of big band swing, which began waning around 1948 with a sudden drop in the early 1950s.<sup>295</sup> Post war audiences increasingly preferred a more streamlined form of rhythm and blues featuring smaller bands deemphasizing brass instruments and championing vocal talents, most notably encapsulated by performers like Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, and Ella Fitzgerald. Calloway's bookings in movie theaters further corroborate this timeline. After booking eight weeks of appearances in theaters during 1948 and 1949, Calloway only performed for one week in such venues during 1950 and three times in 1951, never returning after and only appearing a couple times per year in night clubs during the 1950s. The same is true for Goodman, though he stopped performing in movie theaters even earlier, with a final appearance at the Roxy Theater (Independent, New York City) on October 12, 1949.

While the end of the big band era marked the end of Calloway and Goodman's performances and their specific emphasis on audience engagement in movie theaters, it did not mark the end of live bands there or their promotion of African American stars for the purpose of attracting multi-racial audiences. Chicago's Tivoli Theater, one of the last theaters in the city to program live acts alongside movies, primarily booked black jazz-style performers from 1959 to 1962.<sup>296</sup> Headliners included former swing standouts Count Basie and Duke Ellington, as well as performers who had found newfound or renewed fame in the changing tastes, including Pearl Bailey, Louis Jordan, Brook Benton, Fats Domino, Eartha Kitt, Della Reese, and Dinah Washington. The Tivoli marketed the acts both in the *Chicago Defender* and the University of

Chicago newspaper, suggesting that they aimed to attract both affluent white college music fans and African American around Chicago.<sup>297</sup> Analyzing the significance of the Tivoli's strategy in the context of Chicago's increasing suburbanization and white flight has to wait. However, if the Swing-era is any indication, focusing on the practices of booking, marketing, and reviewing live performance in movie theaters, will help reveal the rich and complex relationships between variety palaces, jazz, and multi-racial audiences occurring in this new period of musical taste, black stardom, and the racial politics of space and behavior.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Examples from notable films include: *The Cotton Club* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1984), *Round Midnight* (Bertrand Tavernier, 1986), and *Kansas City* (Robert Altman, 1996). All but one of the twenty-five films in which Calloway appeared before 1950 show him in nightclubs or what appears to be a nightclub (see note 2).

<sup>2</sup> Only one of Calloway's films was shot in a movie theater. Warner Bros. shot the footage for the short film *An All Colored Vaudeville Show* (1935) at their flagship Broadway Theater, the Stand Theater. While Warner Bros. cut Calloway from the film, they later inserted his footage in another short, *Dixieland Jamboree*, released in 1946. The composition and lack of long shots do not make the variety palace location apparent.

<sup>3</sup> "Variety Bills" Database (appendix).

<sup>4</sup> The only film content that sometimes preceded live performances were newsreels. For example, the Capitol Theater in Manhattan began its program from 1932 to 1933 by showing the latest reel of *Hearst Metrotone News*. Stage Show Collection, Box 1, Capitol Stage Shows, Theater Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> The average number of acts on a program ranged from 3 to 5 during the 1930s-1950s.

<sup>6</sup> Frank H. Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1938), 120-4; Ned Williams, "Mills Artists, Inc., Irving Mills, President, Presents Cab Calloway and His Cotton Club Orchestra: His Hi De Highness of Ho De Ho," (ca. 1934), n.p. [hereafter Calloway Press Manual], Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.



<sup>7</sup> “Variety Bills” Database (appendix). In 1944, theaters reported 1102 bills featuring big bands. Most of these bands performed four times per day, for seven days. The average seating capacity of a variety palace showing live performance was 2332 in 1939, according to *The Film Daily Yearbook*. This estimate is thus based on the following calculation: 1102\*4\*7\*2332. This is certainly an overestimate, which assumes for the sake of argument that every show reached capacity and that every band performed for seven days at every theater. Though they were less common, bands did perform for one night only shows at theaters.

<sup>8</sup> Examples include: Kristin A McGee, *Some Liked It Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928-1959* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2009); Burton William Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz Music, Race and Culture in Urban America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); David W Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Jeff Sultanof, *Experiencing Big Band Jazz: A Listener’s Companion* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); Frank Driggs, Harris Lewine, and Paul Bacon, *Black Beauty, White Heat. A Pictorial History of Classic Jazz: 1920-1950* (New-York: William Morrow & Co, 1982).

<sup>9</sup> I have found no exception to the use of the term “theater” in the contemporaneous trade press, advertisements, correspondence, and memoirs, or in music-related scholarship, for anything other than a theater that played bands and movies on the same bill. For some exceptions of scholarship which explicitly mention watching movies and live bands in the same performance see, Tim Snelson, “‘They’ll Be Dancing in the Aisles!’: Youth Audiences, Cinema Exhibition and the Mid-1930s Swing Boom,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 37, no. 3 (2017): 455–74; George T. Simon, *The Big Bands* (New York: Schirmer, 1968), 3-6; Alyn Shipton, *Hi-de-Ho: The Life of Cab Calloway* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 148.

<sup>10</sup> Harry Kalcheim, “Bands are Box-Office in Theaters” *Billboard Band Yearbook*, September 26, 1942, 79.

<sup>11</sup> “Vaude-Night Clubs: Stages for Brandts,” *Variety*, March 15, 1939, 43; Joe Schoenfeld, “It’s Bandfilms--Not Vaudeville,” *Variety*, September 12, 1942, 145; “House Review: Paramount, N.Y.,” *Variety*, October 20, 1948, 47. The danger of relying on shorthand “theater” for band performances is that it completely disregards the rest of the acts on the bills, and it incorrectly suggests that bands were the only live act to perform on the bill. This did happen, but was an exception to the more normal programs which featured bands alongside other, often non-celebrity acts. In turn, even in this chapter focusing on the industry of bands appearing in movie theaters I continue to use “vaudefilm” or “live performance” to refer to these performances.

<sup>12</sup> To make this claim, I keyword searched through a list of periodicals, including: *Billboard*, *Boxoffice*, *Metronome*, *Downbeat*. I also searched major historical newspapers in the United States including, the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, among others.

<sup>13</sup> Examples from media studies include: Snelson, “‘They’ll Be Dancing in the Aisles!’” Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley:

University of California Press, 1995), 27; Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 72-3; Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: BFI, 2008), 75-6.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis A Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Duke University Press, 2002); Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996), 17-49; Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz Music, Race and Culture in Urban America*. This was most evident in the increasing prevalence of racially intermixed bands throughout the late 1930s and 1940s.

<sup>15</sup> Leo Walker, *The Big Band Almanac* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), 244; Al Lino, "Current Love Ballads Top Musical List of Favorites," *Tampa Bay Times*, June 11, 1944, 39.

<sup>16</sup> Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 28, 154; "Joseph W. Labine, "This Thing Called Swing," *Magna Times* (Magna, Utah), March 11, 1938, 7; Helen Welshimer, "Of Thee I Swing - Our New National Anthem," *The Times* (Shreveport, Louisiana), March 13, 1938, 61; Morris Orodener, "Promoting the Personal Appearance," *Billboard Big Band Yearbook 1943*, 126. Many of the images of big band and their audiences come from the Frank Driggs Collection, which was donated to Jazz at Lincoln Center (part of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts) in 2013. The claim is made from comparing photographs of bands to photographs of other non-band live acts from two collections: The Stage Show Collection, the Theater Historical Society; and Leo Morgan Paramount Publix and Strand Theater Materials, the Billy Rose Division, New York Public Library.

<sup>17</sup> In the future, I would like to include oral histories of jazz from performers and attendees, but many of the archives holding this information were closed during my research because of the Covid-19 epidemic.

<sup>18</sup> Shipton, 60.

<sup>19</sup> Benny Goodman's "riot"-causing performances at the Paramount Theater in 1937 and 1938 are now used by scholars as one of the markers for the mainstream popularity of hot jazz and the beginning of the "Swing Era." Erenberg, 4; James Lincoln Collier, *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 190.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the norms of theater spectatorship see, Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 7, 23-4.

<sup>21</sup> Nate Sloan, "Constructing Cab Calloway Publicity, Race, and Performance in 1930s Harlem Jazz," *The Journal of Musicology* 36, no. 3 (2019): 371.

<sup>22</sup> Sloan, 371; Erenberg, xi, 8-10, 95-97; Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington and Anthony Braxton* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 77-118; Lisa Barg, "National Voices/Modernist Histories: Race, Performance, and Remembrance in American Music, 1927-1943" (Ph.D. diss., SUNY Stony Brook, 2001), 118-65; Kimberly Hannon Teal, "Beyond the Cotton Club: The Persistence of

Duke Ellington's Jungle Style," *Jazz Perspectives* 6 (2012): 123–49; and Jeffrey Magee, "Ellington's Afro-Modernist Vision in the 1920s," in *The Cambridge Companion to Duke Ellington*, ed. Edward Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 91.

<sup>23</sup> Kathy Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 75; Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film*, 224. For an exception to this narrative see, Samuel Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 117. For a critical discussion of this usual narrative see, Scott DeVeaux "Constructing the Jazz Tradition," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 483–512.

<sup>24</sup> Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 341; George T. Simon, *The Big Bands* (New York: Schirmer, 1968), 110.

<sup>25</sup> My use of the term "slumming" is not to dismiss or delegitimize white interest in black culture. My claims here relate only to the marketing of Calloway's shows, and is not a statement on the likely countless reasons white audiences sought out the star and his performances.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Tucker and Travis A. Jackson, "Jazz," in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Howard Spring, "Swing," in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Mary Carbine, "'The Finest Outside the Loop': Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905–1928," in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 236-7; Knight, "Star Dances," 388-90.

<sup>27</sup> Tucker and Jackson; Jeff Sultanof, *Experiencing Big Band Jazz: A Listener's Companion* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 1-11.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Abel, *Motor City Movie Culture, 1916-1925*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 98, 111-8; Carbine, "Finest Outside the Loop."

<sup>29</sup> "Bands and Vaudeville," *Variety*, October 1, 1924, 30.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* Bidding wars on name jazz bands resulted in average salaries rising 143%, from an already sizable \$1,100 to \$2,700 (\$16,919 to \$41,528 in 2021).

<sup>31</sup> Shipton, 36; Carbine, 246; Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 24-9.

<sup>32</sup> Carbine, 246; Abel, *Motor City Movies*, 84-125; Simon, *The Big Bands*. White audiences did patronize black jazz performers in night clubs during the 1920s. The preferences and unofficial policies of theaters with white audiences likely explains why black performers did not appear in theaters with primary white audiences. In addition to general racism, Carbine suspects that white access to black jazz in night clubs adequately appeased the small desire of white patrons for black bands in the 1920s, thus booking them was not necessitating them in movie theaters.

<sup>33</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures* 155-63.

<sup>34</sup> Cab Calloway and Bryant Rollins, *Of Minnie the Moocher and Me* (New York: Crowell, 1976), 65.

<sup>35</sup> “Paul Ash, 67, Theater Band Pioneer, Dies: Teen-Agers' Idol in Jazz Era,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 14, 1958, B8.

<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the people that influenced Calloway’s call and response techniques see Shipton, 19-27.

<sup>37</sup> Carbine, 246; Calloway and Rollins, 54.

<sup>38</sup> Carbine, 249-50; Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 183; Nat Shapiro and Nat Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya: The Story of Jazz by the Men Who Made It* (New York: Rinehart, 1955), 256.

<sup>39</sup> Carbine, 249-56

<sup>40</sup> “Colored Acts Are in Vogue; Cut Flesh Budgets Help 'Em,” *Variety*, January 23, 1932, 3, 55.

<sup>41</sup> Tucker and Jackson; Quoted in: Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (London: W.W. Norton, 2010), 422.

<sup>42</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tales of the Jazz Age* (New York: C. Scribner’s sons, 1922).

<sup>43</sup> Sammond, 170-86; Erenberg, 207-8. For an explicit example from the period see, “Batch of Smiles,” *Daily Boston Globe*, May 21, 1936, 29.

<sup>44</sup> Erenberg, 5.

<sup>45</sup> “Colored Acts Are in Vogue; Cut Flesh Budgets Help 'Em,” *Billboard*, January 23, 1932, 55.

<sup>46</sup> Erenberg, 27.

<sup>47</sup> Steven J Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 180-94; Jeffrey Klenotic, “‘Four Hours of Hootin’ and Hollerin’” Moviegoing and Everyday Life Outside the Movie Palace,” in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Robert C Allen, Richard Maltby, and Melvyn Stokes (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008), 130-2. To be clear, I am not claiming that cinema itself was a medium of cultural prestige (like legitimate theater) during the 1920s, 1930s or 1940s. Rather, I am talking specifically about the venue of the variety palaces. Movies themselves were still seen at this time as mass, sometimes crude popular culture. See Peter Decherney, *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.) Variety palaces however tried to blur class lines and distinctions between high and lowbrow by placing movies in venues that surpassed even legitimate theaters with amenities and high-quality entertainment.

<sup>48</sup> Harvey G Cohen, *Duke Ellington’s America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 59.

<sup>49</sup> Erenberg, 116.

<sup>50</sup> John Bird, *Percy Grainger* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 239-40. Decius referred to German monk and hymn-writer Nikolaus Decius.

- <sup>51</sup> “Sixty Years,” *Metronome*, October 1943, 11; H. G Cohen, “Duke Ellington and Black, Brown, and Beige: The Composer as Historian at Carnegie Hall,” *American Quarterly* 56(2004), 1009.
- <sup>52</sup> Shipton, 46-9.
- <sup>53</sup> For a similar argument not focusing on variety palaces see, Erenberg, 101.
- <sup>54</sup> Shipton, 46-9.
- <sup>55</sup> “Signs of Band Comeback But Limited to those with Reprs,” *Billboard*, October 11, 1930, 16.
- <sup>56</sup> “Jefferson, New York,” *Billboard*, August 23, 1930, 18.
- <sup>57</sup> “New Acts,” *Variety*, August 13, 1930, 48; “Vaudeville. Notes,” *Billboard*, August 30, 1930, 20; “Cab Calloway and his Cotton Club Orchestra,” *Billboard*, September 6, 1930, 42; “Albee, B’klyn,” *Variety*, September 17, 1930, 47; “81st Street, New York,” *Billboard*, September 27, 1930, 18; “Hippodrome, N.Y.,” *Variety*, October 1, 1930, 53.
- <sup>58</sup> “Proctor’s 58th St., N.Y.,” *Billboard*, August 30, 1930, 19.
- <sup>59</sup> “Signs of Band Comeback But Limited to those with Reprs,” *Billboard*, October 11, 1930, 16.
- <sup>60</sup> “Jefferson,” *Variety*, November 12, 1930, 52.
- <sup>61</sup> “The Palace, New York,” *Billboard*, October 18, 1930, 18.
- <sup>62</sup> “Loew’s State, New York,” *Billboard*, November 22, 1930, 18; “Osborne, Calloway Bands Booked for Loew Houses,” *Billboard*, November 22, 1930, 49.
- <sup>63</sup> “Paramount, New York,” *Billboard*, May 23, 1931, 19; “Big Name for Publix,” *Billboard*, September 5, 1931, 8.
- <sup>64</sup> Shipton, 111.
- <sup>65</sup> For more information on big band theme songs see, Simon, 63-5.
- <sup>66</sup> Cab Calloway, Bryant Rollins, and John Shearer, *Of Minnie the Moocher and Me* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), 1-2.
- <sup>67</sup> Calloway and his band also performed occasionally in Europe and Canada during the big band era.
- <sup>68</sup> These statistics rely on another database I created, also using data from *Variety*’s “Variety Bills” database, which I call Cab Calloway’s Performances as Reported to *Variety*. *Variety* reported that Calloway and his orchestra performed on five-hundred thirty-six unique bills during this time across all venues, most of which were week-long engagements. It often hard to differentiate week from day engagements, but sometimes *Variety* would mark it. Still weeks were the normal booking lengths, especially for motion picture theaters.
- <sup>69</sup> Even Fox reported one their bills featuring Calloway at the Michigan Theater in Detroit, Michigan in 1932, suggesting they viewed him as a significant celebrity whose appearance was worth promoting nationally, rather than only locally as per Fox’s normal approach.
- <sup>70</sup> St. Louis also had a population over 600,000. While Calloway did perform there at least twice, live performance in movie theaters was not as common in general as other comparably large cities. Still, the fact that theaters not usually participating in the circuit temporarily joined to host Calloway is a testament to his celebrity and demand in movie theaters.

<sup>71</sup> Technically the smallest city in which Calloway performed at a movie theater in was Hamilton, New York (population 3,618 in 1940). However, Cedar Rapids is a more representative “small” example for Calloway’s career as a whole. Calloway performed at RKO’s Hamilton Theater very early in his career (week of September 24, 1930) during the end of live performance in small vaudeville theaters. He never again performed in such a small theater.

