

T. S. Eliot and Popular Music: Ragtime, Music-Hall Songs, Bawdy Ballads, and All That Jazz

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Dedicated to the Memory of Dr. Guy A. Hargrove, Jr.

Throughout his life, T. S. Eliot not only enjoyed the various forms of popular entertainment in the United States, France, and Great Britain, but was also greatly influenced by them in writing his poetry, plays, and essays. Indeed, many of their elements are reflected in numerous ways from the earliest of his works to the last. David Chinitz in *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* illustrates the extent to which Eliot in his youth was steeped in and influenced by American popular culture. My book *T. S. Eliot's Parisian Year* contains a chapter on the Parisian popular entertainment scene that influenced him during his 1910-1911 sojourn in the French capital. And Ronald Schuchard in his essay "In the Music Halls" in *Eliot's Dark Angel* establishes the influence of British music hall on Eliot. This essay will focus on the music and performers in popular entertainment that seem to have inspired him, moving chronologically from his youth in St. Louis and Boston to his year in Paris when he was 22 and finally to his adulthood in London. I will demonstrate how they informed the rhythm and shape of his works, provided him with lyrics, and encouraged his eagerness to experiment.

I will begin with a brief review of the major characteristics of variety theatre, a broad umbrella term that includes most of the types of popular entertainment that Eliot experienced: American minstrel shows, vaudeville, revues, and musicals; Parisian café-concerts (cafés with musical entertainment) and music halls (imported from England, but given a French flavor); and British music halls and revues. All presented a series of different acts or "turns," featuring songs, comedy routines, and specialty acts such as magicians, acrobats, and dancers. The songs, typically aimed at working-class or middle-class audiences and romantic, sentimental, patriotic, or humorous in nature, consisted of a series of verses sung by the performer, each of which was followed by a refrain with which the audience joined in. A contemporary account of

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a Parisian café-concert, for example, notes that there is “direct contact between the song and the people, . . . for the audience takes up the refrain in a chorus, . . . accepting the [singer’s] invitation which often ends the last verse: ‘Sing with me . . . Repeat with me,’” an invitation facilitated by the sale of printed refrains (Caretie qtd. in Caradec and Weill 30).¹ Eliot found this feature particularly appealing, noting in his famous 1922 essay on the British music-hall comedienne and singer Marie Lloyd, “The working man who . . . joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the act; he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art” (“Marie Lloyd” 74).

As Chinitz demonstrates, Eliot’s youth in St. Louis was permeated with the exciting sounds of American popular music from minstrel shows, vaudeville, revues, and musicals as well as from honky-tonks and saloons, although at his young age he was surely not allowed to go to the last two, but probably heard their tunes. Ragtime, an original American musical genre, began in the late 1890s and was popular until the late teens when it was eclipsed by jazz. An abbreviation of “ragged time,” a reference to its ragged or syncopated rhythm, ragtime grew out of dance music played in red-light districts in St. Louis and New Orleans and jigs and marches played by African American brass bands. Its lyrics, as described by Philip Furia, reflected the American vernacular and employed internal rhymes and jagged syntactical breaks (Chinitz 37). Since ragtime literally “filled the St. Louis air,” as Eric Sigg points out (20–21), its rhythms and lyrics surely informed Eliot’s own sense of rhythm and contributed to his appreciation for the daring and experimental from an early age, as well as provided him with actual lyrics for his works.

In Boston during his undergraduate years at Harvard, with occasional trips to New York City, Eliot’s opportunities to experience popular entertainment expanded; there, for example, he could have attended George M. Cohan’s 1907 musical *Fifty Miles from Boston*, which contained the song “Harrigan,” and Chinitz suggests that he probably heard “My Evaline,” a 1901 song from a vaudeville-minstrel act, sung as a barbershop quartet at Harvard (43). And because of his love of ballroom dancing, he was familiar with current dance tunes.

Eliot’s most well-known use of ragtime in his works is “That Shakespearian Rag” (see fig. 1), from the 1912 Ziegfeld Follies, in Section II of *The Waste Land*. In the scene portraying the upper-class couple in their ornately-decorated flat, the frantic wife tries to elicit a response from her silent, depressed husband by asking, “Is there nothing in your head?” He only thinks the reply, nothing

But
O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—
It's so elegant
So intelligent. (127-130)



Fig. 1

"That Shakesperian Rag." York University Libraries, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, John Arpin Fonds, FO JAC005281.

