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WHEN ELEPHANTS WERE BLACKLEGS

Just over 50 years ago, the Music Halls went on strike.

William Payne, managed of the South London Music Hall, walked to centre stage — "You've had the elephants on once, and the pictures once. Would you care to have the pictures again or the elephants?" The audience gives a terrific howl of "No!" "Elephants?" (Yes! Yes! Yes!) "Very well we will put on the elephants again!"

So Lockhart's elephants lumbered back on stage to repeat their routine. But they were no sooner before the footlights than they were booed and called "Blacklegs!"

It was Tuesday, 22 January, 1907, and the Variety Artistes Federation as part of a National Alliance of performers, stage staff and musicians were "on strike" at 14 London music halls controlled by George Adney Payne and his son-in-law, Walter Gibbons.

For over 20 years the music halls had evolved into a series of powerful circuits — with the independents being squeezed out. From the free and easy pothouses of Champagne Charlie's day had grown the huge "Palace of Variety" with twice-nightly bills with maybe six star names on each weekly bill.

Not ripe

As far back as 1885, Charlie Coborn of "Two Lovely Black Eyes" fame, had formed the Music Hall Artistes Association, the first performers' union, to combat a move by the Managers Association of issuing a book setting out the salary to be paid to artistes. If a manager exceeded that rate, he was liable to a £50 fine. Unfortunately, there were a number of "benefit" societies vying for artistes' support, and Coborn's brainchild faded away — the time was not ripe for a trade union in that fiercely individual world of the music hall artiste.

But by 18 February, 1906, many performers, led by Joe O'Gorman, Joe Elvin, Arthur Roberts, George Gray, Harry Mountford and Coborn himself realised that only a trade union could achieve equitable conditions. So eight members each from the Grand Order of Water Rats, the International Artistes Lodge and the Music Hall Artistes Railway Association founded the Variety Artistes Federation, which is now incorporated with Equity. From those 24 founder members, by "Strike Day"

their numbers had grown to 3,799 VAFs with their own weekly penny newspaper "The Performer".

How and why did the strike happen? The VAF in concert with the National Association of Theatrical Employees (NATE) and the Amalgamated Musicians Union (AMU), had presented the managers with a Charter of the National Alliance. In it were the minimum conditions demanded by the constituent unions of the Alliance: for the AMU a 36s London minimum per instrumentalist plus pro rata half salary for each matinee at twice-nightly houses. Full salary was to be payable for matinees at once-nightly halls.

Demands

The NATE demands were more complicated, but for Daymen in "The Stage, Flies, Property and Gas Departments", the minimum demanded was 24s per week exclusive of "show-money" (For twice-nightly houses this was 2s 6d per night and 2s per matinee) plus overtime. This was for a five-day week.

The VAFs demands set out no minima but that all matinees shall be paid for at the rate of one-twelfth salary for each matinee; no artiste shall be transferred from one hall to

Peter Houri tells the story.

another without his consent; "time" shall not be varied after Monday without artiste's consent; VAF forms of contract be adopted as soon as supplied; no commission stopped on direct bookings; the "barring clause" to be modified to one mile and three months and that all disputes be referred to a board of arbitration of two managers, two artistes plus an independent chairman.

The first music hall managers to consider the charter were Frank MacNaghton, Walter Gibbons and George Adney Payne. On 9 January MacNaghton, controller of eight provincial and five London halls signed an agreement with the National Alliance. But as was quoted at the Alliance's first mass meeting at the Surrey Theatre on Sunday, 20 January, Mr. Gibbons said: "I am a beaten man; I do not want it to go to the public that you wiped the floor with me. Do not ask me to sign any agreements; I will give you my word of honour".

"The Performer", which was to become one of the Alliance's main sinews for the campaign, reported: "By an ultimatum sent Mr. Gibbons on Saturday, he was given until 4 o'clock Monday, 21 January to append his autograph to our Charter. Florists have flowers called 'Four o'clocks' because they blossom at that hour in the afternoon; but sad to say the affirmation of Gibbons did not burst into blossom at that hour. At 5.15 p.m. the Alliance Committee called out all VAF, AMU and NATE members at all of Gibbons' halls."