<sup>72</sup> These numbers are likely underestimates, and are based only on theaters reporting their programs to *Variety*. As discussed with the dissertation’s primary “Variety Bills” database, theaters in the Fox West Coast Theaters rarely reported bills to *Variety*, and neither did theaters in Detroit or Los Angeles. Research into Calloway’s shows reveals that black theaters in Harlem, including the Apollo, and the Lafayette, also rarely reported, as did theaters in the South. One example of an underreporting theater is the Paramount Theater in Amarillo, Texas, which featured Calloway and his band in 1934.

<sup>73</sup> Orpheum Theater Receipts and Expenses, B’hend and Kaufmann Collection, Folder 707, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 1; “Cab Calloway on Apollo Bill,” *The New York Amsterdam*, July 31, 1937, 16; “Where to Go and What to See—Standard,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, January 22, 1931, 7; Maurice Dancer, “Harlem: Night by Night,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 28, 1932; Charles Bowen, “On the Air,” *Afro-American*, October 21, 1933, 18; Ralph Matthews, “Broadway Continues Her Invasion of Dixie,” *Afro-American*, November 04, 1933, 18; “Cab Calloway, His Band and Show in Sensational Debut,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 14, 1942, 20; “Cab Calloway Revue for Apollo Friday,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 23, 1940, 17.

<sup>74</sup> Calloway and Rollins, 147.

<sup>75</sup> “State, N.Y.” *Variety*, January 29, 1935, 18.

<sup>76</sup> Calloway Press Manual, 17.

<sup>77</sup> For another example see, “Detroit Bills Goslin as ‘Public Hero No. 1,’ Aids ‘Chan’-Cab to Wow 36G.” *Variety*, October 16, 1935, 11. In October 1935 in Detroit, Calloway performed on the same bill as baseball star Goose Goslin, who had just won the World Series with the Detroit Tigers the previous week. *Variety* credited Goslin for drawing the crowd, not Calloway.

<sup>78</sup> Calloway and Rollins; Booking Contracts (1936 - 1954), Balaban & Katz Collection, The Theater Historical Society.

<sup>79</sup> “Fair Mobs Upping Loop Grosses Despite Censor, Pix Difficulties; ‘Works’-Cab, Big 37G; ‘Cat’ \$12,000,” *Variety*, July 3, 1934, 0.

<sup>80</sup> Sloan, 383-9.

<sup>81</sup> “Za-zu-zaz” used the titular phrase in lieu of “hi-de-ho.” It still contains all the other elements of his Harlem songs.

<sup>82</sup> Sloan estimates three additional songs fit the description of the “Harlem” group after 1934.

<sup>83</sup> “Earle, Philly,” *Variety*, April 27, 1938, 53.

<sup>84</sup> Jack Mills, “No Creed or Color,” *Variety*, July 7, 1940, 64.

<sup>85</sup> Christofer Robbin, “In Flicker Land,” *Minneapolis Star*, June 5, 1937, 10.

<sup>86</sup> “Paramount, N.Y.,” *Variety*, December 29, 1931, 150.

<sup>87</sup> William F. Lee, *American Big Bands* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2005), xii. Lee estimates that 217 big bands toured nationally between 1930 - 1940. My estimate is likely an underestimate, but is based on all the bills reported to *Variety* in 1944, which clearly designated themselves as a band. Of the years included in my “Variety Bills” database, 1944 has the most band performances, which is why I sampled this year for my estimate.

<sup>88</sup> For an article claiming big bands had become “big business,” which some defined as a billion dollar industry see, Elias E. Sugarman, “Bands—A Billion Dollar Industry,” *Billboard Band Yearbook*, September 26, 1942.

<sup>89</sup> “Bands Find Theaters Less of Goldmine with Less Pull,” *Billboard*, May 12, 1945, 20.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* This rate reportedly included theaters paying for the cost of the acts accompanying the band.

<sup>91</sup> *Booking Contracts (1936 - 1954)*, Balaban & Katz Collection, Theater Historical Society (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). Non-headline acts made considerably less than headliners (regardless of whether the headliner was a band). In Paramount’s Balaban and Katz theaters, non-headline acts earned anywhere from \$50 to \$450 per week, with the average between \$100 - 200.

<sup>92</sup> On November 22, 1935, RKO Palace in Cleveland paid Jimmie Lunceford’s band \$6,000 (\$112,361 in 2019) for one day of work, and that same year paid Paul Whiteman’s band and Vincent Lopez’s band \$7,285 and \$4,000 (\$136,425 and \$74,907 in 2019) respectively for separate two day performances. In June 1938, Calloway performed a single matinee show (theaters usually had four shows per day) at two Paramount-owned Orpheum Theaters, one in Springfield, Illinois and another in Madison, Wisconsin for \$1,000 per show (\$18,195 in 2019). His week-long stints were even more profitable. For example, Calloway and his orchestra headlined week-long bills at the Orpheum Theater in downtown Los Angeles--affiliated by Fox but independently operated—at least three times during the 1940s, once each in 1942, 1944, and 1948. During these first two shows his company made over \$10,738 for the week in 1942 (\$169,013 in 2019), and \$11,071 in 1944 (\$201,443 in 2019). Calloway and his orchestra similarly profited from week-long stints on the Paramount circuit. For example, one week at the Chicago Theater (located in Chicago’s downtown loop) in December 1944 paid \$9,500 (\$138,483 in 2019). One residence in March 1944 and another in February 1945 the Regal Theater (located in the Bronzeville area, the epicenter of African American entertainment in Chicago), paid Calloway \$8,000 per week plus bonuses if the theater earned enough revenue from admissions. If the show reached \$20,000 in receipts, then Calloway earned another \$1,000. Any money earned after reaching \$21,000 was split between the theater and Calloway’s orchestra. All contracts between studio theaters, their circuit bookers, and performers come from three sources: Billing Sheets, Stanley Warner Collection, Warner Bros. Archives, University of Southern California; Orpheum Theatre, Los Angeles -- performers (A-Z) 1935-1949, B’hend and Kauffmann Collection, Folders 138-9, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; *Booking Contracts (1936 - 1954)*, Balaban & Katz Collection, Theater

Historical Society. All Paramount contracts come from the Theater Historical Society. All RKO and Warner Bros. contracts come from the Warner Bros. Archive. All contracts for the Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles come from the Margaret Herrick Library. The Orpheum Theater was affiliated with Fox Films, but was managed independently from 1935 - 1949. Management was especially in charge of booking live acts. Usually flat fees were negotiated in round dollars. The unrounded amounts either mean that the show was not paid in a flat fee as records indicate, or they were paid in addition to their flat fees for special requests. For example, during the 1944 engagement, it appears that Calloway and his Orchestra played at the Orpheum two days longer than their contract required. A “week” went from Friday to Thursday, at least for Deluxe Warner Bros. and RKO theaters. The latter shows were at Balaban and Katz theaters, which were owned and affiliated with Paramount and their live performance booking circuit.

<sup>93</sup> Harry Kalchier, “Bands are Box Office for Theaters,” *Billboard’s Band Yearbook*, September 26, 1942, 79. Here is a longer bio of Kalchier: In January 1942, Kalchier joined William Morris Agency’s New York office, as the head “developer of new talent and handling other duties connected with acts and bands.” Thus he then represented the interests of bands and other acts William Morris managed. However, Kalchier was also veteran of the vaudeville industry from the theater and studio side of the business, having worked in various capacities for several different studios and vaudeville organizations the previous twenty-five years. At only sixteen, Kalchier became a booking agent for the Keith-Albee’s Western Vaudeville Managers Association in Chicago. He stayed with the company through two mergers—first with the Orpheum vaudeville circuit, then with Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and the Film Booking Office (FBO)—when they became RKO, where he stayed as booking agent until 1932. He then became the head of booking (i.e. “a booking executive”) for the Paramount Theater Circuit, where he was in charge of scouting talent for the entire circuit and booking bands and acts into Paramount’s flagship theater, the Paramount Theater in Times Square, as well as other of the circuit’s centrally located, “de luxe” variety palaces, including ones in Detroit, Chicago, Buffalo, Minneapolis, Omaha, and Boston.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> “Records for the Nation,” *Billboard Band Yearbook*, September 26, 1942, 8-9. While the advertisement does not specify the revenue at the Golden Gate Theater, the other engagements are listed as earning \$56,614; \$33,066; \$62,517.

<sup>96</sup> “N.G. Films, Boff Chi; Dick Powell Bright \$20,000 with ‘Lady,’ ‘Bahama’-Stokes Orch, 35G,” *Variety*, February 11, 1942, 9. *Variety* noted that 35,000 at the Chicago Theater was “neat” (i.e. fairly good).

<sup>97</sup> *Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, *Billboard*, September 28, 1940, 17. For similar examples see, Ibid., 18; *Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, *Billboard*, September 27, 1941, 66.

<sup>98</sup> “Bands No. 1 Theatre B.O.” *Variety*, February 25, 1942, 1, 46.

<sup>99</sup> “Question: How’s Business? Ans.: NY, Chi & Los Vaude Hit 23 Mil in ’43—Zowie!” *Billboard*, January 8, 1944, 3, 22, 23, 29. Without surviving financial documents from theaters of



different sizes and locations, only a partial judgment can be made about the relative profits of maintaining a band policy throughout the 1930s and 1940s (though the lack of specific coverage about the financial impact of booking bands in the 1930s is an indication that it was not any more noteworthy than other live acts). However, the surviving records of the Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles, which contain the revenues, salaries, and profits of bands and other live acts from 1938 to 1947, suggests that we cannot make sweeping conclusions of these accounts for other theaters and years. Nor do they support that bands were the only drawing power for these theaters. While the Orpheum, like most American movie theaters, produced healthy profits during the war years, more than \$77,000 in 1942 and then average annual revenues of at least \$100,000 from 1943 to 1947 (up to \$193,000 in 1944), it produced barely a quarter of these annual profits from 1938 to 1941, despite maintaining a band heavy programming the entire time. Thus, bands were not the sole source for these theater's profits, which suggests that nation-wide increased theater-going and disposable income were a larger reason. Likewise, while bands were the single most profitable type of act, they were followed by others. From 1942 to 1946, the top grossing 196 acts were nearly evenly split between bands (100) and all others (96), including comedians, dancers, circus acts, and magicians. Los Angeles Orpheum Theater Box Office Receipts, B'hend and Kaufman Collection, folders 706-7, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The immense cost and revenue sharing required to maintain a band policy also prohibited many theaters from implementing it at the scale and profitability of the nation's big-nine theaters.

<sup>100</sup> Examples of "50/50 splits," as they were often referenced in contracts, with no other stipulations, include: Warner Bros.'s Warner Theater in Utica, New York gave the orchestras' of Inna Ray Hutton, Duke Ellington, Tommy Tucker, and Shep Field one in 1943; Calloway received one from Paramount's Palace Theater in South Bend, Indiana in 1944 and another from the Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles in 1948; Ellington also received similar contracts from Paramount's Rialto in Joliet, Illinois and their Orpheum Theater in Springfield, Illinois in 1944.

<sup>101</sup> Similarly, Count Basie's 50/50 split at the Regal in 1945 began after a \$500 dollar deduction. Other variations include revenue sharing only after certain financial targets were met. During Bob Crosby and His Orchestra's week-long engagement at the Palace Theater (Paramount/Balaban and Katz, South Bend, Indiana) in 1938, they received a \$750 flat rate and then shared 50% of any revenue over \$2,500. Similarly, though not a percentage-based revenue share, in 1942 Louis Armstrong and his band received a \$3,500 flat fee with additional revenue sharing after reaching \$3,000, after which Armstrong received the next \$500 and the Los Angeles Orpheum Theater (where this week-long engagement took place) received the next \$1,000.

For more on bank night see, Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 28. Some contracts did not disclose the reason for this deduction. Bank night became less common after the depression era, so these fees may be related to paying for additional talent on the bill.

<sup>102</sup> This information is from a November 1935 billing sheet. This number accounts for the cost of features, shorts, newsreel, salaries for management, orchestra, and service department, as well as advertisements and utilities.

<sup>103</sup> *Variety's* weekly reports about theater going in specific cities (in its "Picture" section) often reported reasons why bills underperformed at specific cities, including inclement weather, a poor quality of performance, among other possibilities.

<sup>104</sup> "Band Salaries Terrific: Theaters and Bookers Worried Trend will Ruin Vaude Chances," *Billboard*, January 21, 1939, 19.

<sup>105</sup> Orodener, 126. At least for African American bands (such as Calloway and Ellington's), the weekly collective salary for their band members was slightly over \$1,000. See Shipton, 102.

<sup>106</sup> For example, despite earning more than \$10,000 per show in Los Angeles in 1942 and 1944, Calloway and his band's appearance there in September 1948 had a 50/50 revenue sharing deal. The program only generated \$13,086.50 in admissions—the consequence of both warm weather and the start of the school year, according to *Variety*—leaving both parties with just over six-thousand dollars before expenses, meaning that the theater likely lost money. *Variety*, Sep 15 and 22. "Holderovers, Heat Clip L.A. but 'Ruth' Fat \$47,000; 'Moonrise' Climbs to 26G; 'Sam' Tall 33G, 'Judy' 35G, 2d," *Variety*, September 15, 1948, 8; L.A. Spotty; 'This is N.Y. Bang-up \$35,000, 'House' Slow 56G, 'Larceny' Lusty \$36,000, 'Amber' Limp at 24G," *Variety*, September 22, 1948, 13. Music historians and Calloway himself would also likely attribute Calloway's underperformance to the end of the big band era, which is marked by the rise in popularity of smooth-voiced individual singer-lead bands, like Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole.

<sup>107</sup> Of course, the cost of bands was dictated by larger economic features, such as the demand for individual bands (often assessed by record sales or by perceived popularity), the demand at specific theaters, inter-theater competition and precedents (i.e. what the going-rate for name bands was in a certain city, region, or nationally), and theater capacity (theaters who had fewer seats to sell could not pay high flat fees as at the larger variety palaces).

<sup>108</sup> Abel Green and Joe Laurie, *Show Biz: From Vaude to Video* (New York: Doubleday, 1953), 437. Reports by vaudeville critics indicate this was one of the benefits of booking bands. Theaters managers did not have to figure out and book additional acts, similar to units.

<sup>109</sup> Artists Booking Agency Inc. Contract for Cab Calloway at the Palace Theater (Peoria, Illinois) - April 21, 1938, Box 103, Folder 7, Balaban & Katz Collection, Theater Historical Society; Artists Booking Agency Inc. Contract for Cab Calloway at the Chicago Theater (Chicago, Illinois) - September 5, 1944, Box 105, Folder 7, Balaban & Katz Collection, Theater Historical Society; Payrolls - Balaban and Katz Theaters - 1943, Box 104, Folder 11, Balaban & Katz Collection, Theater Historical Society; Orpheum Theater Ledger, 138.f -Orpheum Theatre, Los Angeles -- performers (A-C) 1935-194, B'hend and Kaufmann Collection, Folder 707, Margaret Herrick Library. While including a band's revue on the bill was fairly standard, there were differences in whether the band or theater paid for these additional acts. Several of Calloway's contracts from Chicago-area theaters in 1943 and 1944, at which tap dancer Bill Bailey and

comedic duo Holmes and Jean appeared alongside and were chosen by Calloway, stated that the theater owner had to pay the acts: “owner agrees to supply a complete show in conjunction with Calloway and Orchestra.” In contrast, band leaders might be contractually obligated to furnish the entire cost of the performers, even if the theater manager or booking agent selected the acts. In other cases, the costs of acts, like revenue sharing, were split among the band and the theater or had special stipulations depending on the revenue earned. When Count Basie appeared at the Regal Theater for a week in 1943, he negotiated a bill that included Pops and Love, Apos and Estrellita, and Thelma Carpenter. However, his orchestra would have to pay “50% of the talent” regardless of the show’s success; and if the “gross reach [*sic*] \$10,500, Basie is to pay for the entire cost of the talent.” Bands were not the only headliners with varying control over the contents of programs. When Bill “Bojangles” Robinson performed a weeklong engagement at the Orpheum in Los Angeles in 1944, he had to furnish the band and two additional acts.

<sup>110</sup> “Band Salaries Terrific: Theaters and Bookers Worried Trend will Ruin Vaude Chances,” *Billboard*, January 21, 1939, 19.