This fragment of a popular tune suggests the triviality and vacuity of his existence. The poem's odd spelling "Shakespeherian," which is overlooked by most Eliot scholars, is surely meant to indicate both the syncopated beat of ragtime (Chinitz 48) and the way the refrain sounds when sung by a music-hall singer and repeated by the audience. The Grizzly Bear referred to in the chorus was a popular dance considered shocking at the time, which, Schuchard notes, was the trademark of the British music-hall star Ethel Levy and whose steps Eliot offered to teach Virginia Woolf (106, 235 n. 10). Sara M. Evans in her book *Born for Liberty* reveals that, "after a ten-to-twelve hour workday

[young working-class women] flocked to dance halls where young men would treat them to drinks and [they would] join in the faddish 'tough dancing.' The raw sexuality of dances like the slow rag, turkey trot, bunny hug, grizzly bear, and 'shaking the shimmy' horrified the middle classes. . . . Such public eroticism shocked one magazine into announcing in 1913 that 'sex o'clock' had struck" (161).

Two lines of the chorus of another popular song are found in the excised opening passage of *The Waste Land*. "Harrigan," as noted earlier, appeared in Cohan's 1907 musical *Fifty Miles from Boston*, sung by an Irish American proud of his heritage, with a rousing chorus that is still well-known today. Eliot uses this song to characterize the group of lowbrows who are drinking and carousing when one of them recalls an earlier incident in which "we got Joe to sing / 'I'm proud of all the Irish blood that's in me, / There's not a man can say a word agin me'" (*The Waste Land: Facsimile* 5). Eliot substitutes "There's not a man"

for the original's Irish dialectal phrase "Divil a man," meaning "Nary a man," perhaps to avoid misunderstanding.

However, the two lines from "Harrigan" are circled in the typescript, and notations in the right margin indicate alternate choices: lines from the songs "By the Watermelon Vine" and "My Evaline," which are struck through, and two lines from the chorus of a 1909 ragtime song "The Cubanola Glide" (*The Waste Land: Facsimile 5*; see fig. 2),



Fig. 2

"The Cubanola Glide": 32278011731092: The Cubanola Glide, Charles H. Templeton, Sr. sheet music collection. Special Collections, Mississippi State University Libraries.

quite fond of this song because he had used two other lines from the chorus ("Throw your arms around me—Aint you glad you found me" 18) ten years earlier in "The smoke that gathers blue and sinks," a poem written in Paris in February 1911, to which I'll return later. Interestingly, this second pair of lines was adapted from a 1907 song entitled "Ain't You Glad You Found Me."

Eliot uses the song "Under the Bamboo Tree" in his highly experimental melodrama *Sweeney Agonistes*. Wishing to convey to a broad audience the serious theme that the menace of savagery resides in modern civilization, he incorporated not only this song but also

which, according to Chinitz, was significant for its tropical rhythms, its African American dialect, and its contribution to the developing social dance craze (43). In the song an amorous man invites his "honey babe" to learn a Cuban dance that involves "kissin" and "squeezing" as they "Glide to Glory"; the lines from the chorus written in the margin are "Tease, Squeeze lovin & woo in / Say Kid what're y' doin" (*The Waste Land: Facsimile 5*), with "Say kid" substituted for the original's "Oh babe."

Eliot was apparently quite fond of this song because he had used two other lines from the chorus ("Throw your arms around me—Aint

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numerous elements of the minstrel show, vaudeville, music hall, café-concert, and melodrama. For instance, when the play was first published in 1926-7 in the *Criterion*, it was entitled *Wanna Go Home, Baby* to resemble a music-hall song and / or a drunken question with modern-day sexual implications, but he later changed it to the title it bears today. Musically speaking, Eliot drew from ragtime and jazz, the latter of which had its beginnings in New Orleans in the mid to late teens with African American musicians and had become extremely popular by the early 1920s in Europe as well as in America. Both ragtime and jazz used syncopation and American slang and dialects, but jazz introduced improvisations, thus authorizing free-wheeling experimentation and individuality on the part of the performers, and pushed the envelope with more and more daring uses of the vernacular and sexual innuendo. As Chinitz shows, these and other aspects of popular entertainment can be seen in the play's irregular rhythm, repetition, slang, rapid-fire cross-talk, sexual innuendo, and stock characters (43). Concerning the characters, Schuchard suggests that the British music-hall comedian George Robey's Prehistoric Man is a model for Sweeney (105; see photograph of Robey in the illustrations found between pp. 108 and 109).