That evening there were no performances at the Islington Empire, Balham Duchess, Clapham Grand, Ealing Hippodrome, Croydon Palace, whilst at Holborn Empire Mr. Marner, with none of his billed artistes working, and only the drummer remaining of the musicians, tried to improvise a show with a pianist playing the "Belle of New York" selection and a pretty young lady, as an eye witness put it, "who sang 'Good-bye' and to tell the truth it looked like what she sang, and then a white moving picture sheet showed 'The Alps seen through a telescope'. There was no second house!"

By Tuesday evening the strike had spread to the halls controlled by Gibbons' father-in-law, Adney Payne — so there were no shows at the



Maybelles' Elephants late Lockharts

Oxford, Tivoli, Paragon, Canterbury, Euston, East Ham Palace, Walthamstow Palace. South London's attempt at strike breaking had ended in pandemonium. The Tivoli's manager received the following telegrams from his "bill-toppers": "I am learning a new cornet solo. Cannot tear myself away—Little Tich" and "I am busy putting a new frounce on my dress so I cannot appear tonight—Marie Lloyd."

An Emergency Relief Fund was started by Little Tich, Arthur Roberts and Joe Elvin to which hundreds of members and sympathisers subscribed, including Miss Helty King and my grandfather Percy Honri who "struck" with the Canterbury and Paragon "bills" that included Joe Elvin, Gus Elen, Nellie Wallace, Gertie Gitana, Tom Leamore, Lottie Collins. His own father Harry Tomps (my great-grandfather) was VAF Branch Chairman at Ashton-under-Lyne, whilst Percy's father-in-law, W. H. Broadhead, was "on t'other side o' fence" as proprietor of the Lancashire music hall circuit that bore his name.

Hosts of artistes undertook picket duties at the "barred" halls, and a few including Marie Kendall and her husband Steve McCarthy were arrested for obstruction.



Close quarters

At their second mass meeting at the Surrey, Frank Gerald, VAF general secretary, announced that Dr. Distin Maddick, owner of the Scala Theatre, had agreed that "La Scala shall be the home of the music hall profession in England". "The Performer" put it succinctly that "... we have taken the Scala Theatre which is within a few yards of the Oxford. Here we shall get to close quarters with our enemies and endeavour to prove to them that Talent and Ability constitute the most important factors of success in the Variety World".

In the same article the writer stated: "An industrial strike can in no way be compared to our dispute, for when ordinary workmen 'come out' they are compelled to leave the machinery and the raw materials behind them. But we, the Artistes and Musicians, can never be in such a position as that, for when we strike we take the machinery and the raw materials with us, to use and to sell as suit our purpose best. The managers cannot replace the talent they have lost."

The Managers tried to replace the "stars" that had "struck"—many a third-rate act found that "strike-breaking" for their "West End Music Hall" debut was not an enjoyable occupation. Music hall artiste-pickets were something to reckon with for pithy comment, and with the public firmly on their side, many a patron braved the cold for some pavement entertainment by his "favourite star". Even the Salvation Army Bands refused to play for the Managers!

By 7 February the situation had hardened somewhat—Oswald Stoll speaking of the Charter had said: "I must ignore it"—the Alliance put on shows at "The Horns", Kennington, and "The Myddelton Hall", Islington, and prepared for the Gala show at the Scala. "The Performer" published dozens of adverts of support from members working in the provinces, together with columns of subscribers to the relief fund and the names of the "blackleg" artistes.

Recognition

Two days later, on 9 February, the managers via their London Entertainments Protection Association officially recognised the National Alliance. With the advice of the London Trades Council, and in particular of

the veteran union man Ben Tillett, negotiations continued. On Tuesday, 13 February, the day after the National Alliance opened its own show at the Scala, an armistice was declared pending the unconditional arbitration of George R. Askwith, of the Board of Trade—this meant the withdrawal of legal actions on the Managers side and of the pickets by the Alliance.

Acting on Shakespeare's injunction "Go hang your banners on the outer walls", the Vaudeville Club put out a banner with two-foot letters: "Peace! All the stars return to the halls tonight".

The lesson of the strike was that performers had learned to think less of self-interest and more of co-operative interests; they had discovered that a combination of talent can secure fairer and better conditions than individual talent.

Disraeli's phrase "Peace with Honour" seemed apt as the Chirgwins, the Elvins, the Lloyds made their exits—smiling!

PETER HONRI: London debut at Collins Music Hall in 1948. Member of Equity Council since 1965, and of executive committee since 1967.