<sup>111</sup> After the major studios forced divestment of its theater chains as a result of a successful antitrust suit against them in 1948, this appears to have changed. When the theater chains successfully separated into their own corporations, which occurred unevenly throughout the early 1950s, there is evidence that the new system of booking films afforded opportunities for even the control over feature films to headliner acts and bands, at least in Chicago. Correspondence files for the Chicago Theater (Downtown, Chicago) reveal that William Morris agent, Nat Kalcheim, negotiated such contracts for at least four of its clients during the 1951 season. Three of the performers, multimedia comedians Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, and Red Skelton, performed at the Chicago Theater for a week, and African American actress, vocalist and bandleader, Josephine Baker, performed there for two weeks. For evidence of this see, Correspondence - Chicago Theater Stage Show - Early 1950s, Box 84, Folder 115, Stage Show Collection, Theater Historical Society.

<sup>112</sup> Richard Maltby, “The Standard Exhibition Contract and the Unwritten History of the Classical Hollywood Cinema,” *Film History* 25: 138–53, 2013; Andrea Comiskey, “The Sticks, the Nabes, and the Broadways: U.S. Film Distribution, 1935-1940,” Doctoral Dissertation, University of Wisconsin – Madison, 2015.

<sup>113</sup> “Kay Kyser's 'Darling Daughter' Date Kayoed by N. Y. Censors' Nix on WB Pic; Maestro Assigned Another Film,” *Variety*, February 15, 1939, 5, 55. When the New York Censor Board banned the film from the state, the Strand’s management theater stuck Kyser with *Off the Record* (1939), a true “B” melodrama barely sixty-minutes long.

<sup>114</sup> Bands NO. 1 Theatre B. O.,” *Variety*, February 25, 1942, 1, 46.

<sup>115</sup> Frank H Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres* (New York; London: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1938), 30-1; F. Andrew Hanssen, “Revenue Sharing and the Coming of Sound,” in *An Economic History of Film*, ed. John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>116</sup> Orpheum Theater Receipts and Expenses, B'hend and Kaufmann Collection, Folder 707, Margaret Herrick Library,

<sup>117</sup> As established in the previous chapter, in this context the “B” film distinction does not refer to any specific type of film genre (such as horror), studio (such as the Poverty Row studios), but any film that could be rented for a low flat fee, so that studios did not share in theater’s already apportioned revenues. This meant that bands played with a random assortment of films, with few obvious booking strategies or discernable patterns.

<sup>118</sup> The budget for a Charlie Chan film averaged \$200,000.

<sup>119</sup> Calloway and *Charlie Chan in Shanghai* played at the Fox Theater for two weeks. During one of the weeks, the bill also included Detroit Tigers baseball star Goose Goslin, who had just recently won his second-straight World Series title for Detroit. *Variety* reported that while his act was not noteworthy (it does not mention what he performed), the crowd paid to see him rather than Calloway or the film--though Calloway was still noted as second in importance.

<sup>120</sup> Shipton, 148.

<sup>121</sup> “Negro Employment Down,” *Billboard*, November 23, 1940, 1. The articles appear to be talking specifically about New York City. Given the centrality of New York and Harlem for all nationwide black entertainment, this discussion is still relevant more broadly.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>123</sup> Dan Burley, “What’s Wrong with Negro in Showlife?” *New York Amsterdam*, October 26, 1940, 20-1. The *New Amsterdam*’s list included: Bill Robinson, Ethel Waters, Paul Robeson, Buck and Bubbles, Calloway, and Armstrong. *Billboard*’s more inclusive list included: Basie, McDaniels, Beavers, Hawkins, Lunceford, Rochester, Ella Fit, Andy Kirk, Rex Ingram, the Ink Spots, Calloway, Ellington, and Armstrong, and Robinson.

<sup>124</sup> “Negro Employment Down,” 13.

<sup>125</sup> “Negro Employment Down,” 13; Erenberg 155. The Paradise Theater, another black variety palace, opened in Detroit a year later. Erenberg incorrectly notes the Earle Theater in Philadelphia was a sister theater of black theaters. In contrast, The Earle Theater was a flagship theater of the Warner Bros. circuit, while most black theaters were independently owned (other than the Regal Theater in Chicago, affiliated with Paramount). The Virginia theaters were owned by Abe Lichtman. For more information see, Eric Ledell Smith, *African American Theater Buildings: An Illustrated Historical Directory, 1900-1955* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2011). 212-4. 230, 238, 240.

<sup>126</sup> Arthur Knight, “Star Dances: African-American Constructions of Stardom, 1925 –1960,” in *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (Minneapolis: MN.: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>127</sup> Calloway “Variety Bills” Database (Appendix 2).

<sup>128</sup> Erenberg, 162-72. Some of Calloway’s advertisements support this connotation. One in particular features what appears to be Calloway eating several half-naked white women.

<sup>129</sup> “Because,” *Metronome*, April, 1943, 4.

<sup>130</sup> Panther Room Postcards, *The Hi De Ho Blog*, <http://www.thehidehoblog.com/blog/2018/09/cab-calloway-on-postcards>, Accessed April 4, 2020.

<sup>131</sup> “The World Famous Cotton Club” - Menu, Rare Books Division, New York Library, [http://menus.nypl.org/menu\\_pages/62223/explore](http://menus.nypl.org/menu_pages/62223/explore), accessed May 5, 2021.

<sup>132</sup> “Spots with Radio Wires,” *Billboard’s Band Yearbook*, 1943, 49-50; Michael Hauser and Marianne Weldon, *Detroit’s Downtown Movie Palaces* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 83. Two other venues with “theater” in their name had radio wires in 1942, the Harding Field Theater in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Strand Theater in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Neither of these venues hosted live performance and/or bands from this circuit.

<sup>133</sup> The Earle broadcasted once per week on the local station, WIBG. The Orpheum only had occasional and sporadic broadcasts on its local station, WTCN, as did the Fox over WJR and CKLW; none of which featured bands.

<sup>134</sup> Frank Davis, “Says Hot White Bands Ape Race Orchestras: Getting Preference in Booking and Theater Stands,” *Norfolk Guide and Journal*, September 10, 1938, 13.

<sup>135</sup> Erenberg, 160-2.

<sup>136</sup> For an example of this claim see, Erenberg, 163. This claim contradicts other research, which only cites trade press articles. My research instead cites many contracts from Paramount, RKO, and Independent theaters that so no racial pay disparity.

<sup>137</sup> Ross Melnick and Andreas Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theaters* (St. Paul: MBI, 2004).

<sup>138</sup> One exception was Paramount’s Oriental Theater in Chicago. While they programmed bands with some regularity, it was not a major stop for black bands in Chicago. Calloway, for example, never played that theater. It is worth noting that while no theater permanently (in their architecture or decor) or temporarily featured anything reminiscent of the slave-era, they could have. In 1930, Paramount-Publix marketing team suggested other theater managers follow the example of an exhibitor in Knoxville, Tennessee, who set up a cotton field in the lobby in “promotion” of MGM’s *Hallelujah!* (Vidor, 1929) featuring an all-black cast, presumably as a way to mitigate and pacify “the local tradition” (as the article called it) of white supremacy. Sammond, 136-7.

<sup>139</sup> Joseph R. Carlton, “Is Hollywood Doing the Best Possible Job with Name Bands?,” *Band Yearbook* (Cincinnati: *Billboard*, 1942), 43-5.

<sup>140</sup> David O. Alber, “Motion Pictures Make Magnificent Publicity for Bandleaders,” *Metronome*, May 1942, 18.

<sup>141</sup> Larry Richards, *African American Films through 1959 a Comprehensive, Illustrated Filmography* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005), 178-9. There are some Calloway films missing from this list.

<sup>142</sup> Christopher P Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon: Black Representation in American Animated Short Films, 1907-1954* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 30.

<sup>143</sup> Artists Booking Agency Inc. Contract for Cab Calloway at the Palace Theater (South Bend, Indiana) - July 19, 1944, Box 105, Folder 8, Balaban & Katz Collection, Theater Historical Society.

<sup>144</sup> Artists Booking Agency Inc. Contract for Duke Ellington at the Regal Theater (Chicago, Illinois) - December 2, 1947, Box 105, Folder 8, Balaban & Katz Collection, Theater Historical Society.

<sup>145</sup> Louis Armstrong - Paramount Pictures Contract, May 5, 1937, folder 70 "Armstrong, Louis (actor) 1937, 1958," Paramount Pictures Contract Summaries Collection, Margaret Herrick Library.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. The footage of Armstrong made under this contract was either for *Artists and Models* (1937), *Every Day's a Holiday* (1937), or *Doctor Rhythm* (1938)

<sup>147</sup> Carlton, "Is Hollywood Doing the Best Possible Job with Name Bands?"

<sup>148</sup> Shipton, 100.

<sup>149</sup> Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, *Jack Benny and the Golden Age of American Radio Comedy*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 174; Don Deleighbur, "South Takes Out Spite on Race by Censoring Films," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 1, 1944, 2.

<sup>150</sup> Krin Gabbard, "The Images of Jazz," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, ed. Mervyn Cooke and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 332–46; Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 13-14, 20, 27. Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 203-35; Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical*: 71-8; Carlton, 31-6.

<sup>151</sup> Calloway Press Manual, 16; Calloway and Rollins, 162. Calloway's press book seemingly contradicts this claim, saying explicitly "Theatre managers everywhere are loyal Calloway enthusiasts because he not only is a dynamic box-office attraction, but is a consistent performer[...]he never displays temperament and he always is willing and even anxious to cooperate in the matters of changing routines or adding extra numbers for his shows." However, this claim appears to be more of a marketing move than an accurate representation of who controlled Calloway's show. Calloway's bandmate, Benny Payne remembered, in contrast that Calloway never let theater managers meddle with the band's performance: "It was not unusual in those days, either for a theater manager to come to a rehearsal and figure since he knew the theater and the crowd he could tell the bandleader how to play to the show. Not with Cab. He didn't stand for it. He would tell any theater manager, 'I'm running this band. Don't give my guys no orders.' He was very protective of us and very jealous of anyone usurping his role."

<sup>152</sup> Sloan, 380-1.

<sup>153</sup> Dan Richman, "Closer Study of Talent and Tunes Pays Dividends," *Billboard: Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, September 26, 1940, 8; William Morris, Jr, "To Make Better Records," *Billboard: Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, 1940; *Billboard: Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, 1940, 18; Walter W. Hurd, "A Busy Year," *Billboard: Talent and Tunes on*

*Music Machines*, September 27, 1941, 4 ; “Music Machines and the Music Industry,” *Billboard: Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, 1941, 14-6.

<sup>154</sup> *Billboard Band Yearbook*, September 26, 1942, 51.

<sup>155</sup> Elias E. Sugarman, “A Billion Dollar Industry,” *Billboard Band Yearbook*, September 26, 1942, 5.

<sup>156</sup> *Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, 1940, 39, 43 46, 50, 56,61; *Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, 1941, 59-83; *Band Year Book*, 1942, 92-100; Band’s that released records under subsidiary companies of these major labels, such as Blue Bird, also appear in *Billboard* supplement.

<sup>157</sup> *Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, 1940, 39.

<sup>158</sup> *Band Year Book*, 1942, 90.

<sup>159</sup> *Band Year Book*, 1942, 42; *Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, 1941, 60; *Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, 1940, 25.

<sup>160</sup> *Band Year Book*, 1942, 93; *Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, September 23, 1939, 16.

Dick Jurgen’s advertisement reprinted a letter from the head booker of Warner Brothers’ Artist Bureau Inc. (the studio’s booking office) congratulating him for his successful stint at the Strand Theater (either Manhattan or Brooklyn) and welcoming him back the following year. Laurence Welk also did this with the Balaban and Katz office.

<sup>161</sup> *Music Year Book*, 1943, 51.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>163</sup> *Talent and Tunes on Music Machines*, 1940, 52.

<sup>164</sup> *Calloway Press Manual*, 16-7.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *Band Year Book*, 1942, 32.

<sup>167</sup> *Calloway and Rollins*, 159.

<sup>168</sup> *Shipton*, 56.

<sup>169</sup> *Erenberg*, 150-78.

<sup>170</sup> Simon, 3; “Bands’ Film Boom Makes Coast Dates As Desirable for Maestros as N.Y.,” *Variety*, March 31, 1943, 35; David Arlen, “No. 1 Band Builder,” *Variety*, October 7, 1942, 67; “Bernie Woods, “Films Big Coin Keeps ‘Em West,” *Variety*, July 14, 1943, 31; “Theaters Bullish for Orks,” *Billboard*, November 4, 1939, 5.

<sup>171</sup> Harry Kalcheim, “Bands are Box-Office in Theater,” *Band Year Book*, 1942, 79.

<sup>172</sup> “Band Poll Used as Guide to N.Y. Paramount 1939 Bookings,” *Billboard*, February 25, 1939, 3, 8.

<sup>173</sup> Some surviving letters capture this gate-keeping process, with talent agents writing to the Paramount requesting bookings their budding talent. See, for example, Jack Kalcheim to Nate Platt, December 14, 1951, Correspondence - Chicago Theater Stage Show - Early 1950s, Box 84, Folder 115, Stage Show Collection, Theater Historical Society.

<sup>174</sup> Frank Rose, *The Agency: William Morris and the Hidden History of Show Business* (New York: Harper Business, 1996), 96.

<sup>175</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>176</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 155-63.

<sup>177</sup> Sallye, Sell, "On the Air," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 14, 1938, 2; "Negro Employment Down," *Billboard*, November 23, 1940, 3, 13; "Duke Ellington A Memphis Hit," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 18, 1937, 24; Riettes Moseley, "This Week-End Shows No Promise, But Maybe Something Will Show Up," *New Journal and Guide*, October 6, 1934; Dan Burley, "What's Wrong with Negro in Showlife," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 26, 1940. Some of these photographs are published or available online. Pertinent photos from Frank Driggs Collection: "Billie Holiday, Hot Lips Page Orchestra, Bobby Evans, M.C. at the Apollo Theater," Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 131; Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, 1939, Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 28. "Jitterbugs Whoop," photograph, circa 1938, New York Daily News Collection, *Getty Images*, Accessed June 23, 2022, <https://www.gettyimages.ie/detail/news-photo/jitterbugs-whoop-it-up-during-benny-goodman-concert-at-the-news-photo/97299056?adppopup=true>; Larry Froeber, "Yelling and Waving," photograph, circa 1938, New York Daily News Collection, *Getty Images*, Accessed June 23, 2022, <https://www.gettyimages.ie/detail/news-photo/yelling-and-waving-jitterbugs-whoop-it-up-at-the-paramount-news-photo/97340309?adppopup=true>; *New York Times*, "Dancing in the Aisles," photograph, January 30, 1938, *New York Times* Archive Photos Collection, *Getty Images*, Accessed June 23, 2022, <https://www.gettyimages.ie/detail/news-photo/couples-dance-in-the-aisles-at-the-paramount-theatre-during-news-photo/51209349?adppopup=true>; Teenie Harris, "Stanley Theater Marquee," photograph, circa 1944, Carnegie Museum of Art Collection, *Getty Images*, Accessed June 23, 2022, <https://www.gettyimages.ie/detail/news-photo/exterior-of-stanley-theatre-with-marquee-reading-cab-news-photo/535084443?adppopup=true>; "Benny Goodman's Swing Band with Dancers," photograph, January 29, 1938, Bettmann Collection, *Getty Images*, Accessed June 23, 2022, <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/new-york-ny-here-is-one-of-the-reasons-that-many-people-are-news-photo/515305982>.

<sup>178</sup> M.H. Orendecker, "Selling the Band," *Billboard*, April 19, 1941, 16; Drew Meincke, "The Paradise Theater (1941-1951): African American Movie Palaces and the 1943 Racial Uprising in Detroit," Paper presented at the *Visions Film Festival and Conference*, University of North Carolina - Wilmington, April 2021. Theater managers did not commonly advertise movies in black presses, and it is unclear how common this approach was even for black bands. Other than in the Regal Theater, Balaban and Katz Theaters did not advertise their programs in black newspapers, even with black acts, until the 1950s (likely changing their approach to the changing urban demographics), nor did the Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles. Orpheum Theatre, Los Angeles -- clippings 1942, B'hend and Kauffmann Collection, 138.f-4606, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; Tivoli Contracts, Stage Show



Collection, Box 84, Folders 485-499, Theater Historical Society. Chicago Theater Contracts, Stage Show Collection, Box 84, Folders 500-504, Theater Historical Society. "Calloway Turns it On," *Kansas City Star*, June 25, 1933, 17.

<sup>179</sup> "Calloway Turns it On," *Kansas City Star*, June 25, 1933, 17.