"Under the Bamboo Tree," which tells of a Zulu from Matabooloo who woos a jungle maiden, was written by the African American song-writers Bob Cole and brothers James Weldon and Rosamond Johnson for their popular vaudeville act and was then included in the 1902 Broadway musical *Sally in Our Alley*. Sung by Marie Cahill, it was such a hit that she sang it again in her next show, *Nancy Brown*. In the second part of *Sweeney Agonistes*, the characters Sam Wauchope and Captain Horsfall, accompanied in minstrel-show style by Swarts and Snow on the tambourine and bones (castenets), sing a humorous, but sinister, version of the chorus elicited by Sweeney's proposal to carry Doris off to a cannibal isle:

Under the bamboo
Bamboo bamboo
Under the bamboo tree
Two live as one
One live as two
Two live as three
Under the bam
Under the boo
Under the bamboo tree. (40-48)

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Peter Ackroyd reports that Eliot sang this song for his guests at a party celebrating his winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948 (290).

Eliot left Harvard and America in 1910 for a year in Paris, where he attended the courses given by the famous philosopher Henri Bergson at the Collège de France and simultaneously searched for his poetic voice in the home of French poets such as Jules Laforgue. With the sounds of American popular music ringing in his ears, he doubtless couldn't wait to check out the famous—or infamous—Parisian forms of light entertainment (removed as he was then by an entire ocean from the watchful eye of his mother and of Bostonian proper society). There he heard French popular music along with the American tunes that were staples in Parisian night spots. Nancy Perloff describes the Paris of this time as “one vast entertainment world” (20) with a wide array of offerings, two of the most dominant being café-concerts and music hall. While the lack of surviving documents makes it impossible to know exactly what he attended, the great variety of choices discussed below suggests what he might have seen and heard.

The major offering of the café-concert, where one could drink, smoke, and move around freely, was banal songs of a coarse, crude, and / or humorous nature sung by various performers, with the audience joining in on the refrains, which were printed and sold to the customers. Between the rounds of sentimental or licentious love songs, patriotic songs, and idiotic songs were dances, comic skits, and revues. One of the most popular singers was Dranem, whose signature idiotic song “Les p'tits pois” (“Green Peas”) had ten verses, each of which was followed by the refrain “Ça n' se mange pas avec les doigts” (“Don't eat them with your fingers”).

Félix Mayol, known for his lively, light-hearted songs, owned his own café-concert called the Concert Mayol, which was patronized by *Le Tout Paris* (the cream of Parisian society). He was famous for his perfect diction, his raised tuft of hair, his elegant formal clothing, and the sprig of lily of the valley on his lapel. Several YouTube videos show him doing dance movements while singing that look silly and even laughable today, but at the time were a part of his appeal. His most celebrated song, the 1902 hit “Viens, Poupoule” (“Come on, chick,” a term of affection), is about a Parisian working-class man who invites his wife to go to a café-concert on Saturday as their dessert, urging her to hurry so that they will get good seats for the entertainment. He says that the songs will make him “naughty,” reminding her that that is how he became a papa!

I have described the Parisian café-concert in some detail because, although Eliot did not echo any of its specific songs in his works (a bit puzzling since he certainly used foreign languages in many of them),

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he was highly influenced by the interaction between singer and audience and incorporated its setting and performers into several poems written in Paris in 1911, most notably “The smoke that gathers blue and sinks.” Among several types of café-concert performers was the *gommeuse*, a sensual singer of sexually explicit songs who was typically buxom but had a poor voice (see fig. 3). In the poem, Eliot’s speaker describes the entertainer in such a venue as a woman who is surely a *gommeuse*, “A lady of almost any age / But chiefly breasts and rings,” who sings “*Throw your arms around me—Aint you glad you found me*” (16-18) from the chorus of “The Cubanola Glide,” an authentic combination of French and American influences since American ragtime was very popular in Paris at that time.



Fig. 3.

