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# From Domestic Song to Drawing Room Recitation: Dan Leno's Music Hall Repertoire

Caroline Radcliffe

Dan Leno was the most popular male performer of the Victorian music hall, yet few people of the present generation are aware of his centrality to the British comic tradition. His fame was eclipsed by one of his most renowned imitators, Charlie Chaplin, who overshadowed Leno soon after his death as the medium of film took hold of the popular imagination. Like Leno, Chaplin worked his way up through the British music halls and popular theatres, performing clog-dances, slapstick and character acting; Stan Laurel followed the same route. Both Chaplin and Laurel acknowledged their debt to Leno, and traces of his act frequently appeared in their work, but from the age of twenty-six until his death in 1904, Leno had remained at the pinnacle of his profession, elected as the professional representative of music hall artistes and adored by his public.

Despite Leno's seminal position as a popular performer, he has received no scholarly attention other than through my own work (Kershaw 1994; Radcliffe 2006, 2010, 2015). Prior to an intensive and fruitful period of academic analysis during the 1980s and 1990s, music hall performance in general, has, historically, been celebrated and remembered through the lens of ideologically mediated theatrical mythology and a conservative nostalgia for 'the good old times'. Leno has been documented by a narrative that frames him as an archetypal comic genius who ironically but inevitably succumbs to overwhelming

depression and madness, hence parallels with Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers and Tony Hancock are frequently, and, from a stylistic point of view, inappropriately, made.

Contrary to the common narrative that presents music hall as a romanticized, working-class art form, I argue that it was Leno's ability to adapt and keep up with the managerial ambitions and changing environment of the music hall as 'big business' that ensured his long-lasting popularity and success as a performer. It was this 'professional acumen' that served him most successfully and which, in turn, reveals an alternative narrative to the interpretation of the music hall stage.

In this chapter I explore Leno's mid- to late- career when he was at the peak of his success, focusing on his repertoire of music hall songs. I will demonstrate how his professional judgment led him to adapt his performances to conform with and survive within the dominant cultural hegemony. Leno's 'genius' was in choosing songs that complied with the changing policies and aims of the London music halls, appealing to the corresponding social composition of a newly emergent middle-class audience and management sector. I thus disprove the myth of Leno as a champion of a working-class audience by demonstrating that he consciously moved away from his early material (undoubtedly rooted in the personal hardships of his youth), complying instead to an ethos of 'improvement', endemic to the late-nineteenth-century music hall. A survey of Leno's songs from 1885 to 1903 demonstrates a clearly defined repertoire. Leno's early, bleakly ironic depiction of lower-class domestic violence transforms into a musical and textual satire of middle-class drawing room music and dance repertoire.<sup>1</sup> As Leno rose to stardom through his roles in the Drury Lane pantomimes, he relinquished his preferred performance style, successfully formulating a new style that complied with the increasing aggrandisement of both pantomime and music hall.

Born in 1860, Leno's life and career coincided with the music hall's most prolific and successful period. Leno's immense skill as a performer was grounded in disciplined family performance training, encompassing forms of dance, sketch performance, satirical ballads, burlesque and

pantomime. These traditional, theatrical skills demarcated him from many other music hall performers, enabling him to bring otherwise standard songs to life through his accomplished character acting. His early immersion in popular theatre forms, contemporary drama and popular literature and his determination, adaptability and self-reliance as a performer secured his initial success as a music hall performer.

Leno's first performance was over one hundred and fifty years ago. But a few seconds of Kinetoscope reels and a number of gramophone recordings survive, unable to convey his particularly spontaneous, and by all accounts, hilariously funny acts. It would be misleading to attempt to offer a reconstruction of *how* he performed on the music hall stage. Music hall song sheets and photographs provide visual means with which to interpret his act, but the texts, with their absences and omissions, cannot be regarded as representative. What can be ascertained for sure is that Leno's performance style was an amalgamation of diverse elements of Victorian popular performance, creating a highly physicalized, slapstick style, including the gestural and choreographed comic vocabularies of the Harlequinade, traditional and contemporary dance and music, and popular drama – from melodrama and burlesque to Shakespeare; an unbroken clog dancing tradition acknowledges and still displays his influence.