<sup>180</sup> "Ethel Waters Unit A K.C. Issue," *Variety*, March 3, 1937, 47; "Ethel Waters Sunbbed For Jim-Crow Show," *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 4, 1937, 13; "Ethel Water's Show is Boycotted in K.C.," *Chicago Defender*, March 13, 1937, 24; "Kansas City People Stage 'Sit At Home' Strike Against Ethel Waters' Special Midnite Show," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 6, 1937; "Kansas City Snubs Ethel Waters's Midnight Show," *Afro-American*, March 6, 1937, 15.

<sup>181</sup> Burley, 20. Of course, this was partly the result of the decreasing number of Harlem motion picture theaters that were programming live performances,

<sup>182</sup> "Reviewer Finds Cab Calloway at Best Displaying Wares for Broadway Folk," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 28, 1931, 10.

<sup>183</sup> "Frank Marshall Davis, "Can Ace Ofay Bands Put Negro Crews in Eclipse," *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 8, 1938, 10.

<sup>184</sup> *Down Beat*, April 1937, 16.

<sup>185</sup> "Jitterbugs Whoop," New York Daily News Collection; Larry Froeber, "Yelling and Waving," New York Daily News Collection; *New York Times*, "Dancing in the Aisles," *New York Times* Archive Photos Collection; "Benny Goodman's Swing Band with Dancers," Bettmann Collection.

<sup>186</sup> "Variety Bills" Database (Appendix A).

<sup>187</sup> Shipton, 37; Thomas Brothers, *Louis Armstrong: Master of Modernism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 338.

<sup>188</sup> "The World Famous Cotton Club" - Menu, Rare Books Division, New York Library, [http://menus.nypl.org/menu\\_pages/62223/explore](http://menus.nypl.org/menu_pages/62223/explore), accessed May 5, 2021.

<sup>189</sup> Ross, 187-94. During the 1920s, the Balaban and Katz theater chain — known as the nationwide models for the luxury, service, and entertainment in individual movie theaters and for their corporate structure of theater chains— established a single ticket price as part of their cross-class vision of theater-going. This did not continue into the studio era, however.

<sup>190</sup> "Picture Grosses," *Variety*, December 1, 1937, 8-10. The major difference between theaters with live performance and those without was not at the bottom end of the pricing spectrum, but the top. First run theaters without live acts topped out at around forty to sixty cents with some exceptions.

<sup>191</sup> Knight, "Star Dances," 388.

<sup>192</sup> Kalcheim, 79. How occasionally is hard to determine. In contrast to the oft-repeated utopian fantasy of the variety palaces making entertainment regularly accessible to all, evidence suggests that regular attendance to movie palaces (especially to see live performance) was not always financially possible even for the white working class. This was not identified as a problem in the trade press before World War II, but it was discussed retroactively when the post-war economic

boom temporarily relieved this inequality. Harry Kalchier, an agent for William Morris agent and former head of the Paramount circuit, wrote in his support of live performances in movie theaters: “factory workers now are making more money than ever before. These are the type of people that usually like pop music but, until now [1942] did not have the money to patronize vaudefilmmers often.”-Because black workers did not even have access to prime jobs in factories, it is likely that their regular attendance would have been even less likely.

<sup>193</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 155-62; Advertisement for Cab Calloway and *The City of Silent Men* (1942) - Paradise Theater (Detroit), *Michigan Chronicle*, December 5, 1942, 19.

<sup>194</sup> “Jitterbugs Whoop,” New York Daily News Collection; Larry Froeber, “Yelling and Waving,” New York Daily News Collection; *New York Times*, “Dancing in the Aisles,” *New York Times* Archive Photos Collection; “Benny Goodman’s Swing Band with Dancers,” Bettmann Collection; Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, 1939, Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream*, 28.

<sup>195</sup> “Picture Grosses,” *Variety*, December 1, 1937, 8-10.

<sup>196</sup> Erenberg, 172.

<sup>197</sup> Langston Hughes, “Here to Yonder,” *The Chicago Defender*, September 23, 1944, 12.

<sup>198</sup> “Detroit Downtown Biz in Unexpected Holiday Upswing,” *Billboard*, December 29, 1945, 38; “Jane Withers Pulls 28,500; Basie’s Ork Looks for 32,000,” *Billboard*, March 17, 1945, 28.

<sup>199</sup> Erenberg, 154.

<sup>200</sup> White patronage at black theaters does not appear to be immune to larger racial tensions in a particular city. The racial uprisings in Detroit during 1943 reportedly led to drastic and permanent decline in attendance by white patrons. While this designated black theaters like the Paradise as largely black spaces which whites did not patronize en masse, it did not lead to only racially isolated experiences of jazz in the city. As the previous citation indicates, African Americans still attended more mainstream theaters like the RKO Downtown to see and listen to swing artists. Drew Meincke, “The Paradise Theater (1941-1951): African American Movie Palaces and the 1943 Racial Uprising in Detroit,” Paper presented at the *Visions Film Festival and Conference*, University of North Carolina - Wilmington, April 2021.

<sup>201</sup> Calloway and Rollins, 171. This helps explain Calloway’s own ostensible contradiction to my claim that multi-racial audiences commonly attended swing performances in movie theaters. By Calloway’s own account, his audiences in variety palaces were largely white and likely middle class. In his autobiography, he reminisces about the size and general demographics of his theater audiences in the New York City area: “You have to understand that in those days the big bands were hitting the theaters like dynamite. People would stand in line for hours and hours to get into a Cab Calloway concert or revue[...] In those days, you could count on several thousand regulars turning out[...] Many of these people in Brooklyn, Queens, and New Jersey didn’t have the money to come into the Cotton Club to see a show, but they would turn out at the theaters. The audiences were mostly white, except for Harlem.” Calloway’s statement is thus a generalization, one that is especially true for New York City during the first half of the 1930s.

<sup>202</sup> Burley, 20-1.

- <sup>203</sup> Calloway Database.
- <sup>204</sup> “Negro Employment Down,” 13.
- <sup>205</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>206</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>207</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>208</sup> “Cab’s Home Coming,” *Afro-American*, August 18, 1934, 8.
- <sup>209</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>210</sup> Ralph Mtthews, “Broadway Continues her Invasion of Dixie,” *Afro-American*, November 4, 1933, 18; “Interstate Circuit Shaping Up Well,” *Billboard*, May 6, 1933, 6; “Calloway to Interstate on Direct Booking,” *Variety*, August 7, 1934, 41; “Here and There in the Theatrical World,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 13, 1933, 14;
- <sup>211</sup> Thru Sugar’s Domino,” *Billboard*, May 6, 1933, 10; “Calloway’s Band is Going Big in Dallas,” *The Chicago Defender*, May 13, 1933, 5;
- <sup>212</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>213</sup> Here and There in the Theatrical World,” 14.
- <sup>214</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>215</sup> Dessye Bearden, “Around New York,” *The Chicago Defender*, May 13, 1933, 5; “Calloway’s Smash on Interstate,” *Variety*, May 2, 1933, 39.
- <sup>216</sup> Ellington Tryng [sic] South,” *Variety*, July 4, 1933,42; “Duke Ellington A Memphis Hit,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 18, 1937, 24.
- <sup>217</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 155-62; "Segregation in Theatres Part Two," from Leroy Sterling oral history interview, July 06, 2015, Bryan, TX , Civil Rights in Black and Brown Interview Database, <https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/770/segregation-in-theatres-pt-2>, accessed May 10, 2021; Robert R Weyeneth, “The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past,” *The Public Historian* 27, no. 4 (2005): 11–44.
- <sup>218</sup> Christopher J. McKenna, “Tri-Racial Theaters in Robeson County, North Carolina, 1896-1940,” in *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, ed. Robert C Allen, Richard Maltby, and Melvyn Stokes (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008), 45–59.
- <sup>219</sup> “Auditorium, Balto,” *Variety*, March 21, 1933, 38.
- <sup>220</sup> Calloway and Rollins, 139.
- <sup>221</sup> Charles I. Bowen, “On the Air,” *Afro-American*, May 20, 1933, 11.
- <sup>222</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>223</sup> The fear of reprisal kept African American newspapers in the South from printing stories, especially those of local interest like these performances, that one might expect.
- <sup>224</sup> “Texas State News,” *Chicago Defender*, May 27, 1933, 18.
- <sup>225</sup> Riettes Moseley, “This Week-End Shows No Promise, But Maybe Something Will Show,” *New Journal and Guide*, October 6, 1934, 7.
- <sup>226</sup> A “Southern” circuit operated in 1944, including theaters in Alabama, Florida, North Carolin, South Carolina. It almost exclusively booked revues and only lasted one year. Appendix A.

<sup>227</sup> Erenberg, 176.

<sup>228</sup> “Inquiring Reporter,” *Afro-American*, August 13, 1932, 11.

<sup>229</sup> Some writers, including the women, did not list a profession.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> Knight, “Star Dances.”

<sup>233</sup> “Inquiring Reporter,” 11.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004 276-8); Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996) 93-7, 100-1; Janet Staiger, *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 7-31.

<sup>236</sup> For examples see, Production materials for Cab Calloway Show, September 8, 1933, Stage Show Collection, Box 1, Capitol Stage Shows, Theater Historical Society; “Calloway, Colorful Hi-De-Ho Apostle, Comes Next Week,” *The Daily Times*, May 20, 1933, 5; “Current Film Plays,” *Boston Globe*, January 13, 1934, 11; “Swing Fans Cheer Calloway And Band At State Theater,” *Hartford Courant*, September 23, 1939, 10.

<sup>237</sup> Simon, 3. This quote is part of a larger section in which Simon charts the different venues (hotels, night clubs, ballrooms, and theaters) in New York City a jazz fan could go see and listen to their favorite performers on any given night during the 1930s and 1940s. Simon’s list features the premiere studio-owned Manhattan movie theaters, but he specifically separates them out from the other venues based on their relatively passive spectatorship. Simon’s account presents a dichotomy between the active bands and their static audiences: “Maybe you didn’t feel so much like dancing but more like sitting and listening and maybe taking in a movie too. You could go to the Paramount, where Tommy Dorsey and his band, along with Jack Leonard and Edythe Wright, were appearing...or to the Strand to catch Xavier Cugat and his Latin music...or to Loew’s State, where Jimmie Lunceford was swinging forth.”

<sup>238</sup> Murray Forman, *One Night on TV Is Worth Weeks at the Paramount: Popular Music on Early Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 154. Frank Sinatra also incited riots in the Paramount Theater in the early 1940s, but this portrayed as a matter of his incessant fans rather than his connected to his music or musical style.

<sup>239</sup> “Harlem Stars Predominate Broadway’s ‘Big Top’ Theatre,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 1, 1937, 19.

<sup>240</sup> “Tommye Berry, “Cab Calloway Triumphs in Kansas City House,” *Chicago Defender*, July 27, 1935, 6.

<sup>241</sup> Orodnenker, 126.

<sup>242</sup> “This Thing Called Swing,” *The Courtland News*, March 17, 1938, 6. Written and distributed by the Western Newspaper Union, this article appeared in at least forty newspapers in nine states.

- <sup>243</sup> Linton Martin, "Place of 'Swing' Today as Musical Phenomenon," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 19, 1942, 51; "Of thee I Swing: Our National Anthem," *Albuquerque Journal*, March 13, 1938, 16.
- <sup>244</sup> Erenberg, 8.
- <sup>245</sup> "M.H. Orodener, "Selling the Band," *Billboard*, March 30, 1940, 13.
- <sup>246</sup> Patrick Burke, *Come in and Hear the Truth: Jazz and Race on 52nd St.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 83; Stowe, 36; Samuel Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 95-6.
- <sup>247</sup> The only audiovisual recording of Calloway's call-and-response with an audience from around the period of this study comes from his appearance on an unknown television show, shot around 1958. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mq4UT4VnbE>
- <sup>248</sup> Sloan, 385.
- <sup>249</sup> "Cab Calloway Hits Jackpot at the Earle," *Washington Post*, April 9, 1938, x16.
- <sup>250</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 234-7; Carbine, 247-8.
- <sup>251</sup> Altman, 277.
- <sup>252</sup> "Keith Boston," *Boston Globe*, April 27, 1945, 19; "RKO, Boston," *Variety*, May 2, 1945, 58; "Earle, Philly," *Variety*, April 27, 1938, 53; "Roxy, N.Y.," *Variety*, March 16, 1949, 16; "Current Film Plays," *Boston Globe*, January 13, 1934, 1; "Orchestra Takes Over Palace Stage; 'Ghost Goes West' Proves To Be Good Entertainment," *Akron Beacon Journal*, March 4, 1936, 15; "Cab Calloway Triumphs in Kansas City House," *Chicago Defender*, July 27, 1935, 6; "Strand, New York," *Billboard*, March 23, 1946, 50; Ralph Matthews, "Watching the Big Parade," *Afro-American*, September 29, 1934, 4; "Capitol, New York," *Billboard*, May 21, 1932, 11; "Stanley, Ptsbgh [sic]," *Variety*, July 21, 1931, 63; "Cab Calloway, His Band and Show in Sensational Debut," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 14, 1942, 20; "Orpheum Theatre," *Boston Globe*, March 16, 1935, 12.
- <sup>253</sup> Maurice Dancer, "Harlem: Night by Night," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 4, 1933, a6; "Vaudeville: RKO Boston Theatre," *Boston Globe*, April 28, 1944, 17.
- <sup>254</sup> "Vaudeville: RKO Boston Theatre."
- <sup>255</sup> "Stanley, Ptsbgh [sic]."
- <sup>256</sup> *Indianapolis Star*, February 8, 1936, 11.
- <sup>257</sup> "Cab Calloway has Broadway in Hand," *Chicago Defender*, September 4, 1943, 10.
- <sup>258</sup> *Indianapolis Star*, February 8, 1936, 11.
- <sup>259</sup> Here and There in the Theatrical World," 14.
- <sup>260</sup> For another example reporting audiences in the South sang with Calloway see, "Cab Calloway to Sing Texas Song at Waco Theater," *Waco News-Tribune*, October 10, 1934, 10.
- <sup>261</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 155-63.
- <sup>262</sup> Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 50, 70-1.

- <sup>263</sup> Hughes.
- <sup>264</sup> Sell, 2.
- <sup>265</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>266</sup> Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 341; Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical*, 224; Simon, 110; For a rebuttal for a similar argument against Stuff Smith see, Burke, 83.
- <sup>267</sup> Sloan, 373.
- <sup>268</sup> “This Thing Called Swing,” 6.
- <sup>269</sup> “Reviewer Finds Cab Calloway at Best Displaying Wares for Broadway Folk,” 10.
- <sup>270</sup> “Texas State News,” *Chicago Defender*, May 27, 1933, 18.
- <sup>271</sup> “Cab Calloway Hits Jackpot at the Earle,” *Washington Post*, April 9, 1938, x16.
- <sup>272</sup> “RKO Boston Theatre,” *Boston Globe*, July 9, 1943, 10; Calloway Press Manual.
- <sup>273</sup> Calloway Press Manual.
- <sup>274</sup> “Calloway Turns it On,” 9.
- <sup>275</sup> “Tommye Berry, “Cab Calloway Triumphs in Kansas City House,” *Chicago Defender*, July 27, 1935, 6.
- <sup>276</sup> The above example specifically mentions how fans (presumably of all races) idolize Calloway and how generous he is in meeting with them, “He is smiling and accommodating to his fans and the fans are as eager to get a close-up of their idol as they are to receive the much-prized autographs, hence Cab is always a welcome asset to Kansas City’s entertainment lovers.”
- <sup>277</sup> Staiger calls for more studies addressing how content and experiences before and after the film viewings which impact reception. This is one attempt to do this, though it is an ever-elusive process to trace though.
- <sup>278</sup> This feature also existed in the 1920s as the “Vaudeville House Reviews.”
- <sup>279</sup> Hobart Bosworth- Vaudeville Tour 1932, B’hend and Kaufmann Collection, 10.f-[63], Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences ; Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (Earle Theatre), B’hend and Kaufmann Collection, 88.f-3290, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; Warner Bros. Archive, University of Southern California.
- <sup>280</sup> W. Ward Marsh, “Hey! Hey! Cab’s Here!,” *The Plaindealer* (Cleveland, Ohio), u.d., n.p., Calloway Press Manual.
- <sup>281</sup> Ross Melnick calls this the “unified text.” Ross Melnick, *American Showman: Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908-1935* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) 13-5.
- <sup>282</sup> *Faithless* is an MGM film starring Tallulah Bankhead and Robert Montgomery about a socialite (Bankhead) who loses her wealth as a result of the Depression.
- <sup>283</sup> Mordaunt Hall, “The Screen,” *New York Times*, November 19, 1932, 20; “*Faithless*,” *Film Daily*, November 19, 1932, 4; “Capitol,” *Variety*, November 22, 1932, 41.

