The second half of the 19th century was an age of mass entertainment in the United States. Urban audiences had ready access to theater, minstrelsy, vaudeville, and other popular amusements, while showboats, touring troupes, tent shows, repertory companies, circuses, and Wild West shows took comedy, drama, music, and action to the hinterlands. In addition to this wide array of live entertainments, there were technical marvels such as dioramas, panoramas, cycloramas, and—by the end of the century—motion pictures, not to mention the wonders and oddities on display at museums and expositions.

Minstrelsy was the principal form of popular entertainment in America during the middle third of the 19th century. Unlike most musical or theatrical performances of the period, minstrelsy was largely, though not exclusively, indigenous entertainment. It was, as Eric Lott has written, "the national art of the moment." Minstrel shows typically included songs, dances, instrumental specialties, comic dialogues, novelty acts, parodies of "stump speeches," and burlesques. The performers were white entertainers who mimicked African Americans by wearing burnt-cork makeup (blackface), speaking in exaggerated dialect, exploiting well-established stereotypes, and performing music that ostensibly originated in the slave communities of antebellum plantations. Some black troupes (who also performed in blackface) toured the eastern states during the antebellum period and the Civil War, often appearing before abolitionist groups, but minstrelsy was essentially a white enterprise. Even the black companies came under white management by the 1870s. Managers, actors, and songwriters were typically northerners who had little or no knowledge of African Americans or of the plantation life that they romanticized.

This ignorance hardly mattered to either the performers or the audiences, for minstrelsy did not strive for authenticity; its function was to entertain and lampoon. In so doing, minstrels depicted plantation blacks as shiftless, ignorant (but cunning), and contented. Northern blacks were dandies, con men, gamblers, and womanizers. Black women, on the other hand, were not subjected to such derision. The comedy was not limited to African-American stereotypes. The stump speech, for instance, mocked pomposity, verbosity, and bogus intellectualism while satirizing abolitionism, temperance, women's rights, and other current issues. The burlesque numbers enabled minstrels to lampoon high culture—Shakespeare, opera, and classical music.

Minstrelsy reached its peak about 1860, when there were about 100 companies nationwide, 10 in New York City. By 1880 the number of companies had declined to about 30. The content and format had begun to change during the 1870s. One company, Primrose and West, kept the basic structure but dispensed with blackface altogether, dressing its performers as 18th-century French courtiers. Another promoter, J. H. Haverly, combined four companies into one and promoted his United Mastodon Minstrels as a spectacle, comparable to the circus. He included tightrope walkers, acrobats, clowns, bareback riders, and a brass band. Over time the comedy routines made less use of African-American stereotypes; the new objects of ridicule were immigrants, especially the Irish. Cultural historians attribute the decline of minstrelsy to many factors, including the panic of 1873, the rise of variety, burlesque, and vaudeville shows, as well as postbellum concerns about African Americans. Race was no longer a laughing matter; the
theatrical depiction of slave life had become the preserve of reformist melodramas such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Race, understandably, remains an important issue in critiques and cultural histories of minstrelsy. During the antebellum period, Frederick Douglass, the great African-American abolitionist, described minstrels as "filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow-citizens." Russel B. Nye, writing in 1970, maintained that minstrelsy's obvious artificiality minimized the social effects of its negative African-American stereotypes. Robert C. Toll in 1976 stressed the popular appeal and entertainment value of the shows while acknowledging the harmful lingering effects of minstrel stereotypes. More recently, William L. Mahar (1999) and Eric Lott (1993) depicted minstrelsy as a two-way medium of cultural diffusion between blacks and whites.

Vaudeville superseded minstrelsy in popularity during the last 20 years of the 19th century. Vaudeville was principally an outgrowth of variety and burlesque, though it also perpetuated elements of minstrelsy. (Prominent vaudevillians such as Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor were performing in blackface even as late as the 1920s.) Variety, which had the greatest influence on vaudeville, was a hodgepodge of low comedy, songs, specialty acts (jugglers, hypnotists, acrobats), and dancing girls. The venue for variety was the concert saloon, with the audience consisting of men who wanted to be entertained while they imbibed. The blend of booze and sexuality in the disreputable atmosphere of the saloon caused respectable women to stay away from the shows and led moralists and reformers to charge that concert saloons were dens of vice. Variety shows that featured scantily clad women were called leg shows. The more risque of these evolved into burlesque, although the traditional burlesque theater specialized in comedy skits and parodies of well-known plays and novels. By the 1890s these separate strands had merged. The typical burlesque show of the late 19th century included song-and-dance routines, double-entendre jokes, and slapstick, but partially dressed women were the principal attraction. The more daring shows presented "exotic" dancers, who did a variation of the belly dance. (Striptease was a much later innovation.) The performer who called herself Little Egypt became a celebrity by doing such a dance in Chicago at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893.

A key figure in the emergence of vaudeville was Tony Pastor, a singer and songwriter who operated variety theaters in New Jersey and New York City after 1865. A devout Catholic who had once sung at temperance rallies, Pastor revamped variety by prohibiting alcohol and forbidding vulgar comedy and suggestive dances in his shows. His goal was to attract middle-class families to his theaters by providing popular entertainment in a respectable venue. Pastor's formula, which he continued to call variety, was adopted by the emerging vaudeville theaters of the 1880s and 1890s. In Boston, B. F. Keith and Edward F. Albee employed a similar strategy, but enhanced by continuous performances in opulent new theaters designed to appeal to a broader and more affluent audience than those who went to concert saloons and burlesque houses. The policy of continuous performances enabled patrons to arrive at their convenience anytime between 9:30 A.M. and 10:00 P.M. and see a complete performance. By acquiring a circuit of theaters and creating their own booking agency, Keith and Albee dominated the vaudeville business in the eastern United States. Martin Beck's Orpheum Circuit was equally influential west of the Mississippi. Black performers worked the so-called chitlin circuit, a network of segregated theaters scattered between New York and New Orleans, controlled by the Theatre Owners Booking Association.
Between 1880 and 1920, when vaudeville was the reigning form of popular entertainment in the United States, every city had at least one vaudeville house. New York City had 10, including the Palace Theater, vaudeville's premier venue. Small towns and rural areas had to make do with occasional touring companies and tent shows. Vaudeville succeeded by virtue of its "cheerful frivolity," as one writer put it, as well as its peculiar blend of wholesomeness and urban sophistication, and the tempo and precision of its staging.