## Musical form, performance and patter

At the time of his London 'debut' (cited as 1885 by his biographer, Hickory Wood [Wood 1905]), although billed equally as 'Vocal Comedian and Champion Dancer', Leno stated that he was already earning £10 a week in the provinces as a comic singer long before he got his 'London chances' (*The Era* 1901). At this time, Leno's songs employ a strictly formulaic and limited musical structure, reliant on standard musical genres and subject matter common to the majority of music hall songs from the 1870s through to the early 1900s. As with the popular repertoire of hymns or folk music, the melodic range

of the music hall song is extremely limited, accommodating the typically untrained voice of a music hall performer such as Leno, and easily manageable by audience members in their communal rendition of a chorus. Each music hall song contains a number of musical pointers, identifiable by the audience as signals to listen, join in, laugh or applaud. Characteristic musical motifs were integral to Leno's act, for example, an introductory eight bars of song melody followed by eight bars of music with diminishing note values (giving the impression of acceleration into the verse, not dissimilar to the 'hurry' music of early pantomimes and accompanying later silent film chase scenes) served to bring Leno onto the stage – he would make a fast entry, running down to the footlights, slamming his foot on stage to gain the audience's attention. Four bars of similar 'hurry' music are frequently repeated at the end of each chorus, as a transitional passage into the next verse, during which Leno performed comic 'business'. These four bars also served as a 'walk-off' at the end of the song; in Leno's songs, this concluding section often extended into an eight bar section in which he performed an eccentric dance break. Further musical clichés serve to reinforce stereotypical characterization; for instance, Leno's song 'Dear Old Mike', which concluded with a fast Irish reel.

But Leno's individuality as a performer did not rely on the song itself. His 'genius' is frequently attributed to his development of 'patter' – spoken interjections between the verses and choruses of a song. Leno included patter in all of his songs. In the earlier songs the patter consisted of a few lines but soon expanded to become the main body of the act.

Patter provided Leno with a particularly direct form of audience address, creating an intimacy between the performer and the spectator. It also strengthened the song's narrative; the patter was key in illustrating the songs. Undoubtedly, Leno's skill at the form singled him out from other performers but he was certainly not unique in using patter. Patter is reproduced in much earlier songs such as 'Villikins and his Dinah' (published 1853), and there are numerous theatrical precedents from Charles Matthews to Albert Smith. Leno's published patter

is unusually substantial compared to other published music hall songs, considerably outweighing the musical content. He was clearly a leader in the field of spoken comedy. Although sometimes cited as the precursor to today's 'stand-up' comedian, his act still remained within a framework of character and parody, not situational nor political nor overtly topical comedy.

It is evident that Leno planned a clear structure to his patter, maintaining links to the song it was based on and building a framework on which he could then improvise.<sup>2</sup> A comparison of the published song sheet texts with Leno's phonograph recordings of the same material illustrates this. The recordings contain small differences (generally an improvement on the published texts), demonstrating that there was a certain amount of development and improvisation. It is possible that the published texts were already a polished rendition of versions that he had tried out and improved over months of repetition as he took the song from hall to hall. Considering that he would often perform the same song for well over a year, it is not surprising that he eventually established a set patter. Leno was emphatic, however, that he invented his own patter, improvising at each performance:

Do I have my own patter written for me? No; not a single word of it. What's more, I've tried to write it down myself, and failed. I could no more sit down and write you the patter of a single song now than I could fly. But when I'm on stage it comes natural. You hear me sing the same song at three halls, and you will not find the patter the same at two. (*The Era* 1893)

Jimmy Glover, the musical director of the Drury Lane pantomimes, maintained that Leno was a bad study, never knowing his part or his songs on the first night; reviews were often optimistic that he would 'work up' a song, making a success of one that was not an immediate hit (Glover 1911: 75). Contrary to Leno's description of his own methods, Glover insisted that Leno had no powers of initiation, claiming that the song writer, Herbert Darnley (who wrote many of Leno's later songs), provided him with material which Leno would then build on: 'Once

provided with the material he had the best contributory and constructive power' (153). Glover's account perhaps explains why the few songs that Leno wrote himself were parodies.

Leno, as with most other music hall performers, bought his songs from professional composers and writers. Once paid for, he changed them as he pleased.

I get hundreds of songs and buy lots of them for a good chorus or a funny line, then work them out myself again. Lots of my songs are absolutely rewritten by me, except the refrain or a catchy bit like that (*The Era* 1893: 11).