<sup>284</sup> “Capitol, New York,” *Billboard*, November, 26, 1932, 11. I would argue that the difference between these reviews is not a general difference in taste, but rather reflective of a tendency to view African American jazz performances as unfit for variety palaces. Unlike *Variety*’s review, Harris is preoccupied by the racial implications of Calloway’s performance, and describes the act as stereotypically exotic and animalistic, transplanting slumming practices of Harlem night clubs into the theater. Harris wrote, “With this colored show the Capitol’s boards appear to be invaded once again...this show affords transients and local stay-at-homers who have never invaded a Harlem club a bird’s-eye view of what they would see [...] you are able to grasp the mad syncopation and untiring rhythmic efforts of the colored performers, with the hi-dee-hi warbling and hotcha hoofing. One thing, tho [*sic*], you get bewildered watching this show, for the stage is so heavily tenanted and things come so fast and furious you get the same feeling you would watching a three-ring circus.” Harris’s response suggests that that instead of a seeing Calloway’s performance as a distinct, yet complementary component of the variety palace experience, some audiences viewed Calloway’s performances as racially charged and out-of-place, better fit for the bizarre showplaces.

<sup>285</sup> Tim Snelson ‘They’ll Be Dancing in the Aisles!’: Youth audiences, cinema exhibition and the mid-1930s swing boom, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 37:3, 2017, 455-474.

<sup>286</sup> Erenberg, 4.

<sup>287</sup> Orpheum Theatre, Los Angeles -- clippings 1942, B’hend and Kaufmann Collection, 138.f-4606, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

<sup>288</sup> *The BigbandLibrary.com*, <http://www.bigbandlibrary.com/billboardpolls.html>, Accessed May 13, 2021. African American artists largely did not make this list. Lunceford is the exception, appears low in the rank each time.

<sup>289</sup> Shipton, 125.

<sup>290</sup> “Of thee I Swing: Our National Anthem,” *Albuquerque Journal*, March 13, 1938, 16.

<sup>291</sup> Linton Martin, “Place of ‘Swing’ Today as Musical Phenomenon,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 19, 1942, 51

<sup>292</sup> Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., *Show Biz: From Vaude to Video* (New York: Doubleday, 1953), 458-9.

<sup>293</sup> “RKO Boston Theatre,” *Boston Globe*, July 9, 1943, 10.

<sup>294</sup> Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Catherine Sue Ramírez, *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>295</sup> Calloway and Rollins; Tucker and Jackson;

<sup>296</sup> Tivoli Contracts, Stage Show Collection, Box 84, Folders 485-499, Theater Historical Society. The Chicago Theater also appears to have taken a similar approach in the mid-1950s. Chicago Theater Contracts, Stage Show Collection, Box 84, Folders 500-504, Theater Historical Society.

<sup>297</sup> I would hypothesize this slight change in imagined audience was the result of increasing suburbanization and white flight effecting Chicago and other cities with large populations of African Americans.



## **Conclusion**

In this dissertation, I have explained how and why live performance and showmanship survived the Depression and the corporatization of theatrical exhibition. My approach aimed to balance the pressures and realities of the studio system with the present and driving force of local autonomy. In this way, my findings rekindle post-1930 what has been central in exhibition studies of early and silent cinema: a focus on the interplay of national, regional, and local cultures and economics within histories centered around audiences. Using live performance, I provided a sense of the scale at which managers and performers exercised this form of autonomy, and have established the conditions (such as decentralization, market saturation, and film distribution policies) which made it possible and drove its use. I then explored the impact of this form on performers and audiences. By examining African American swing musicians and their interactions and effects on theatergoing, I argued that live performance histories make marginalized audiences and their experiences historically visible, and supported a star system which fostered the comparative autonomy, empowerment, and success of performers of color.

My findings and approaches open up further avenues for research on the social history of theatergoing. As the field continues to invest in the experiences and contributions of marginalized peoples, some of this research must continue to center on live performance. I believe that continued case studies of different performers, genres of performance and live music, and locales will extend my findings much further.

Here are a few examples that point future research in other directions. The first involves Asian American audiences and onstage performers. In April 1938, the Oriental Theater (Chicago, B&K/Paramount) programmed a week-long bill headlined by the Frisco Follies, a twenty-member Chinese American acrobat company. The Follies' contract stipulated their pay as a \$1,850 flat fee "plus fifty percent of Chinese patronage this week."<sup>1</sup> To facilitate this agreement, management agreed to "clock Chinese patrons and settlement will be made on basis of price of admission paid."<sup>2</sup> The act and its usual payment structure hint at two important findings for media history. First, it suggests the continuation of vaudeville's practice of attracting a heterogenous audience in part by constructing a bill in which certain components were primarily intended to attract one or more specific groups. The Frisco Follies (and perhaps theater management) would not have agreed to this contract unless they believed their act could attract Asian American audiences, especially because other headline acts at the Oriental Theater earned nearly twice as much when paid only a flat rate. Relatedly, the Frisco Follies's performance makes visible traces of Asian American audiences, which a growing—though still relatively small—body of scholarship aims to chronicle.<sup>3</sup> I believe this approach expands this previous work by examining Asian American theatergoing beyond fairly segregated, ethnic communities, like so-called "Chinatowns," on which these previous works center. As in my study of African American jazz bands and black audiences, a case study like this demonstrates the mobility and at least occasional patronage of Asian Americans in urban entertainment centers, (potentially) attracted into multiracial audiences by seeking entertainment befitting their tastes and desired representations.

The second example involves international vaudeville circuits. My dissertation focuses rather exclusively on the United States and its contexts, but future research on the role of live

performance circuits for performances and audiences of color would benefit from a transnational approach. Vaudeville, vaudefilm, and live performance circuits even more sizable than those run by the studios continued operation in major cities in South America, Europe, Australia, and Russia.<sup>4</sup> Performers traversed between these international circuits and those in the United States frequently, and circuit managers and talent directors continued to recruit acts outside of their own countries. These activities indicate cultural, political, and economic exchange. Future research on these circuits could investigate the geopolitical affordances of international tours for celebrities of color. In line with growing research into the mobility of black celebrity during the late 19th and early 20th century, these formalized circuits could have facilitated some amount of freedom from the strictures of largely segregated US media industries, allowing performers of color to strategically accumulate critical and commercial acclaim abroad and utilize it to trouble racial barriers domestically.<sup>5</sup>

One last example involves the decline of the studio-supported live performance circuits. While vaudeville and forms of variety theater thrived long after the period of my study, even in variety palaces until at least the 1970s, the formalized circuits at the heart of this dissertation fragmented and dissolved during the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Instead of lamenting this decline, though, further work could examine it in order to discover what changed in theater programming, attendance, and audience experience during the post-war period, which also saw the divorcement of theater ownership from the studios, the proliferation of television, large-scale suburbanization, “white flight,” and an emerging civil rights movement. In Chicago and Los Angeles, for example, it appears that these changes fostered increased opportunities for live entertainment to cater to the urban communities of color. This might suggest that suburbanization and the complete decentralization of these circuits forced theaters to offer

programs anchored in live performance that they believed would attract local audiences of color, particularly African and Latinx Americans.<sup>7</sup>

While this dissertation focused on live performance, my research reaffirms that social histories of theatergoing must be inclusive of all components of audience experience and the work of exhibitors. As others have called for, in one way this means we also need studies that decenter entertainment (stage or screen) as our primary object of analysis.<sup>8</sup> Live performance, like film, was just one of the many possible elements in the ecology of theatergoing, which intertwined architecture, demography, advertising, performance, economics, and interpersonal relationships (among others); all of which make understanding the social history of exhibition necessarily an interdisciplinary undertaking. The diverse audiences that ventured into theaters did not just experience or seek out films or live acts; what they saw and experienced were shaped by industries, people, performers, cultural phenomena not principally in the film or variety theater industries.

My specific call to historians expands on this premise: inclusive social histories of theatergoing must expand the reach and duties of exhibitors beyond the theater and beyond what one might consider theatrical or traditional entertainment. Research for this dissertation into the corporatization of exhibition and theater chains through training manuals and company records has led to new conceptions of showmanship that extend beyond the theater's role in entertainment and directly into local communities. Though I contend that the book keeper model of theater management eventually (though later than previously understood and not with the total exclusion of stage acts) became the norm, this does not mean that exhibitors ceased to be showmen. Scholars have long established exhibition's charge over exploitation and advertising.<sup>9</sup> Even if the manager did not design or program the show in line with pre-studio definition of

showmanship, they were charged and empowered to develop how they sold films and live acts, and otherwise attracted local patrons to their theater. Hollywood's production offices and the head offices of theater chains sent press books with advertising recommendations or premade templates, which managers could and did use. But they were also free to (and rewarded with chain-wide and industry wide awards) to organize and coordinate their marketing schemes, including everything from staging a Hollywood caliber premiere for a critically mediocre movie in a small town, to coupon books, dishware giveaways, and coordinated plugs for the show in businesses across a town.<sup>10</sup> In one example of the latter, a theater manager in Syracuse promoting a combination program headlined by Cab Calloway recruited several other businesses to theme their products around Calloway or place the band leader's name on their merchandise. Juke boxes around town played only Calloway records; music stores mailed flyers to their clients and placed stickers with Calloway's names on all their records and sheet music; the town's taxi cabs all adorned bumper stickers reading "take a cab to see Cab," and a chain of drug stores featured a "Hi-De-Ho sundae." Coupled with "boys carry[ing] banners down main street during rush hours and barkers with p.a. systems outside the theater and driving around town, the name of a black celebrity had literally taken over the visual space and sound scape of Syracuse.<sup>11</sup> Archives with significant holdings of exhibition material reflect this dual focus: theater chains training, encouraging, and codifying managers to be book keeper accountants *and* showmen advertisers.

If one is not fixated on traditional entertainment, however, these archives reveal a third prong of an exhibitor's job and their showmanship: community engagement. The role and space of theaters in the social lives of the local communities is certainly not a new phenomenon during the studio era. What I would argue is new, however, is that community engagement becomes an

explicit part of exhibitors' corporate mission, one outside of, though not unrelated to, their goal of selling admission tickets. Alongside advertising, theater chains controlled or affiliated with the studios obsessed over their work with and involvement in all aspects of their community. Training manuals from Paramount, RKO, and Fox all dedicated sections or chapters to "public service," "civic duty," "good will," as did manuals created by Mullins & Panski (M&P) Theaters, the largest theater chain in New England.<sup>12</sup> The Interstate Theater Circuit, the largest chain of theaters in Texas and its surrounding states and at different times affiliated with both RKO and Paramount, was so dedicated to the concept that it entirely made up their company motto: "community service." Unsurprisingly, the Interstate dedicated at least a day during its annual three-day managers convention to the topic.<sup>13</sup>

These manuals held up the theater as an "instrument of great possibilities for good [... and] an agent of untold community value, if guided intelligently and controlled by persons who recognize their moral responsibility."<sup>14</sup> As such managers had clear "duty and obligation to the public."<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the book-keeping approach which desired that managers keep out of programming, chains charged that "civic life is [the manager's] field of exploration, and they should be "Barnumesque [... though] fundamentally sincere" in their "desire to serve and contribute a constructive part to the life of the community."<sup>16</sup> Accomplishing this required to insert themselves into "every civic organization [...], taking an active part in its affairs, and also cooperating with every worthwhile civic, social, and business event," even if this required running for public office themselves.<sup>17</sup> It also required inserting themselves into the daily life of the community. The chains encouraged managers to keep detailed records about and acknowledge birthdays, deaths, new residents, and wedding anniversaries, and compile whatever

other personal information they could secure from “insurance companies, clubs, churches, and schools [...] rental offices, and the water, light, telephone, and other such companies.”<sup>18</sup>

With this information, chains then recommend managers develop showman-esque civic campaigns and events. Some of the more national campaigns organized as part of this corporate mission, such as selling bonds and promoting United States propaganda during World War II, are better known in film scholarship.<sup>19</sup> But many of these events were coordinated locally and regionally, with total managerial control. Theaters hosted, welcomed, and helped organize church services, business conventions, cooking schools, school events, talent shows, beauty contests, women’s clubs, summer camps, boy and girl scout troupes, and fundraisers for civil rights (of African Americans and Jewish people in particular), political causes and military support, orphanages, and health research.<sup>20</sup> Corporate offices instructed managers to be selective in who and what groups they choose to work with, or welcome in their theaters for sponsored fundraising events and benefits.<sup>21</sup>

As insinuated by other names for this focus on community, including “institutional advertising” or “good-will advertising,” managers and circuits believed this effort brought financial and political benefit.<sup>22</sup> One part of this involved building patron loyalty, which they saw as especially important to differentiate a theater in competitive markets; encouraging attendance at their theater regardless of what film or programming theaters in the area offered. Another intention was to use it to combat accusations that cinema was morally questionable and corrupted impressionable minds by “champion[ing] the theater as a vital factor in the maintenance of public welfare.”<sup>23</sup> By encouraging networking with public officials (or becoming politicians themselves), the chains also attempted to create a wide network of political influence.

The chains wanted to utilize these “contacts” and “friends” against “unfair legislation” such as government regulated censorship and increased taxation.<sup>24</sup>

Such findings deserve further attention and open new questions about the social and culture impacts of these actives and events: what function did theater managers and chains have as mediators for community life and values, and for what efforts and ideologies did they wield their adept advertising and marketing? What roles did local exhibitors, rather than the studios themselves, play in continuing debate about censorship and regulation of films? Answering these questions will connect histories of entertainment and its companies into longer, interdisciplinary histories of corporate philanthropy and corporate social responsibly as a business mission and marketing tactic.

Like my study of live performance circuits, I believe these proposed directions for film studies demonstrate the utility of treating theaters (even chain theaters) as spaces which facilitated the interplay of national, sometimes standardized entertainment mediated through the performances, advertising, events, benefits, and receptions controlled and impacted by managers, performers, patrons, and local organizations. This approach and its findings recast theaters as cultural centers, with aims and reach that extended beyond the screen, onto the stage, into the audience, and outside of the theater walls into the community.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Agreement between Harry Rogers, Frisco Follies, and Theatre Booking Office - April 9, 1938, "F" 1938 – Booking Contracts, Box 103-12, Balaban and Katz Collection, Theater Historical Society, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

<sup>2</sup> Agreement between Harry Rogers, Frisco Follies, and Theatre Booking Office.

<sup>3</sup> Kim K. Fahlstedt, *Chinatown Film Culture: The Appearance of Cinema in San Francisco's Chinese Neighborhood* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

Like scholarship on other marginalized peoples, film research on Asian Americans centers on media makers and onscreen representation. See, for example, Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu, eds., *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000); Jun Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens: History, Representations, and Identity* (Oxford: Altamira, 1998); Lori Kido Lopez and Vincent Pham, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Asian American Media* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Wolfe Kaufman, "International Show Business," *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 131. "Vaudeville Looks to Europe," *Billboard*, April 11, 1936, 10-11; Robert Stern, "In Paris," *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 199; Claire Trask, "In Berlin," *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 199; "In London," *Variety*, January 1, 1936, 199; "Find 10-Week Italian Tour," *Variety*, October 31, 1933, 54; Wolfe Kaufman, "The International Show Biz Scene," *Variety*, January 6, 1937, 121; "Arg. Exhibs Struggle to Live Up to Vaudfilm Law; Scour Legit Field," *Variety*, September 1, 1954, 24.

<sup>5</sup> James W. Cook, "Finding Otira: On the Geopolitics of Black Celebrity," *Raritan* 34, no. 2 (2014): 84–111.

<sup>6</sup> Trav S. D., *No Applause, Just Throw Money: The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 262-6.

<sup>7</sup> Tivoli Contracts, Stage Show Collection, Box 84, Folders 485-499, Theater Historical Society, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Chicago Theater also appears to have taken a similar approach in the mid-1950s. Chicago Theater Contracts, Stage Show Collection, Box 84, Folders 500-504, Theater Historical Society; "California, Los Angeles (Orpheum Theatre)—Clippings 1924-1991, Folder 28, Box 705, B'hend & Kaufmann Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Maltby, "How Can Cinema History Matter More?," *Screening the Past*, no. 22 (December 2007); Richard Maltby, Philippe Meers, and Daniel Blitereyst, eds., *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Daniel Blitereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, eds., *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Richard Maltby, "Sticks, Hicks and Flaps: Classical Hollywood's Generic Conception of Its Audience," in *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, "What the Picture Did for Me?: Small-Town Exhibitors' Strategies for Surviving the Great Depression," in *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of*

*Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 169–86; “Elkhart Scoops New York,” *The Elkhart Truth*, June 15, 1938. The author thanks Kathryn Fuller-Seeley for showing me her research into the Elco Theater’s (Elkhart, IN) “world premiere” of *Blockade* (1938).