A Gommeuse. Degas, Edgar (1834-1917). Café Concert aux Ambassadeurs. Oil on canvas. Photo Credit : Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

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The influence of specific performers in Parisian music halls such as Ba-ta-clan² is also evident in Eliot's works. Harry Fragson was a comedian and singer who delighted Parisian audiences with his "inimitable cocoricos" ("Fragson" 7), his comic hallmark; perhaps Eliot heard this French onomatopoetic word for the crowing of a rooster at one of Fragson's performances at the Alhambra Music Hall in November 1910 and used it as a symbol of hope and protection when *The Waste Land's* protagonist arrives at the ruined chapel, based on the rooster's well-known function as the guardian of France (see Hargrove 296 n. 17). The first music-hall performer to accompany himself on the piano, Fragson sang comic, sentimental, and patriotic songs, with whose refrains his audiences joined him.

Fina Montjoie, a leading female singer in a popular revue in the fall of 1910, may have furnished the name Maisie Montjoy that Eliot uses in his last play *The Elder Statesman* for the stage name of the beautiful star of revue with whom Lord Claverton had a love affair as a young man. She tells other characters that her name once "Topped the bill in revue" (89) and was known by everyone in London (92). The hit song that made her reputation was entitled "It's not too late for you to love me" (68, 92), which she sang with great emotion as a result of her anguish at Claverton's breaking off with her. While I could not find an actual popular song with that title, it's certainly typical of the genre.

The dancer Polaire, who began her career as a *gommeuse* in a café-concert, expanded the vulgar gestures of that type to create the epileptic dance genre with her frenetic movements—shaking, jerking, and twirling her body in a manner considered scandalous at the time; indeed, she was described as the "agitating and agitated" Polaire (Caradec and Weill 177-8). A drawing of the time with the title "Epileptic Singer: Vulgar gestures and a voice like vinaigrette" captures well this dance new to the café-concert. At the time of Eliot's arrival in Paris, audiences at the Moulin Rouge thrilled to "La Danse Noire," described in the October 23, 1910 issue of the leading Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* as an "impassioned and brutal dance by Polaire and Gaston Sylvestre" ("Spectacles" 4). She may well have been the model for the actual epileptic in Eliot's 1917 poem "Sweeney Erect" since the latter's appearance closely resembles Polaire's disheveled hair, immense dark eyes that appeared bruised, and large voracious mouth (Caradec and Weill 178): "This withered root of knots of hair / Slitted below and gashed with eyes, / This oval O cropped out with teeth" (13-15).

Perhaps the most celebrated Parisian performer in popular entertainment was the singer, dancer, and comedienne Mistinguett or LA Mistinguett (THE Mistinguett, as she was called, see fig. 4) who appeared at the Moulin Rouge, the Folies Bergère, the Eldorado, and the

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Casino de Paris. Eliot doubtless first saw her perform during his 1910-1911 year in Paris, and he did see her in January 1922 in Paris during his stopover there on his way back to London after his treatment in Lausanne; in his London Letter of April 1922, he wrote that in Paris he saw “Mistinguette [sic] at the Casino de Paris,” noting that “she is versatile” and made him think of Marie Lloyd’s “directness, frankness, and ferocious humour” (513).

A particularly noteworthy intersection of American and Parisian popular entertainment that influenced Eliot in writing *The Waste Land* was the scandalous Cubist ballet *Parade*, which combined elements of music hall, street fair, circus, cinema, and ragtime. First performed in Paris in 1917, it was revived in 1919 in London, where Eliot probably saw it. The composer Erik Satie incorporated into his innovative score the melody of the chorus of Berlin and Snyder’s 1911 “That Mysterious Rag,” which had been featured in a revue at the Moulin Rouge in 1913. Satie’s use of this popular ragtime song no doubt inspired Eliot to include “That Shakespearian Rag” in his ground-breaking poem. Satie also incorporated into the score sounds of lowbrow entertainment such as the



Fig. 4.

Mistinguette. Photograph by Paul Tournachon Nadar (son of Nadar), c. 1900. www.dutempsdeserisesauxfeuillesmortes. Used by permission of Jacques Marchioro.

calliope, the lottery wheel, and the small bands of Parisian street fairs and the sounds of the modern industrial world such as typewriters, sirens, airplanes, and trains, perhaps an inspiration for Eliot’s description in *The Waste Land* of the bells of St. Mary Woolnoth, the “horns and motors” of urban traffic, and the inclusion of a typist. Furthermore, the major character in the ballet is the Chinese Conjuror, based on the wildly popular Chinese magician Chung Ling Soo (actually an American named William Ellsworth Robinson) and danced by Leonide Massine. Eliot probably saw this famed magician at the Alhambra Music Hall in Paris, where he performed annually from

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1910 to 1918 and / or in London at the Empire, the Alhambra, or the Coliseum, music halls which he frequented.