In the same interview, he explained how he would sometimes be the one to formulate the idea for a line or phrase sending it to the writer to develop into a full song. Leno commissioned songs to suit his own imagination, allowing for spontaneous improvisation onstage. Few of his songs were failures, for each was meticulously adapted to his particular set of performance skills and the audiences he was playing to.

### 'The Shopwalker': Naturalism and a shifting class appeal

In 1939, Herbert Darnley, one of Leno's most prolific writers during his late career, defined Leno's style as a character singer as opposed to a comic one:

Leno was not in any shape or form a comic singer – that is to say, he was not a singer of comic songs. Neither was Albert Chevalier. They were both delineators of character comedy, quite a different line of business. It may be asked how do I differentiate between a comic song and a comedy number? Well, the former is a humorous ditty that, from the first word almost, starts off with, as Clarkson Rose calls it, a wise-crack, and then, romping through an eight or sixteen-line stanza containing as many jokes as is possible to squeeze in, runs on to a chorus in which there may be a twist or a slogan, but invariably a strong

last line. As an example, take R. G. Knowles' old song *The Benches in the Park*. This was Knowles telling the audience what funny people he had seen sitting on the park benches. Or Herbert Campbell asking the folk to *See Me Dance the Polka*. Or Harry Champion likening a gold chain to *Any Old Iron*. These were comic songs (and jolly good ones) in which the singer, without disguise, was putting himself, as it were, over the footlights. But no characterisation, to be somebody ... Leno was not merely a great comic, he was a great actor. Whatever the number he was the character true to life. Never for a moment stepping out of the picture, never burlesquing or exaggerating the little worries of existence, nor belittling its joys, Leno gave to his songs a realism by which they came to life. (Darnley 1939)

Darnley was clearly looking back to Leno's high career – forgetting, or perhaps never having witnessed his early, aggressive style of domestic humour which grossly parodied the 'little worries of existence', cynically 'belittling the joys' of lower-class marriage and courtship. By the time Darnley was writing for Leno in the 1890s, there had been a distinct move towards dramatic naturalism in the legitimate theatre influencing theatre criticism in general; thus it was Leno's 'truthfulness to life' that was consistently admired by commentators. While the legitimate theatre was rapidly modernizing, the music hall was also seeking a move away from the precedents of the last thirty or forty years. Song writers such as Darnley moved towards the acting styles of the legitimate theatre, the seeds of which appeared in Leno's later work. As his career progressed, comparisons were made between Leno and legitimate actors such as Henry Irving. The following anecdote demonstrates the moment of change, as the music halls transformed from the older-style hall, designed and geographically situated to attract a 'popular' audience, to the new 'Empires' of London's West End, attended by the new, middle-class, upper-class and bohemian spectator. The anecdote demonstrates Leno's awareness of this changing audience, signaling the moment for him to develop a new style in order to maintain his popularity.

J. B. Booth refers to Leno's song 'Dear Old Mike', by Harry King, performed in 1889 and sung in the character of an Irish labourer's wife:



I can do what I like with dear old Mike,  
 All the days of the week but one day,  
 He's as happy as you please with a bit of bread and cheese,  
 But he likes his bit of meat on Sunday.

... Leno sang it first one night at the Empire, and Lennard (Horace) went round to see him in his dressing room. The new song had not gone particularly well.

'Come round with me, and hear me sing it at the "Mo"', said Dan; 'This audience doesn't know the type, but they'll see it alright at the "Mo".'

He drove Lennard in his brougham to the Old Mogul, where on his appearance he had the usual tremendous reception. He let himself go, as only Leno could, and when as a frowsy yet loveable old harriidan, he produced from his marketing basket Mike's 'little bit of meat', in the shape of a belly-piece of pork, which he referred to as the 'waist-coat piece with the buttons', the house became hysterical with delight. (Booth 1943: 52–53)

When Leno produced the actual 'bit of meat' – representative of everyday life and perhaps laced with sexual innuendo – the audience at the Empire could not relate to it but when taken to the Middlesex Music Hall (the 'Old Mo'), a hall renowned for a lower class of patron, the 'bit of meat' got the biggest laugh. The picture on the sheet music cover illustrates Leno dressed as a middle-aged woman in a plain, drab dress, with an old-fashioned bonnet adorned by a flower and a red shawl, holding a shopping basket. With meekly clasped hands and a benevolent look, Leno seemingly portrays a passive, humble woman but her red nose undermines any pretense at moderation. The red nose was worn by Leno as a signifier of the carnivalesque, representing a state of intemperance embodied through drunkenness or sexual impropriety. The red nose subverts the image into a figure of derision, reflecting the content of the song. By emphasizing his small stature and distinctive facial features with ill-fitting, overly large costume and makeup, Leno conformed to the 'low' comic convention of exaggerated physicality.