<sup>11</sup> M. H. Orodener, “Selling the Band,” *Billboard*, November 23, 1940, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Harold Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), 326-8; Frank H Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1938), 103-8; Don Chambers, *Institutional Advertising* (Boston: M&P Theatres, 1933), Box 7, Folder 9, Leo Morgan Collection, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; “Paramount – Publix Prosperity Week Manual (no. 1290),” September 12, 1930, Box 7, Folder 9, Leo Morgan Collection; Don Chambers, *The Theatre’s Trade Area* (Boston: M&P Theatres, 1933), Box 7, Folder 9, Leo Morgan Collection,

<sup>13</sup> Don Hinga, *Forty Years of Community Service: The Story of Karl Hoblitzelle and the Development of Interstate Theatres* (Dallas: Interstate Theater Circuit, 1946); “Minutes of 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention of Interstate Circuit and Texas Consolidated Theatres, Inc. (May 8-11, 1939), Box 7, Hoblitzelle Interstate Theatre Circuit Collection, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.

<sup>14</sup> Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, 326-7.

<sup>15</sup> Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, 326.

<sup>16</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres*, 103-4.

<sup>17</sup> Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, 328; Don Chambers, *Institutional Advertising*, 4; “Paramount – Publix Prosperity Week Manual (no. 1290).”

<sup>18</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres*, 104-5.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 147-9.

<sup>20</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 105-7; Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, 326-8; Don Chambers, *The Theatre’s Trade Area*, 4-6; “RKO Annual Reports, History, and Manuals, 1943-1961,” Box 2, Folder 1, Harry Mandel Papers, Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; Drew Meincke, “The Paradise Theater (1941-1951): African American Movie Palaces and the 1943 Racial Uprising in Detroit,” *Film Matters* 13, no. 1 (July 2022): 83-95. For Fox Theaters, in particular, this civic minded managerial approach also meant extending theater services and amenities to the community, even if they were not attending a show. Rest rooms and the staffed nursery, for example, should remain free and open to the public, particularly women shopping nearby.

<sup>21</sup> Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, 327-8.

<sup>22</sup> Ricketson, *The Management of Motion Picture Theaters*, 103; Don Chambers, *Institutional Advertising*.

<sup>23</sup> Don Chambers, *Institutional Advertising*, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Franklin, *Motion Picture Theater Management*, 327; Don Chambers, *Institutional Advertising*, 3.

## APPENDIX A

### *Variety's* "Variety Bills" Database

This appendix includes executive summaries of the data collected from *Variety's* "Variety Bills," which tracked theaters combining movies and live acts, for the sample years 1930,<sup>1</sup> 1935, 1939, 1944, and 1948. There are also links to all the compiled data for each year. These spreadsheets are searchable and sortable. The tabs at the bottom show total tabulations sorted by theater, city, circuit, and acts.

#### Year-by-Year Comparison

##### Total Cities

**1930:** 186  
**1935:** 187  
**1939:** 91  
**1944:** 104  
**1948:** 68

##### Total Acts Programmed

**1930:** 8817  
**1935:** 4132  
**1939:** 2599  
**1944:** 2435  
**1948:** 1462

##### Total Theaters

**1930:** 483  
**1935:** 378  
**1939:** 147  
**1944:** 137  
**1948:** 109

##### Average Number of Bills Per Week

**1930:** 270  
**1935:** 63  
**1939:** 34  
**1944:** 52  
**1948:** 26

##### Circuits (in order from most to least number of bills)

**1930:** RKO, Loew's, Picture Theaters, Fanchon & Marco, Association, Interstate, Great Lakes, Western RKO, Provincial, Butterfield, Stanley-Fabian (Warner Bros.)

**1935:** RKO, Loew's, Paramount, Warner Bros. Wilbur Cushman, Independent, Fanchon & Marco

**1939:** Independent, Warner Bros., RKO, Paramount, Loew's World's Fair (NYC)

**1944:** Independent, Southern, Warner Bros. RKO, Paramount, Loew's

**1948:** Independent, Paramount, Loew's, RKO, Warner Bros., Walter Reade

---

<sup>1</sup> The summary for 1930 only includes programs reported to *Variety* up to September 20, 1930. The last three months of the year will be added to the database later.

## 1930<sup>2</sup>

Link to spreadsheet: <https://bit.ly/3QqjVql>

### Circuit-Wide Totals, Ranges, and Averages

- Cities Using Live Acts
  - 186
- Total Theaters
  - 483
- Total Unique Acts/Groups
  - 8817
- Total Bills
  - 10523

### Total Bills by Circuit/Studio

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| ● RKO <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 5204</li></ul>                           | ● Great States <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 110</li></ul>                |
| ● Loew's <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 1891</li></ul>                        | ● Western RKO <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 42</li></ul>                  |
| ● Picture Theaters <sup>3</sup> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 1274</li></ul> | ● Provincial <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 23</li></ul>                   |
| ● Fanchon & Marcon <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 1053</li></ul>              | ● Butterfield <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 7</li></ul>                   |
| ● Association Vaudeville <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 680</li></ul>         | ● Stanley-Fabian (Warner Bros.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 5</li></ul> |
| ● Interstate Circuit <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 229</li></ul>             |   |

---

<sup>2</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>3</sup> For a short time, *Variety* tried to organize variety palaces into their own category called "Picture Theaters," regardless of ownership. Many of these theaters were owned by the major circuits, but they are not reflected in their circuit totals. The idea was that this category would help keep track of what theaters programmed presentations, but by the late 1920s most theaters programmed bills that could not be categorized perfectly as presentations or vaudeville.

### **Top Ten Cities by Totals Bills**

- |              |                     |
|--------------|---------------------|
| 1. New York  | 6. Buffalo          |
| a. 2001      | a. 171              |
| 2. Brooklyn  | 7. Washington, D.C. |
| a. 912       | a. 170              |
| 3. Chicago   | 8. Yonkers          |
| a. 499       | a. 152              |
| 4. Cleveland | 9. Boston           |
| a. 191       | a. 150              |
| 5. Detroit   | 10. Pittsburgh      |
| a. 183       | a. 14               |

### **Ten Most Booked Acts/Groups**

- |                       |                     |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Sunkist Beauties   | 6. Luster Bros      |
| a. 98 bills           | a. 67 bills         |
| 2. Roy Rogers         | 7. Vox & Walters    |
| a. 79 bills           | a. 63 bills         |
| 3. Chester Hale Girls | 8. Wilton & Weber   |
| a. 75 bills           | a. 61 bills         |
| 4. Peter Higgins      | 9. Tiny Town Revue  |
| a. 73 bills           | a. 61 bills         |
| 5. Ada Kaufman Girls  | 10. Ryan & Noblette |
| a. 68 bills           | a. 61 bills         |

### **Twenty Theaters with the Most Bills**

1. Franklin, New York, RKO  
a. 105
2. Coliseum, New York City, RKO  
a. 105
3. Chester, New York City, RKO  
a. 105
4. Kenmore, Brooklyn, RKO  
a. 103
5. Madison, Brooklyn, RKO  
a. 101
6. Keith's, Yonkers, RKO  
a. 101
7. Keith's, Schenectady, RKO  
a. 100
8. Capitol, Union Hill, RKO  
a. 92
9. Royal, New York, RKO  
a. 88
10. Hamilton, New York, RKO  
a. 88
11. Fordham, New York, RKO  
a. 86
12. Jefferson, New York, RKO  
a. 85
13. Keith's, White Plains, RKO  
a. 76
14. Keith's, Paterson, RKO  
a. 75
15. Palace, Newark, RKO  
a. 72
16. Orpheum, St. Paul, RKO  
a. 72
17. Orpheum, Oakland, RKO  
a. 72
18. National, New York, Loew's  
a. 72
19. Loew's, Bay Ridge, Loew's  
a. 72
20. Lincoln Sq., New York, Loew's  
a. 72

## 1935

Link to spreadsheet: <https://bit.ly/3HvjC9C>

### Circuit-Wide Totals, Ranges, and Averages

- Cities Using Live Acts
  - 187
- Total Theaters
  - 378
- Total Unique Acts/Groups
  - 4132
- Total Bills
  - 3254

### Total Bills by Circuit/Studio

- RKO
  - 1041
- Loew's
  - 597
- Paramount
  - 457
- Warner Bros.
  - 394
- Wilbur Cushman
  - 340
- Independent
  - 277
- Fanchon & Marco
  - 148

### Top Ten Cities by Totals Bills

- |                     |                  |
|---------------------|------------------|
| 11. Chicago         | 16. Detroit      |
| a. 406              | a. 135           |
| 12. New York        | 17. Philadelphia |
| a. 396              | a. 123           |
| 13. Brooklyn        | 18. Pittsburgh   |
| a. 204              | a. 109           |
| 14. Boston          | 19. Los Angeles  |
| a. 154              | a. 93            |
| 15. Washington D.C. | 20. Cleveland    |
| a. 146              | a. 81            |

### **Ten Most Booked Acts/Groups**

- |                     |                          |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| 11. Eddie Peabody   | 16. John Fogarty         |
| a. 39 bills         | a. 28 bills              |
| 12. Large & Morgner | 17. Bob Ripa             |
| a. 30 bills         | a. 28 bills              |
| 13. Johnny Perkins  | 18. Blackstone           |
| a. 30 bills         | a. 27 bills              |
| 14. Vic Oliver      | 19. Sylvia Manon Company |
| a. 29 bills         | a. 26 bills              |
| 15. John Fogarty    | 20. Jackie Heller        |
| a. 28 bills         | a. 26 bills              |

### **Twenty Theaters with the Most Bills**

- |  |       |  |
|--|-------|--|
| 1. Earle Theater, Washington D.C.,<br>Warner Bros. | a. 64 | 11. Palace Theater, New York, RKO                        |
| a. 98  |       | a. 56  |
| 2. Chicago Theater, Chicago,<br>Paramount          |       | 12. Academy, New York, RKO                               |
| a. 93  |       | a. 56  |
| 3. Palace Theater, Chicago, RKO                    |       | 13. Orpheum Theater, Minneapolis,<br>RKO                 |
| a. 91  |       | a. 51  |
| 4. Earle Theater, Philadelphia, Warner<br>Bros.    |       | 14. State Theater, New York, Loew's                      |
| a. 61  |       | a. 50  |
| 5. Oriental Theater, Chicago,<br>Paramount         |       | 15. Michigan Theater, Detroit,<br>Paramount              |
| a. 74  |       | a. 48  |
| 6. Palace Theater, Cleveland, RKO                  |       | 16. Metropolitan Theater, Boston,<br>Paramount           |
| a. 73  |       | a. 48  |
| 7. Fox Theater, Detroit, Independent               |       | 17. Keith's Theater, Providence, RKO                     |
| a. 66  |       | a. 48  |
| 8. Stanley Theater, Pittsburgh, Warner<br>Bros.    |       | 18. Century Theater, Baltimore, Loew's                   |
| a. 65  |       | a. 48  |
| 9. Keith's Theater, Rochester (NY),<br>RKO         |       | 19. State Lake, Chicago, Independent                     |
| a. 65  |       | a. 47  |
| 10. Orpheum, New York, Loew's                      |       | 20. Plymouth Theater, Worcester (MA),<br>Fanchon & Marco |
|  |       | a. 47  |



**Link to spreadsheet: <https://bit.ly/3mZK8OM>**

**Circuit-Wide Totals, Ranges, and Averages**

- Cities Using Live Acts
  - 91
- Total Unique Acts/Groups
  - 2599
- Total Bills
  - 1734
- Total Theaters
  - 147
- Average City Population<sup>4</sup>
  - 421,905
- Average Seating Capacity
  - 2,332 seats
- City with Smallest Population
  - 5,507 (Pitman, New Jersey)
- Theater with Smallest Capacity
  - 621 Seats (Huntington Theater, Virginia)

**Total Bills by Circuit/Studio**

- Independent Theaters
  - 680
- Warner Bros
  - 322
- RKO
  - 311
- Paramount
  - 186
- Loew's
  - 130
- World's Fair (in New York City)
  - 105

---

<sup>4</sup> I have yet to compile city average theater capacities or city populations for all the sample years.

### **Top Ten Cities by Totals Bills**

- |                    |                           |
|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. New York        | 6. Cleveland              |
| a. 381             | a. 63                     |
| 2. Philadelphia    | 7. Pittsburgh             |
| a. 159             | a. 59                     |
| 3. Washington D.C. | 8. Boston                 |
| a. 134             | a. 47                     |
| 4. Chicago         | 9. Milwaukee              |
| a. 132             | a. 43                     |
| 5. Baltimore       | 10. Paterson (New Jersey) |
| a. 124             | a. 42                     |

### **Ten Most Booked Acts/Groups**

- |                          |                        |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Gae Foster Girls      | 6. Major Bowes Company |
| a. 54 bills              | a. 25 bills            |
| 2. Erno Rapee Orchestra  | 7. Don Rice            |
| a. 41 bills              | a. 25 bills            |
| 3. Rockettes and Company | 8. Paul Ash Orchestra  |
| a. 40 bills              | a. 23 bills            |
| 4. Chester Hale Girls    | 9. Brown & Ames        |
| a. 29 bills              | a. 22 bills            |
| 5. Cass Daley            | 10. Del Rios           |
| a. 27 bills              | a. 20 bills            |

### **Twenty Theaters with the Most Bills**

1. Earle Theater, Washington D.C., Warner Bros.  
    a. 86
2. State Theater, Baltimore, Independent  
    a. 76
3. Strand Theater, New York City, Warner Bros.  
    a. 71
4. Palace Theater, Cleveland, RKO  
    a. 61
5. Stanley, Pittsburgh, Warner Bros.  
    a. 59
6. Palace Theater, Chicago, RKO  
    a. 59
7. Carman Theater, Philadelphia, Independent  
    a. 50

8. State Theater, New York City, Loew's
  - a. 49
9. Radio City Music Hall, New York City, RKO
  - a. 48
10. Fox Theater, Philadelphia, Warner Bros.
  - a. 48
11. Capitol Theater, Washington D.C., Loew's
  - a. 48
12. Paramount, New York City, Paramount
  - a. 46
13. Chicago Theater, Chicago, Paramount
  - a. 46
14. Roxy Theater, New York City, Independent (Fanchon & Marco)
  - a. 44
15. Hippodrome, Baltimore, Independent
  - a. 43
16. Riverside Theater, Milwaukee, Independent
  - a. 42
17. Majestic Theater, Paterson, Independent
  - a. 42
18. Keith Theater, Boston, RKO
  - a. 40
19. Earle, Philadelphia, Warner Bros.
  - a. 39
20. Lyric, Indianapolis, Independent
  - a. 35

Link to spreadsheet: <https://bit.ly/39sTTSP>

**Circuit-Wide Totals, Ranges, and Averages**

- Cities Using Live Acts
  - 104
- Total Theaters
  - 137
- Total Unique Acts/Groups
  - 2435
- Total Bills
  - 2708

**Total Bills by Circuit/Studio**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| ● Independent <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 1171</li></ul> | ● RKO <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 364</li></ul>       |
| ● Southern <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>418</li></ul>       | ● Paramount <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 222</li></ul> |
| ● Warner Bros. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 379</li></ul> | ● Loew's <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 154</li></ul>    |

**Top Ten Cities by Totals Bills**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. New York <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 403</li></ul>        | 6. Boston <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 105</li></ul>        |
| 2. Washington D.C. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 162</li></ul> | 7. Columbus <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 92</li></ul>       |
| 3. Baltimore <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 162</li></ul>       | 8. Cleveland <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 87</li></ul>      |
| 4. Long Island <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 160</li></ul>     | 9. Chicago <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 73</li></ul>        |
| 5. Philadelphia <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 150</li></ul>    | 10. Paterson (NJ) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 57</li></ul> |

### **Ten Most Booked Acts/Groups**

1. Roxyettes  
a. 84 bills
2. Eileen Ritter  
a. 50 bills
3. Tommy Tucker Orchestra  
a. 32 bills
4. West & Lexing  
a. 29 bills
5. Charlie Barnet Orchestra  
a. 29 bills
6. Dick Buckley  
a. 28 bills
7. Cab Calloway Orchestra  
a. 28 bills
8. Ladd Lyon  
a. 27 bills
9. 3 Hearts  
a. 27 bills
10. Sammy Kaye  
a. 24 bills