Finally, the stars and songs of the British music hall had a great influence on Eliot as an adult. He greatly admired the “Queen of the Halls,” the inimitable Marie Lloyd (see fig. 5). Known for her mischievous wink, her sometimes vulgar gestures, and her bawdy songs, such as “What’s that for, eh?” and “She’d never had her ticket punched before,” she “always envisaged the seamy side of life with gusto rather than deprecation,” according to British theatre critic

James Agate (qtd. in “Marie Lloyd” 1). Her trademark song, “Oh, Mr. Porter” about a woman who takes the wrong train but receives an offer of marriage from an elderly passenger, with plenty of sexual innuendo and opportunities for lewd gestures, is considered by some scholars as a possible source for Mrs. Porter in *The Waste Land*, a bit of a stretch in my opinion.

Of course, the major source is “O the Moon Shone Bright on Mrs. Porter,” a bawdy ballad of uncertain origin sung by Australian soldiers in World War I about the owner of a brothel in Cairo and her daughter. In his notes to *The Waste Land*, Eliot comments, “I do not know the origin of the ballad from which these



Fig. 5

Marie Lloyd. Postcard of Lloyd onstage in the 1890s. Hana Studios Ltd. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

lines are taken; it was reported to me from Sydney, Australia” (74 n 199). While one version contains the vulgar word for the female genitalia in place of the word “Feet,” Eliot uses the more polite version in the fragment appearing in *The Waste Land*.

The song “At Trinity Church I Met my Doom” (1894), made famous by the music-hall comedian Tom Costello, is about a man who meets a “noble buxom creature” at ballroom dances, and, as he puts it, “Like

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to salmon I was speared”; believing her claims to be “five-and-twenty” and wealthy, he weds her, mourning in the chorus the rotten life he now leads. A You Tube video of Costello performing this song shows him with a top hat, a rumpled frock coat, a big hump on his backside (whose significance is not at all apparent), and a cane with which he imitates spearing a salmon; as he sings, he prances around what seems to be the “top back room” of the song. After finishing the song, he confides to an apparent male audience that “the woman pulls the string and the man is a yo-yo” and admits that he was foolish to get married twice! Eliot’s rendition of the song’s lyrics is sung by the Cockney foreman Ethelbert in *The Rock* (see Schuchard 239 n 45).

“One-Eyed Riley” is a traditional Irish drinking song that exists in many versions, some of which are quite vulgar; indeed, Schuchard includes a bawdy English version in which the singer reveals that he would like to “shag” (rather than marry) the bar owner’s daughter, ending with the chorus

Hi yi yi—Hi yi yi
The one-eyed Reilly,
Rub it up, stuff it up, bum and all,
Play it on your old bass drum. (239-40 n 47)

Eliot, however, uses a quite respectable version in *The Cocktail Party*, sung merrily and unexpectedly by the Unidentified Guest in the first act, and he originally intended to use the song’s title as the title of the play.

Eliot clearly enjoyed the music and performers of the varied forms of popular entertainment in the United States, France, and Great Britain. Indeed, as Schuchard tells us, Eliot sang or hummed popular music all his life, noting Gordon’s reference to Mary Trevelyan’s revelation in her unpublished memoir that he “would sing tunelessly in a harsh low voice on the way home after dinners: music-hall songs of his youth, or Negro spirituals” (Gordon 445; Schuchard 118) as well as Valerie Eliot’s statement that he possessed “an astounding repertoire of ‘music-hall ditties’” (qtd. in “T.S. Eliot and I”; Schuchard 118). Of even greater importance for Eliot studies, he made extensive and significant use of popular songs and popular entertainment from his earliest works to his last.³

Notes

1. All translations from French are mine. Limited portions of the discussion of Parisian popular entertainment were adapted, with permission, from *T. S. Eliot's Parisian Year* by Nancy Duvall Hargrove. University Press of Florida, 2009.
2. This music hall was one of the sites in Paris in November 2015 of the infamous terrorist attacks.
3. My late husband, tenor extraordinaire Guy A. Hargrove, sang the songs mentioned in this paper for presentations that we made many times for the T. S. Eliot Society, the T.S. Eliot International Summer School, and other organizations. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=dupPxd_gYfw for a video of the presentation at Little Gidding, U.K, in July 2013 during the T.S. Eliot International Summer School at the Annual Meeting of the Little Gidding Society.

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