**Figure 1.1** Dan Leno in 'Clever Mr. Green' (author's collection)

The song-sheet cover also contains a small, inset picture in which a rowing couple is depicted as lower-class domestic stereotypes – the brutish husband, throwing his supper out of the window and the woman, who, far from being passive, is portrayed as a screaming harri-dan. Onstage, as he performed an eccentric dance to an eight-bar Irish reel, Leno concluded by pulling a particularly grotesque and ugly face in the limelight, signalling the audience to laugh at his exaggerated and misogynistic rendition of the wife.

Darnley cannot be referring to Leno's early songs such as 'Dear Old Mike'. He is describing a more refined characterization, a less obviously stereotyped realism, the criteria of which could only be met with a different style of song, a style which Darnley himself would shape for Leno.

Accordingly, in 1891, Leno's songs took a new direction, cementing the transition from the old style to the new. Walter De Frece's song, 'The Shopwalker', achieved phenomenal success and is, without doubt, the Leno song that was most popular with contemporary critics. The oft-quoted chorus is hardly indicative of a ground-breaking success, but 'The Shopwalker' became Leno's most popular song, the refrain recalled by many for years to come:

Walk this way! Walk this way!  
 The sale's now on; we've a grand display.  
 Upon my word, we're giving them away!  
 Walk this way, madam! Walk this way!

The chorus contains no apparent narrative or humour; it was Leno's characterization that captured the imagination of the new music hall public. The title on the music sheet cover implied that this was something new – *Dan Leno's Celebrated Pantomime, Patter Song* (sic). The song had not featured in any pantomime, the reference was to Leno's extended use of his physical pantomimic and verbal patter skills that defined 'The Shopwalker' as something new and different. The music hall performer Charles Coborn fondly remembered it:

It is a joyful memory to have seen Dan Leno, and the procession of his 'characters' often rises before my mental vision. It was a sublime treat to see him as the shopwalker, when he placed a ladder, which did not exist, against a set of steps and drawers which were not there, run up and down it, and then spread upon an imaginary counter the articles which had never been. Your own imagination provided readily the boxes, drawers, ladder, and counter as he expatiated upon the excellence of the goods he had to sell. And the screamingly funny comments and recommendations he made concerning all of them! Verily, he was a supreme artist. (Coburn 1928: 151)

Contemporary commentators consistently focused on Leno's ability to 'truthfully' characterize real types. George Smith, in the *Dictionary of National Biography* of 1912, wrote:

Although essentially a caricaturist, with a broad and rollicking sense of fun which added myriad touches of extravagance beyond experience, the groundwork of his creations was true, and truth continually broke through the exuberance of the artist ... 'The Shopwalker' perhaps convinced the great public of his genius. (Smith 1912)

Texts such as these contribute to the Leno mythology, isolating him from his music hall act and the larger part of his audiences while exposing the negotiations occurring between popular and high culture. 'The Shopwalker' became a signifier in the cultural mythology surrounding Leno. The *National Biography* notes it as the pivotal song that 'convinced the *great public* of his genius' (emphasis added). Leno was already well established, at the head of his profession by 1891 when the song was sung, with many published songs and a full working diary as testimony to his success. Leno was a top performer with a dedicated lower-class audience in both the halls and the Surrey Theatre pantomimes; from 1888 he was also starring at Drury Lane, but perhaps by 1891 his success had not convinced the middle classes – the great public. 'The Shopwalker' was the song that secured a wider following. It was the first of a new genre of Leno songs. Unlike the exclusively lower-class domestic songs hitherto performed by him, 'The Shopwalker' was the first of many songs representing the 'petit-bourgeoisie' or lower middle classes of Victorian society. Jane Traies in her article, 'Jones and the Working Girl', bases her evidence on the increasing marginal working-class/lower-middle-class audience. Traies is seminal in locating 'the voice of the clerks and the shop-assistants' as 'one of the voices of music-hall culture' (Traies 1986: 25). From around 1870 there was a demographic rise in clerks and administrators coming from working-class families. There was also an increase in the small businessman. Together they created a new lower middle class, coinciding with a rise in consumerism and bureaucracy. Leno turned to these subjects as he witnessed a rise in their numbers among music hall audiences and in the respectable suburbs of London where he himself now lived. As his own standard of living rose, parallel with his career rise through the more 'respectable'