### **Twenty Theaters with the Most Bills**

1. Jamaica Theater, Long Island,  
Independent  
a. 123
2. Strand Theater, New York, Warner  
Bros.  
a. 100
3. Earle, Philadelphia, Warner Bros.  
a. 93
4. Earle Theater, Washington D.C.,  
Warner Bros.  
a. 90
5. Boston Theater, Boston, RKO  
a. 89
6. State Theater, Baltimore,  
Independent  
a. 88
7. Palace Theater, Columbus, RKO  
a. 87
8. Palace Theater, Cleveland, RKO  
a. 71
9. Majestic Theater, Paterson,  
Independent  
a. 57
10. Stanley Theater, Pittsburgh, Warner  
Bros.  
a. 53
11. Radio City Music Hall, New York,  
Independent  
a. 53
12. State Theater, Hartford, Independent  
a. 51
13. Hippodrome, Baltimore, Independent  
a. 51
14. Capitol Theater, New York City,  
Loew's  
a. 51
15. State Theater, New York, Loew's  
a. 50
16. Towers Theater, Camden,  
Independent  
a. 49
17. Roxy Theater, New York, RKO  
a. 49
18. Paramount Theater, New York,  
Paramount  
a. 49
19. Chicago Theater, Chicago,  
Paramount  
a. 49
20. Olympia Theater, Miami, Paramount  
a. 49

## 1948

Link to spreadsheet: <https://bit.ly/3tFxTLn>

### Circuit-Wide Totals, Ranges, and Averages

- Cities Using Live Acts
  - 68
- Total Theaters
  - 109
- Total Unique Acts/Groups
  - 1462
- Total Bills
  - 1383

### Total Bills by Circuit/Studio

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| ● Independent <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 887</li></ul> | ● RKO <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 80</li></ul>          |
| ● Paramount <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>214</li></ul>     | ● Warner Bros. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 56</li></ul> |
| ● Loew's <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 107</li></ul>      | ● Walter Reade <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ 38</li></ul> |

### Top Ten Cities by Totals Bills

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. New York <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 261</li></ul>        | 6. Rockford (IL) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 51</li></ul> |
| 2. Baltimore <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 161</li></ul>       | 7. Paterson (NJ) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 92</li></ul> |
| 3. Chicago <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 117</li></ul>         | 8. Miami <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 51</li></ul>         |
| 4. Washington, D.C. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 75</li></ul> | 9. Philadelphia <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 50</li></ul>  |
| 5. Queens <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 57</li></ul>           | 10. Camden (NJ) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>a. 49</li></ul>  |

### **Ten Most Booked Acts/Groups**

1. Rockettes and Company
  - a. 49 bills
2. Carl Sands Orchestra
  - a. 34 bills
3. Paul Walker Orchestra
  - a. 22 bills
4. Glee Club
  - a. 21 bills
5. Arnold Shoda
  - a. 17 bills
6. Mills Bros.
  - a. 12 bills
7. Horace Heidt
  - a. 12 bills
8. Helene & Howard
  - a. 10 bills
9. Tex Beneke Orchestra
  - a. 9 bills
10. Paul Franke
  - a. 9 bills

### **Twenty Theaters with the Most Bills**

1. State Theater, Baltimore, Independent
  - a. 97
2. Jamaica Theater, Long Island, Independent
  - a. 56
3. Roxy Theater, New York, Independent
  - a. 52
4. Paramount Theater, New York, Paramount
  - a. 52
5. Olympia Theater, Miami, Paramount
  - a. 52
6. Radio City Music Hall, New York, Independent
  - a. 52
7. Capitol Theater, New York City, Loew's
  - a. 52
8. Palace Theater, Rockford, Independent
  - a. 51
9. Oriental Theater, Chicago, Paramount
  - a. 51
10. Majestic Theater, Paterson, Independent
  - a. 51
11. Strand Theater, New York, Warner Bros.
  - a. 50
12. Hippodrome, Baltimore, Independent
  - a. 50
13. Towers Theater, Camden, Independent

- a. 49
- 14. Carmen Theater, Philadelphia, Independent
  - a. 49
- 15. Capitol, Washington, D.C., Loew's
  - a. 49
- 16. State Theater, Hartford, Independent
  - a. 34
- 17. Court Sq., Springfield (MA), Independent
  - a. 34
- 18. Rajah Theater, Reading (PA), Independent
  - a. 33
- 19. Flatbush Theater, Brooklyn, Independent
  - a. 28
- 20. Chicago Theater, Chicago, Paramount
  - a. 28



## Bibliography

- Abel, Richard. *Americanizing the Movies and the "Movie-Mad" Audience, 1910-1914*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- , ed. *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- . *Motor City Movie Culture, 1916-1925*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020.
- , ed. *Movie Mavens: US Newspaper Women Take On the Movies, 1914-1923*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021.
- . "Opportunities for Women in the Movies." *Film History* 31, no. 2 (2019): 176–96.
- . "Patchwork Maps of Moviegoing, 1911-1913." In *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, edited by Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007.
- . "Reframing the Vaudeville/Moving Picture Debate with Illustrated Songs." In *The Tenth Muse: Cinema and Other Arts*, edited by Leonardo Quaresima and Laura Vichi, 473–84. Udine: Forum, 2001.
- . "The Most American of Attractions, the Illustrated Song." In *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, edited by Richard Abel and Rick Altman, 143–55. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- . *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.
- Acland, Charles R., and Eric Hoyt. *The Arclight Guidebook to Media History and the Digital Humanities*. Sussex: Reframe Books, 2016.
- Afra, Kia. *The Hollywood Trust: Trade Associations and the Rise of the Studio System*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
- Aldridge, Henry B. "The Role of the Stage Show in Film Exhibition: The Case of Detroit's Capitol Theatre." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 66–71.

- Allen, Robert C. "The Movies in Vaudeville: Historical Context of the Movies as Popular Entertainment." In *The American Film Industry*, edited by Tino Balio. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- . "B.F. Keith and the Origins of American Vaudeville." *Theatre Survey* 21, no. 2 (1980): 105–15.
- . "Relocating American Film." *Cultural Studies Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2006): 48–88.
- . "The Role of the Star in Film History." In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- . "Decentering Historical Audience Studies." In *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, edited by Kathryn Fuller-Seeley. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- . *Vaudeville and Film, 1895-1915: A Study in Media Interaction*. New York: Arno Press, 1980.
- Altman, Rick. *Silent Film Sound*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Alvarez, Luis. *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Anderson, Christopher. *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.
- Anderson, Maureen. "The White Reception of Jazz in America." *African American Review* 38, no. 1 (2004): 135.
- Andrew, Dudley. *What Cinema Is: Bazin's Quest and Its Charge*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Balaban & Katz Corporation. *The Fundamentals of Balaban & Katz Theatre Management*. Chicago: Balaban & Katz Corporation, 1926.
- Balaban, David. *The Chicago Movie Palaces of Balaban and Katz*. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2006.
- Balio, Tino. *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- . *The American Film Industry*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

- Barg, Lisa. "National Voices/Modernist Histories: Race, Performance, and Remembrance in American Music, 1927–1943." PhD diss., Stoney Brook University, 2001.
- Barzilai, Maya. *Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters*. New York: NYU Press, 2016.
- Basinger, Jeanine. *The Star Machine*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009.
- Belton, John. *Widescreen Cinema*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Bernardi, Daniel. *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- Bertellini, Giorgio. *Italy in Early American Cinema: Race, Landscape, and the Picturesque*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.
- . *The Divo and the Duce: Promoting Film Stardom and Political Leadership in 1920s America*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2019.
- Biltreyst, Daniel, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, eds. *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*. London: Routledge, 2019.
- Bird, John. *Percy Grainger*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Bjorn, Lars, and Jim Gallert. *Before Motown: A History of Jazz in Detroit, 1920-60*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.
- Bohan, Gary. *Sharkey: When Sea Lions Were Stars of Show Business, 1907-1958*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2022.
- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Bowser, Eileen. *The Transformation of Cinema: 1907-1915*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Braudy, Leo. *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame & Its History*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.
- Brennan, Nathaniel. "The Great White Way and the Way of All Flesh: Metropolitan Film Culture and the Business of Film Exhibition in Times Square, 1929–1941." *Film History* 27, no. 2 (2015): 1–32.
- Brothers, Thomas David. *Louis Armstrong: Master of Modernism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2015.
- Buhler, James, and Hannah Lewis. "Evolving Practices for Film Music and Sound, 1925-1935." In *The Cambridge Companion to Film Music*, edited by Mervyn Cooke and Fiona Ford. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

- Butsch, Richard. *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Caddoo, Cara. *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014.
- Callow, Simon. *Orson Welles: Hello Americans*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007.
- Calloway, Cab, and Bryant Rollins. *Of Minnie the Moocher and Me*. New York: Crowell, 1976.
- Carbine, Mary. "'The Finest Outside the Loop': Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905–1928." In *Silent Film*, edited by Richard Abel. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996.
- Casto, Marilyn. *Actors, Audiences, and Historic Theaters of Kentucky*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2021.
- Clar, Reva Howitt. *Lollipop: Vaudeville Turns with a Fanchon and Marco Dancer*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2002.
- Cohen, Harvey G. "Duke Ellington and Black, Brown, and Beige: The Composer as Historian at Carnegie Hall." *American Quarterly* 56, no. 4 (2004): 1003–34.
- . *Duke Ellington's America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Collier, James Lincoln. *Benny Goodman and the Swing Era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Combs, James E. *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Comiskey, Andrea. "The Sticks, the Nabes, and the Broadways: U.S. Film Distribution, 1935-1940." PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 2015.
- Cook, James W. *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- , ed. *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader: Nothing Else Like It in the Universe*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005.
- Cooper, Mark Garrett. *Love Rules: Silent Hollywood and the Rise of the Managerial Class*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Corrigan, Timothy. *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991.
- Crafton, Donald. *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief and World-Making in Animation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

- . *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926-1931*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Cullen, Frank. *Vaudeville Old and New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Decherney, Peter. *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- . "Inventing Film Study and Its Object at Columbia University, 1915-1938." *Film History* 12, no. 4 (2000): 443–60.
- . *Hollywood and the Culture Elite: How the Movies Became American*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- deCordova, Richard. *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- Desjardins, Mary R. *Recycled Stars: Female Film Stardom in the Age of Television and Video*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.
- DeVeaux, Scott. "Constructing the Jazz Tradition." In *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, edited by Robert G. O'Meally. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Dickstein, Morris. *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*. New York; London: W.W. Norton, 2010.
- DiMaggio, John E. *Vaudeville U.S.A.* Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973.
- Driggs, Frank, Harris Lewine, and Paul Bacon. *Black Beauty, White Heat. A Pictorial History of Classic Jazz: 1920-1950*. New-York: William Morrow & Co, 1982.
- Duckett, Victoria. *Seeing Sarah Bernhardt: Performance and Silent Film*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015.
- Dyer, Richard. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Dyer, Richard, and Paul McDonald. *Stars*. London: British Film Institute, 2007.
- Erb, Cynthia Marie. *Tracking King Kong: A Hollywood Icon in World Culture*. Wayne State University Press, 2009.
- Erdman, Andrew L. *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915*. New York: McFarland, 2015.

- Erenberg, Andrew. *Queen of Vaudeville: The Story of Eva Tanguay*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012.
- Erenberg, Lewis A. *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Fahlstedt, Kim K. *Chinatown Film Culture: The Appearance of Cinema in San Francisco's Chinese Neighborhood*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Tales of the Jazz Age*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1922.
- Fleeger, Jennifer. *Sounding American. Hollywood, Opera, and Jazz*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Floyd Jr., Samuel A. *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Forman, Murray. *One Night on TV Is Worth Weeks at the Paramount: Popular Music on Early Television*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Franklin, Harold. *Motion Picture Theater Management*. New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927.
- Fuller-Seeley, Kathryn, ed. *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- . *Jack Benny and the Golden Age of American Radio Comedy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017.
- . "What the Picture Did for Me?: Small-Town Exhibitors' Strategies for Surviving the Great Depression." In *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, edited by Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, 169–86. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- Fullerton, John. *Screen Culture: History and Textuality*. London: John Libbey, 2004.
- Gabbard, Krin. *Black Magic: White Hollywood and African American Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.
- . *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- . "The Images of Jazz." In *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, edited by Mervyn Cooke and David Horn, 332–46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

- Gabler, Neal. *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.
- Gaines, Jane M. *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018.
- Galili, Doron. "Intermedial Thought in Classical Film Theory: Balázs, Arnheim, and Benjamin on Film and Radio." *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory* 88, no. 4 (October 1, 2013): 391–99.
- . *Seeing by Electricity: The Emergence of Television, 1878-1939*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.
- Gaudreault, Andre. *Film and Attraction: From Kinematography to Cinema*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011.
- Gaudreault, André, and Philippe Marion. *The End of Cinema?: A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.
- Gebhardt, Nicholas. *Vaudeville Melodies: Popular Musicians and Mass Entertainment in American Culture, 1870-1929*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- George-Graves, Nadine. *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender and Class in African American Theater 1900-1940*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Gevinson, Alan. "Vaudeville." In *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, edited by Richard Abel, 672–76. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Gilbert, Douglas. *American Vaudeville: Its Life and Times*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1940.
- Glancy, Mark. "MGM Film Grosses, 1924–1948: The Eddie Mannix Ledger." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 12, no. 2 (1992): 55–73.
- Gledhill, Christine. *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Glenn, Susan A. *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Gomery, Douglas. *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992.
- . *The Coming of Sound*. London: Routledge, 2005.

- . *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*. London: British Film Institute, 2008.
- . “Towards a History of Film Exhibition: The Case of the Picture Palace.” In *Film: Historical-Theoretical Speculations*, 17–24. Pleasantville: Redgrave Publishing Company, 1977.
- . “U.S. Film Exhibition: The Formation of a Big Business.” In *The American Film Industry*, edited by Tino Balio. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Grau, Robert. *The Business Man in the Amusement World: A Volume of Progress in the Field of the Theatre*. New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1910.
- Green, Abel, and Joe Laurie, Jr. *Show Biz: From Vaude to Video*. New York: Doubleday, 1953.
- Green, Adam. *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Grieverson, Lee. *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Gunckel, Colin. *Mexico on Main Street: Transnational Film Culture in Los Angeles before World War II*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015.
- Gunning, Tom. “Now You See It, Now You Don’t: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions.” *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 32 (1993): 3–10.
- . “‘Primitive’ Cinema—A Frame-Up? Or The Trick’s on Us.” *Cinema Journal* 28, no. 2 (Winter 1989): 3–12.
- . “The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde.” In *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, edited by Wanda Strauven, 381–88. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006.
- . “The World as Object-Lesson: Cinema Audiences, Visual Culture and the St. Louis World’s Fair, 1904.” *Film History* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 422–44.
- Hall, Ben M. *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace*. New York: Bramhall House, 1961.
- Hamamoto, Darrell Y., and Sandra Liu, eds. *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000.



- Hansen, Miriam. *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- . “Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Permutations of the Public Sphere.” *Screen* 34, no. 1 (1993): 197–210.
- Hanssen, F. Andrew. “Revenue Sharing and the Coming of Sound.” In *An Economic History of Film*, edited by John Sedgwick and Michael Pokorny, 86–120. London: Routledge, 2007.
- . “Revenue Sharing in Movie Exhibition and the Arrival of Sound.” *Economic Inquiry* 40, no. 3 (2002): 380–402.
- . “Vertical Integration during the Hollywood Studio Era.” *Journal of Law and Economics* 53, no. 3 (2010): 519–43.
- Harrison, Daphne Duval. *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988.
- Harrison-Kahan, Lori. *The White Negress: Literature, Minstrelsy, and the Black-Jewish Imaginary*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011.
- Hauptert, Michael. “The Economic History of Entertainment and Sports.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Modern Economic History*, edited by Robert M. Whaples and Randall E. Parker, 198–212. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- . *The Entertainment Industry*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006.
- Hauser, Michael, and Marianne Weldon. *Detroit’s Downtown Movie Palaces*. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2006.
- Hersch, Charles B. “Jazz and the Boundaries of Race.” *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 03 (September 2012): 701–8.
- Hill, Constance Valis. *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Hill, Erin. *Never Done: A History of Women’s Work in Media Production*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016.
- Hill, Errol, and James V. Hatch. *A History of African American Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Hilmes, Michele. *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

- . *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Hodin, Mark. "Class, Consumption, and Ethnic Performance in Vaudeville." *Prospects*, no. 22 (1997): 193–210.
- Holmes, Su, and Sean Redmond. *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*. London: Sage, 2007.
- Holston, Kim R. *Movie Roadshows: A History and Filmography of Reserved-Seat Limited Showings, 1911-1973*. London: McFarland, 2012.
- Holt, Jennifer. *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011.
- Holt, Jennifer, and Alisa Perren, eds. *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Huettig, Mae D. 1944. *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry: A Study of Industrial Organization*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.
- Jarvie, Ian C. "Stars and Ethnicity: Hollywood and the United States, 1932-1951." In *Stars, the Film Reader*, edited by Lucy Fischer and Marcia Landy. New York; London: Routledge, 2004.
- Jenkins, Henry. *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Jewell, Richard B. "RKO Film Grosses, 1929–1951: The C.J. Tevlin Ledger." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14, no. 1 (1994): 37–49.
- . *RKO Radio Pictures: A Titan Is Born*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
- . *Slow Fade to Black: The Decline of RKO Radio Pictures*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016.
- . *The Golden Age of Cinema: Hollywood, 1929-1945*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- Jurca, Catherine. *Hollywood 1938: Motion Pictures' Greatest Year*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2012.
- Jurca, Catherine, and John Sedgwick. "The Film's the Thing: Moviegoing in Philadelphia, 1935-36." *Film History* 26, no. 4 (2014): 58–83.

- Kaufmann, Preston J. *Encyclopedia of the American Theatre Organ*. Pasadena: Showcase Publications, 1995.
- Kemper, Tom. *Hidden Talent the Emergence of Hollywood Agents*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.
- Kenney, William Howland. "The Influence of Black Vaudeville on Early Jazz." *Black Perspective in Music* 14, no. 3 (1986): 233–48.
- Kenrick, John. *Musical Theatre: A History*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2010.
- Keyser, Wayne. "Vaudeville Lingo Dictionary." *Ballycast* (blog), January 16, 2019. <https://ballycast.com/?p=3708>.
- Kibler, M. Alison. *Censoring Racial Ridicule: Irish, Jewish, and African American Struggles over Race and Representation, 1890-1930*. Chapel Hill: University North Carolina Press, 2015.
- . *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.
- . "The Keith/Albee Collection: The Vaudeville Industry, 1894-1935." *Books at Iowa* 56, no. 1 (1992): 7–24.
- King, Robert. *Hokum!: The Early Sound Slapstick Short and Depression-Era Mass Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017.
- Klenotic, Jeffrey. "'Four Hours of Hootin' and Hollerin'" Moviegoing and Everyday Life Outside the Movie Palace." In *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, edited by Robert C Allen, Richard Maltby, and Melvyn Stokes. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008.
- . "From Mom-and-Pop to Paramount-Publix: Selling the Community on the Benefits of National Theater Chains." In *Watching Films: New Perspectives on Movie-Going, Exhibition and Reception*, edited by Albert Moran and Karina Aveyard, 189–208. Chicago: Intellect, 2013.
- Knight, Arthur. *Disintegrating the Musical Black Performance and American Musical Film*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.
- . "Star Dances: African-American Constructions of Stardom, 1925 –1960." In *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, edited by Daniel Bernardi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

- Knight, Athelia. "He Paved the Way for T.O.B.A." *The Black Perspective in Music* 15, no. 2 (1987): 153–81.
- Knopf, Robert. "Buster Keaton in the Context of Stage, Vaudeville, and Silent Film Comedy." In *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology*, edited by Robert Knopf. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- , ed. *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Kofsky, Frank. *Black Music, White Business: Illuminating the History and Political Economy of Jazz*. New York: Pathfinder, 2008.
- Koszarski, Richard. "Introduction: Movie Business." *Film History* 19, no. 3 (2007): 211–12.
- Koszarski, Richard. *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.
- Lastra, James. *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- Laurie, Joe. *Vaudeville: From the Honky-Tonks to the Palace*. New York: Holt, 1953.
- Leach, William R. *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Lee, William F. *American Big Bands*. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2005.
- Lehman, Christopher P. *The Colored Cartoon: Black Representation in American Animated Short Films, 1907-1954*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009.
- Leigh, Spencer. *Frank Sinatra: An Extraordinary Life*. La Vergne: McNidder and Grace Limited, 2015.
- Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- . *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Lewis, Jon. "Money Matters: Hollywood in the Corporate Era." In *The New American Cinema*, edited by Jon Lewis, 87–121. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Lewis, Jon, and Eric L. Smoodin, eds. *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Lindsay, Vachel. *The Art of the Moving Picture*. New York: Macmillan, 1915.

- Lock, Graham. *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Longo, Vincent. "A Tough Act to Follow: Studio Era Hollywood in the Age of Live Performance." In *Anchoring New Cinema History* (conference paper). Nassau, Bahamas: University of the Bahamas, 2019.
- Lopez, Lori Kido, and Vincent Pham, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Asian American Media*. London: Routledge, 2017.
- Lotz, Amanda D. *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. New York: NYU Press, 2014.
- Maltby, Richard. "The Standard Exhibition Contract and the Unwritten History of the Classical Hollywood Cinema." *Film History* 25, no. 1/2 (2013): 138–53.
- . *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.
- . "How Can Cinema History Matter More?." *Screening the Past*, no. 22 (December 2007).
- . "Sticks, Hicks and Flaps: Classical Hollywood's Generic Conception of Its Audience." In *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, edited by Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby. London: British Film Institute, 1999.
- Maltby, Richard, Philippe Meers, and Daniel Blitereyst, eds. *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Maltby, Richard, and Melvyn Stokes, eds. *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*. London: British Film Institute, 1999.
- Maltby, Richard, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen, eds. *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007.
- Marc, David. *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*. Malden: Blackwell, 1997.
- Marsh, John L. "Vaudefilm: Its Contribution to a Moviegoing America." *Journal of Popular Culture* 18, no. 4 (1985): 17–29.
- Marston, William Moulton. *F. F. Proctor - Vaudeville Pioneer*. New York: Richard R. Smith, 1943.
- Mayer, David. *Stagestruck Filmmaker: D.W. Griffith & the American Theatre*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009.

- McCracken, Allison. *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.
- McDonald, Paul. *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities*. New York: Wallflower, 2013.
- . "The Star System: The Production of Hollywood Stardom in the Post-Studio Era." In *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, edited by Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2012.
- McGee, Kristin A. *Some Liked It Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928-1959*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2009.
- McKenna, Christopher J. "Tri-Racial Theaters in Robeson County, North Carolina, 1896-1940." In *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, edited by Robert C Allen, Richard Maltby, and Melvyn Stokes, 45–59. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008.
- McLaughlin, Robert. *Broadway and Hollywood: A History of Economic Interaction*. New York: Arno Press, 1974.
- McLean, Albert F. *American Vaudeville as Ritual*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965.
- . "Genesis of Vaudeville: Two Letters from B.F. Keith." *Theatre Survey*, no. 1 (1960): 82–95.
- McNamara, Brooks. "Medicine Shows: American Vaudeville in the Marketplace." *Theatre Quarterly* 4, no. 14 (1974): 19–24.
- Melnick, Ross. *American Showman: Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry, 1908-1935*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- . *Hollywood's Embassies: How Movie Theaters Projected American Power Around the World*. Columbia University Press, 2022.
- Melnick, Ross, and Andreas Fuchs. *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theaters*. St. Paul: MBI, 2004.
- Monod, David. *Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment, 1890–1925*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020.
- . "Welcome to Vaudeville America." *Vaudeville America* (blog). Accessed April 25, 2022. <http://vaudevilleamerica.org/about/>.

- Mooney, Jennifer. *Irish Stereotypes in Vaudeville, 1865-1905*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Musser, Charles. "The Clash Between Theater and Film." *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5, no. 2 (2007): 111–34.
- . *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- . "Towards a History of Theatrical Culture." In *Screen Culture: History and Textuality*, edited by John Fullerton. London: John Libbey, 2004.
- Nasaw, Davis. *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Oberdeck, Kathryn J. *The Evangelist and the Impresario: Religion, Entertainment, and Cultural Politics in America, 1884-1914*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Ogren, Kathy J. *The Jazz Revolution Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Ohmer, Susan. *George Gallup in Hollywood*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Orgeron, Marsha. *Hollywood Ambitions: Celebrity in the Movie Age*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008.
- . "Media Celebrity in the Age of the Image." In *The Oxford Handbook of Film and Media Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Paul, William. *When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Peretti, Burton William. *The Creation of Jazz Music, Race and Culture in Urban America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994.
- Petty, Miriam J. *Stealing the Show African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.
- Ramírez, Catherine Sue. *The Woman in the Zoot Suit: Gender, Nationalism, and the Cultural Politics of Memory*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Rathbun, John B. *Motion Picture Making and Exhibiting*. Chicago: Charles C. Thompson Company, 1914.
- Rhodes, Gary D. *The Perils of Moviegoing in America, 1896-1950*. London: Bloomsbury, 2011.

- Rice, Ronald E., Sandra K. Evans, Katy E. Pearce, Anu Sivunen, Jessica Vitak, and Jeffrey W. Treem. "Organizational Media Affordances: Operationalization and Associations with Media Use." *Journal of Communication* 67, no. 1 (February 1, 2017): 106–30.
- Richards, Larry. *African American Films through 1959 a Comprehensive, Illustrated Filmography*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2005.
- Ricketson, Frank H. *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1938.
- Rivers, Larry Eugene, and Cantor Brown, Jr. "The Art of Gathering a Crowd: Florida's Pat Chappelle and the Origins of Black-Owned Vaudeville." *Journal of African American History* 92, no. 2 (2007): 169–90.
- Rojek, Chris. *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion, 2010.
- Rose, Frank. *The Agency: William Morris and the Hidden History of Show Business*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.
- Ross, Steven J. *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Saddlemeyer, Ann. *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario 1800-1914*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990.
- Sammond, Nicholas. "A Space Apart: Animation and the Spatial Politics of Conversion." *Film History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 268–84.
- . *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.
- Schatz, Thomas. *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- . "Film Industry Studies and Hollywood History." In *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, edited by Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- . *Genius of the System Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Schechter, Scott. *Judy Garland: The Day-by-Day Chronicle of a Legend*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.
- Schuller, Gunther. *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.



- Sedgwick, John, and Mark Glancy. "Cinemagoing in the United States in the Mid-1930s: A Study Based on the Variety Dataset." In *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, edited by Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007.
- Sedgwick, John, and Michael Pokorny. *An Economic History of Film*. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Seibert, Brian. *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.
- Semmes, Clovis E. *The Regal Theater and Black Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Senelick, Lawrence, ed. *The American Stage: Writing on Theater from Washington Irving to Tony Kushner*. Boone: Library of America, 2010.
- Sennett, Robert S. *Hollywood Hoopla: Creating Stars and Selling Movies in the Golden Age of Hollywood*. New York: Billboard Books, 1998.
- Shail, Andrew. *The Origins of the Film Star System: Persona, Publicity and Economics in Early Cinema*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.
- Shapiro, Nat, and Nat Hentoff. *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya: The Story of Jazz by the Men Who Made It*. New York: Rinehart, 1955.
- Shipton, Alyn. *Hi-de-Ho: The Life of Cab Calloway*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Simon, George T. *The Big Bands*. New York: Schirmer, 1968.
- Singer, Ben. *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Singer, Stan. "Vaudeville in Los Angeles, 1910 - 1926: Theatres, Management, and the Orpheum." *Pacific Historical Review* 61, no. 1 (1992): 103–13.
- Sklar, Robert. *Movie-Made American: A Cultural History of American Movies*. New York: Random House, 1975.
- Slide, Anthony. *New York City Vaudeville*. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2006.
- . *Selected Vaudeville Criticism*. Metuchen: Scarcrow Press, 1988.
- . *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.
- Sloan, Nate. "Constructing Cab Calloway Publicity, Race, and Performance in 1930s Harlem Jazz." *The Journal of Musicology* 36, no. 3 (2019): 370–400.
- Slowik, Michael. "Documents of Performance: Keith-Albee Managers' Reports." *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 39, no. 2 (2012): 93–103.

- . “Film Exhibition in Vaudeville: What We Learn from Keith-Albee Managers’ Reports.” *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 39, no. 2 (2012): 73–92.
- Smith, Eric Ledell. *African American Theater Buildings: An Illustrated Historical Directory, 1900-1955*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2011.
- Smith, Jeff. *The Sounds of Commerce: Marketing Popular Film Music*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Smoodin, Eric. *Regarding Frank Capra: Audience, Celebrity, and American Film Studies, 1930–1960*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Snelson, Tim. “‘They’ll Be Dancing in the Aisles!’: Youth Audiences, Cinema Exhibition and the Mid-1930s Swing Boom.” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 37, no. 3 (2017): 455–74.
- Snyder, Robert W. *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Solomon, Matthew. *Disappearing Tricks: Silent Film, Houdini, and the New Magic of the Twentieth Century*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010.
- . *The Gold Rush*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.
- Sontag, Susan. “Film and Theatre.” In *Theater and Film: A Comparative Anthology*, edited by Robert Knopf. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Spigel, Lynn. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Spring, Howard. “Swing.” In *Grove Music Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Staiger, Janet. *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*. New York: NYU Press, 2000.
- . “Seeing Stars.” In *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill. London: Routledge, 1991.
- . “Writing the History of American Film Reception.” In *Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences*, edited by Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes, 19–32. London: British Film Institute, 2001.
- Stanfield, Peter. *Body and Soul: Jazz and Blues in American Film, 1927-63*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005.

- Starr, Paul. *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications*. New York: Basic Books, 2006.
- Steedman, Carolyn. *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002.
- Stein, Charles W. *American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries*. New York: Knopf, 1984.
- Sterling, Christopher H., and John Michael Kittross. *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Stokes, Melvyn. "Female Audiences of the 1920s and Early 1930s." In *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, edited by Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes. London: British Film Institute, 1999.
- Stowe, David W. *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Sugure, Thomas. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Sultanof, Jeff. *Experiencing Big Band Jazz: A Listener's Companion*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.
- Tebbel, John William. *Between Covers: The Rise and Transformation of Book Publishing in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Thissen, Judith. "Film and Vaudeville on New York's Lower East Side." In *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp, 42–56. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.
- . "Next Year at the Moving Pictures: Cinema and Social Change in the Jewish Community." In *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*, edited by Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007.
- Thompson, Kristin. *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934*. London: British Film Institute, 1985.
- Trav S. D. *No Applause, Just Throw Money: The Book That Made Vaudeville Famous*. New York: Faber and Faber, 2005.
- Tucker, Mark, and Travis A. Jackson. "Jazz." In *Grove Music Online*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

- Turner, Graeme. "Approaching Celebrity Studies." *Celebrity Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 11–20.
- Vardac, A. Nicholas. *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968.
- Vasey, Ruth. *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
- Wagner, Phil. "'An America Not Quite Mechanized': Fanchon and Marco, Inc. Perform Modernity." *Film History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 251–67.
- Walker, Leo. *The Big Band Almanac*. New York, Da Capo Press, 1989.
- Waller, Gregory A. "Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers: Small-Town Picture Shows in the 1930s." In *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*, edited by Gregory A. Waller. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.
- . "Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater." In *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, edited by Kathryn Fuller-Seeley. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.
- . *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995.
- . *The Stage/Screen Debate: A Study in Popular Aesthetics*. New York: Garland, 1983.
- . *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*. Malden: Blackwell, 2002.
- Waltz, Gwendolyn. "Half Real-Half Reel: Alternation Format Stage-and-Screen Hybrids." In *A Companion to Early Cinema*, edited by André Gaudreault, Nicolas Dulac, and Santiago Hidalgo. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Wasson, Hadiee. "Introduction: Entering the Movie Theater." *Film History* 28, no. 3 (2016): v–xi.
- Wertheim, Arthur F. *Vaudeville Wars: How the Keith-Albee and Orpheum Circuits Controlled the Big-Time and Its Performers*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- . *W.C. Fields from the Ziegfeld Follies and Broadway Stage to the Screen: Becoming a Character Comedian*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Weyeneth, Robert R. "The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past." *The Public Historian* 27, no. 4 (2005): 11–44.

- Williams, Tami. *Germaine Dulac: A Cinema of Sensations*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014.
- Woods, Leigh. *Transatlantic Stage Stars in Vaudeville and Variety: Celebrity Turns*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Grove Press, 1965.
- Xing, Jun. *Asian America Through the Lens: History, Representations, and Identity*. Oxford: Altamira, 1998.
- Young, Paul. "Synchronized Sound Comes to the Cinema." In *The Wiley-Blackwell History of American Film*, edited by Cynthia Lucia, Roy Grundmann, and Art Simon. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.