halls, his observations turned away from the lower class, to the characters around him, as he began to take an active interest in the middle-class world of mortgages, local councils, shop assistants and holidays reflecting not only a change in society but also in the rising economic status of the music hall performer.

Leno's new songs expose a contemporary perception of the Victorian lower-middle-classes as small-minded and hypocritical, satirizing the newly emerging relationship between the dishonest businessman and the put-upon employee. The subtexts of songs such as 'Our Stores' or 'The Doctor' indicate the rise of the individualistic, small-time capitalist – the small businessman exemplified by Leno's shopkeeper in 'Our Stores'. Each of Leno's new, economically driven characters deceives his customers in one way or another to increase his own profit. Each is prepared to sacrifice morals and quality service in his own interests. The doctor whose 'medicine's weak' but his 'fees are strong' announces at the end of his patter, 'But there you are, I'm making such a fortune!' and the proprietor of 'our nineteenth-century stores' serves rotten old food, passing it off for fresh new goods. A host of downtrodden employees followed 'The Shopwalker' in similar songs, such as 'The Waiter' and 'The Bootman'. Leno played the overworked shop assistant, spending long hours on his feet: 'And no-one knows but my poor corns, how I've walked up and down.' These songs represent the social-climbing, commercial employee, obsequious to and suspicious of his superiors in equal measure. Like Leno's other members of the lower-middle-class capitalist system, the shopwalker's subservience is a front for his tricks and dishonesty as he tries to earn more, raising his social status. The figure of the shopwalker as he attempts to sell off last year's stock must have appealed to the clerks and administrators, the new class of consumer, viewing the insistent salesman with suspicion, while the higher-class audiences of the Empire perhaps looked down on the grasping little shop assistant from a position of satisfying superiority. The man or woman who seeks to rise above his or her station has ever been a comic target. Other songs, such as 'Buying a House' by Herbert Darnley and Dan Leno, reveal the agonizing dichotomy of the character who,

by taking on a mortgage, seeks to make an investment, but in fact gains nothing, becoming a slave to the capitalist system.

Verse:

Once I bought a house thro' a Building Society,  
Thinking when I paid for it it would belong to me;  
But oh! I was wrong, for the more I spent on it,  
The further off from being mine the dwelling seem'd to be . . .

Chorus:

Am I the Landlord, or am I not?  
Sometimes I think I am, and then I think I'm not,  
The Building Society wants to claim the spot,  
And my Landlord he wants to have the lot;  
Now what I want to know, before I'm off my dot,  
Is who does the house belong to?

Leno had often performed his earlier, domestic songs cross-dressed as a woman; although only a handful of his pantomime roles were female, it is for these that he is chiefly celebrated. The new genre of song reversed the gender of Leno's earlier songs and the sexual targets. Sexually aware wives had previously played on comic innuendo ('he likes his bit of meat on Sunday') with male characters played as naive innocents, emasculated by their ferocious or predatory female counterparts. Male characters now became the norm, their 'knowing' comments directed at the female:

The obsequious and bewhiskered counter-jumper, with his automatic politeness and everlasting 'walk this way,' lending an attentive ear to the wants of his female customers and telling them that the gloves he sells will 'stretch like a woman's conscience,' is a sight to make the proverbial cat laugh, as is also the alacrity with which he takes the place of the female attendant and smoothes over the bashfulness of his female patrons by assuring them that he is a married man, and fully acquainted with the mysteries of feminine attire – immediately proving it by recommending an article that is better than the old-fashioned kind that buttoned at the back. (*The Era* 1897)

Leno realized that his characterizations, based on familiar types, should have a general class appeal; in an interview from 1899, he references his conscious use of mimesis:

Songs must suit all classes of the audience and without that there is no success. 'The Shopwalker' and *Our Nineteenth Century Stores* are my favourites so far, because they are real studies of human character. You know the amount of humour there is in a shopwalker. His politeness to the buyers, and his courtesy to non-purchasers are proverbial. I knew a real genius in that line – a marvel indeed. He is my prototype for the song. Then the storeman, he is great. He usually sells something and you too. I know 'em. (*The Era* 1899)

By 1899, the year of the interview cited above, Leno's performances had fully conceded to the hegemonic demands of the 'great public'.

### The ballroom: Music hall song and social dance.

The very existence and numerousness of Dan Leno song sheets is further evidence of his middle-class appeal. The music hall song sheet was costly and out of economic reach for the working-class earner. Leno's most popular songs were arranged as polkas, one of the most popular ballroom dances of the time, catering to middle-class pastime of social dance. This is an important indicator, not only of Leno's wide popularity across the classes, but also of the interdependence between late-nineteenth-century music hall repertoire and middle-class social dance repertoire. The first example of a polka arrangement appeared in 1892, 'The Dan Leno Polka', by Fred Eplett. It included music from 'The Moving Job', 'The Grass Widower' and 'The Railway Guard'. Its publishers, taking advantage of 'The Shopwalker's' phenomenal popularity, included a picture of Dan Leno as 'The Shopwalker' on the cover, even though the song was not included in the musical arrangement. In 1892 'The Shopwalker Polka on the Melody of Dan Leno's Great Song' by Josef Meissler was

published as part of a series of 'new and fashionable dance music'. Only a handful of music hall songs appeared in the series, which was mainly composed of fashionable dances based on Victorian light repertoire suitable for the ballroom. Meissler's polka incorporated both the words and the tune of the chorus – an acknowledgement of the song's popularity. Both polkas also appeared in arrangements for full orchestra and 'octuor' (octet), intended for balls and public gatherings.

As Leno's style progressed, the songs became increasingly less defined in terms of class as he sought to encompass the whole music hall audience demographic. 'No More Fancy Balls for Me' references the upper-class aristocracy, the middle-class clergy and the lower-class pawn shop within the four-line chorus, reflecting a simplistic, triadic view of society often depicted in Leno's later songs.

No more fancy balls for me!  
They suit the aristocracy and parsons;  
But if I have to go to any more balls,  
It'll be to the old three brass 'uns.

The references to costume hire situate the song in a higher class bracket:

SPOKEN: Oh there's no doubt I've made a blithering idiot of myself.  
I had no business to go like this, I ought to have gone as a Roman  
Gladiator, but they wanted £4 10s. for that, and I'd only got 15s. to do  
the whole evening on

The hire of a costume was a considerable expense; at the time of 'No More Fancy Balls for Me' an evening's entertainment at a music hall could be purchased for as little as 2d. or 6d. Although the song jokes about having only 15 shillings, it would be a prohibitive expense for a working- or even lower-middle-class person.

The musical introduction breaks away from the usual formula by incorporating a waltz motif – another popular ballroom dance. It sets the scene of the fancy dress ball by presenting sixteen bars of genteel waltz music, comically switching to a four bar verse introduction



followed by four bars of 'hurry' music bringing Leno on for the song. Herbert Darnley's style of introduction served to reinforce the setting and characterization of the song, creating a musically descriptive picture. The song also references another social dance – 'the Lancers', popular at middle-class gatherings:

I soon forgot my sorrows as I mingled with the dancers,  
And begged of 'Joan of Arc' to be my partner in the Lancers.

Leno juxtaposes contrasting class material within his patter, bringing the affluent world of the country house down to the lower-class world of the pawn shop – the 'three brass 'uns':

I was invited down to her father's house to a shooting party – I got there just in time to help them out with the piano ... Oh, what a head I've got this morning! When I woke up, the servant – I mean the policeman – gave me a cup of coffee, and I said, 'What have I been doing?'

Leno performed songs such as 'No More Fancy Balls for Me' not only to satirize but also to encourage audiences to identify with the subject matter within their own experiences. In a previous article (Kershaw 1994: 42) I cited Leno's interview for *The New Penny Magazine* in which, when asked how he viewed the future of music hall, he replied:

I think that in a very few short years that title will have vanished. We shall have no music halls, only variety theatres, and I also think that in a few years we shall be on a level with the legitimate theatres. Whether this remark will bring down the house around my ears, I hardly dare to think, but as an instance of what can be done with the business, look at Mr Charles Morton, and the Palace Theatre. A few years ago, no lady would be seen at a music hall, and especially no lady in evening dress. Now it is the lady who goes in her very best and prettiest evening dress, and after a smart restaurant dinner party, a visit to the Palace is 'de rigueur' ... The Alhambra under Mr Slater's direction, has established a favourable reputation, and even the once much discussed Empire is becoming the fashion ... I have also noticed a change at the Tivoli and the Oxford, two of the halls with which I have been identified for

some years ... The Pavilion in its present condition is far more likely to attract than before, but I always got on well with the audience. (*New Penny Magazine* 1900: 112)

It is worth citing again to emphasize Leno's awareness of the changing social structure of the music halls and the need to adapt his repertoire. He predicts the impending transformation from music hall to variety theatre, recognizing a move towards a morality set by the legitimate theatre. His statement that the music hall would soon be on par with the legitimate theatre forecasts a challenge to the legitimate theatre's leading hegemonic status, a change sought by the music hall but never achieved. When asked, in the same interview, whether the public taste in songs moved with the times, Leno replied:

Most decidedly. Some five years ago, I sung a song about a 'fried fish' man. It was encored nightly, but I am sure if I were to revive it it would not do. The standard of music halls is rapidly rising, and though some people pretend they are unnecessary and not to be taken seriously, the idea is absurd. Night after night these places are crowded, and what turns get the most applause? Good knock-about business, and the ultra-melodramatic ballad, especially when the refrain is sung by some tiny boy or girl from the upper circle.

Far from remaining true to an 'authentic working-class culture', suggested by writers Bailey and Stedman-Jones as being the prevalent music hall class culture, performers such as Leno consented to the hegemonically driven, moral and class elevation taking place in the music hall during the 1890s, choosing material that was unchallenging, with universal appeal.<sup>3</sup> Commentators who failed to recognize the new, class-encompassing music hall chose to read Leno's material as class-specific, attaching a sentimental nostalgia to it, unable to view it as an element of the new entertainment for the petit-bourgeoisie.

Leno ... stood for the understructure of life from which it emerged, by means of a comic transmutation of its dark privations and necessities of suffering. Dan Leno is the supremely comic figure emerging from

a tragic conflict ... His material was the sum of all the small things in the life of his class. It was full of babies' bottles, Sunday clothes, pawnshops, lodgings, cheap holidays and the like. *There was no change in his material after he had ceased to be affected by all these problems.* He remained, as Grimaldi remained, a member of his class, and was *innocent* of basing any behaviour on the assumption that he had left it. (Scott 1946, emphasis added)

Despite this claim, as Leno gained popularity in the London West End halls, most critics were viewing his work exclusively in the light of character songs such as 'The Recruiting Sergeant', 'The Waiter' or 'The Jap'. It is these, along with later songs such as 'The Beefeater' or 'The Huntsman', that are most frequently cited, eclipsing his prolific output of earlier, mainly domestic songs of specifically lower and frequently harsher content.

### Recitations: Parodies and the national-popular

Towards the end of the 1890s and the beginning of the new century, Leno's songs became increasingly neutral, influenced by a national-popular hegemony. Songs such as 'The Swimming Master' or 'The Lecturer' avoided specific class reference, the subject matter was sufficiently universal to appeal to a general, mixed-class audience. Leno also started to introduce more of his own parodies and monologues. He recorded many of these spoken items. The parodies 'Where Are You Going to My Pretty Maid' and 'The Mockingbird' are based on well-known ballads; 'Poppies' is a burlesque 'coon' song and 'McGlockell's Men' a burlesque Scottish ballad. Other spoken recitations included 'My Wife's Relations' and 'The Robin'. Leno performed these at the beginning of the twentieth century by which time he was an established 'celebrity' or 'star' of the music hall, acknowledged even by royalty. It is unclear whether he performed these recitations in costume or not, but given his widespread fame and established status as a 'national treasure', it is likely that he was able to abandon all characterization and finally perform as

'himself'. The only other occasion for which he appeared onstage as an un-costumed, 'non-actor' had been the clog dances he had regularly performed as part of his music hall act until the mid-1880s.

In 'Where Are You Going to My Pretty Maid', and 'The Mockingbird', Leno subverts the ballads by taking each line literally, reducing the poetry to humorous banality, transporting essentially poetic characters to a world of pleasantries and social conventions:

Do you believe in old songs? Well – I do to a certain extent, but I picked up one the other day and I think the man must have been silly who wrote it – it was called 'Where are you going to my pretty maid'. Now that's how it commenced, but there's no explanation whatever. But from what I could see it was a gentleman walking across a field and there was a lady – or a working girl – coming in the opposite direction with a bucket on her arm. Well this gentleman, well he was no gentleman or he wouldn't have spoken to her first without an introduction of course – that's very plain – but however, he turned round and he said, without any introduction 'Where are you going to my pretty maid?' And then he repeated it – he said, 'Where are you going to my pretty maid?' You see now – what was it to do with him where she was going – but an entire stranger – but she turned round – now this is very wrong – she oughtn't to have taken any notice of him – she turned round and she said, 'I'm going a-milking sir' she said, 'sir' she said, 'sir' she said. Now why three times – what for! Once would have been enough and she should've gone on about her business.

Leno's monologues parodied the recitation, a prevalent late-nineteenth-century drawing-room entertainment published in collections suitable for the amateur reader for respectable home entertainments. Leno's biographer Hickory Wood, for example, published many volumes of humorous recitations, and an extract from Leno's ghosted pseudo-autobiography, *Hys Booke*, went through at least eight editions in *Routledge's XXth Century Humorous Reciter*.

Leno's monologues or recitations could be viewed as part of an inevitable progression of his style. As his patter increasingly dominated his songs, Leno began to sing just an introductory song verse and an end

verse, or even to end with just a chorus; as the subject matter became oriented to a wider class spectrum, it was an easy transition from song to recitation. Leno's later humour conforms to Gramsci's definition of a 'national-popular-cultural-character' – a cultural identity which could be understood, experienced and felt by a whole nation (Forgacs and Nowell-Smith 1985: 122–23). 'The Robin', for example, satirized the pervasive Victorian sentiment for Christmas, reflecting a shared religion, shared traditions and the shared values of the Victorian family. Leno parodied the Dickensian image of the warmth and friendship of the Christmas dinner, punctuated by instances of 'good-will'. His style of recitation becomes a pompous monotone in which he eventually loses the thread:

There you sit and you think of Christmas, and just then the little Robin comes hopping outside the window, hopping on his little hop, and you throw the windows open – (weather permitting of course, and you're not sitting there with your neck against it) – and there the Robin hops along and hops and – I often think it's a pity he hasn't got two more feet to hop on, give his hopping legs a rest – and you say 'Oh Merry Christmas!' and you throw him a loaf of bread and he picks it up and flies away with it and you say 'This is Christmas!'. Just then in comes the Christmas pudding, all hot and smoking with a little bit of holly sticking on the top and made of currant and lemons and bits of string and all the brandy burning all round it, all the beautiful brandy burning, and you say 'Oh, ooh, oh! What a pity the brandy's burning!' and there you sit on the pudding and you eat the robin with the pudding – you put the rob – er – well that is the reason I want to give you this impersonation of the bird and his song.

Leno had perfected a style that appealed to a wider national identity thus guaranteeing his popularity. Unlike his early domestic songs, which included slang and specifically lower-class references, Christmas was a nationally understood ritual. The symbolism of the robin, the holly and the Christmas pudding was engrained in the Victorian

consciousness. As a hegemonic drive to improve popular entertainment gathered momentum, music hall managements sought to appeal to higher-class audiences. Leno recognized and readily consented to the hegemonic change, consciously adapting his material accordingly. Far from remaining the youthful, clog-dancing champion of the lower classes, the mature and successful Leno entertained all classes of audience, turning to performance material that enshrined the national-cultural experience.

## Notes

- 1 See my article (Kershaw 1994) and my PhD thesis (Radcliffe 2006) for a full discussion of Leno's early repertoire.
- 2 See, for example, Johns's *Theatre World* interview with Dan Leno Junior (n.d.); Herbert Dan Leno's (1978) letter to the *Sunday Telegraph* and Wood (1905: 110).
- 3 See Stedman-Jones (1974) and Bailey (1998).

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