Successful vaudeville performers were those who timed, tested, and refined their material to achieve maximum impact during their brief turn in the spotlight. Shows typically opened with a "dumb act" (acrobats, jugglers, mimes, or trained animals). Then came comedians, ventriloquists, magicians, song-and-dance acts, skits, virtuoso instrumentalists, knife throwers, bird whistlers, and so on. The first half of the show always closed with a dynamic showstopper that made audiences eager for more. A similar lineup followed the intermission, except that the headliner came on next to closing. Among the leading vaudeville stars of the 1890s were comedians Weber and Fields, Sandow the Strong Man, dancer Eva Tanguay, and singer Lillian Russell. The final presentation was the "chaser," designed to hasten the crowd to the exits so a new audience could take its place. During the late 1890s motion pictures, then a mere novelty, served this function.

During its vogue, vaudeville, particularly the comedians, reflected the changing ethnic character of its audiences. With its broad appeal to pluralistic urban spectators, vaudeville provided unique opportunities for performers of varied ethnic backgrounds. African Americans were an exception to this trend. Even the great Bert Williams, one of the few African-American entertainers not restricted to the "Chitlin Circuit," did his act in blackface. Vaudeville also stereotyped Germans, Irish, and Jews, though the performers often shared the ethnic identities of their comic personas. Thus, white ethnic stereotypes provided employment opportunities for Irish and Jewish comics and singers. Vaudeville also offered prospects for women, who could find respectable employment, opportunities for self-expression, even wealth and fame in a business that welcomed their talents and allure.

The period after the Civil War also saw the beginning of a golden age for circus in America, thanks in large part to Phineas T. Barnum, the nation's leading showman. Barnum launched his circus on a grand scale in 1871, then in 1880 teamed with James A. Bailey to create a unique spectacle: simultaneous acts in three rings surrounded by a hippodrome track for parades and races. Barnum promoted this "greatest show on earth" with parades and well-calculated publicity stunts. Jumbo, billed as the world's largest elephant, was the show's star attraction until the great beast was killed in a railroad accident in 1885. After Jumbo's demise the circus headlined the trapeze acts and tightrope walkers, supported by the usual clowns, equestrians, and wild animal routines. Barnum and Bailey were the first to make effective use of the nation's burgeoning railroad system, moving their circus from town to town and thus maximizing the number of performances by minimizing the time between show dates. Barnum & Bailey's main competition came from the Ringling Bros. Circus, formed in 1884. (The Ringlings acquired Barnum & Bailey in 1906 but operated it separately until 1918, when they merged their troupes to create the gigantic Ringling Bros. And Barnum & Bailey Circus.)

Wild West shows combined elements of the circus with the frontier myth to form a uniquely American spectacle. Barnum staged a Wild West show in 1874, but it was Colonel William Frederick Cody (Buffalo Bill) who made the most of the "equestrian drama," as he called the genre. Cody, the renowned buffalo hunter and U.S. Army scout, was the hero of dime novels by Ned Buntline (Edward E. C. Judson) and in 1872–73 had appeared on stage in a play by
Buntline. He returned to the West to fight under General George Armstrong Custer and Philip H. Sheridan in the Indian wars of the 1870s, but in 1882 at North Platte, Nebraska, he mounted an outdoor show featuring exhibitions of roping, riding, sharpshooting, and a dramatic reenactment of a stagecoach robbery. The initial public response convinced Cody that a grander version of the show would be a great attraction across the country. He enlarged his cast, added buffaloes and Native Americans for greater authenticity, and staged an exciting Pony Express ride. Cody’s first national tour culminated with a successful engagement at New York’s Madison Square Garden. In 1885 Cody hired the great Sioux warrior and holy man Sitting Bull and sharpshooter Annie Oakley. His 1887 European tour caused a sensation in the Old World. Circus magnate James Bailey gained control of the company in 1894, though Cody remained with the show. The logistical expertise Bailey had gained in the circus business enabled the troupe to barnstorm the country with maximum efficiency. Cody’s success inspired competing shows such as the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch and Pawnee Bill’s Show. Reformed bandits Cole Younger and Frank James had a show that reenacted famous bank robberies.

Wild West shows survived until the 1930s. By then movies were the principal interpreters and purveyors of America’s frontier legends. The shows, however, had a lasting impact on American popular culture. They romanticized the frontier experience and immortalized the plainsmen who opened up the West. They glorified courage, resourcefulness, and personal freedom in a boundless land, but they also justified frontier violence by promoting negative stereotypes of Native Americans. Some modern critics contend that the spectacles simultaneously defamed and exploited their "Show Indians"; others note that the Show Indians welcomed opportunities to get away from oppressive reservations, travel the world, and enjoy a degree of economic independence. And, they add, by performing native dances, replicating their traditional village encampments, and reenacting heroic battles, Show Indians sustained for a time their cultural identities in the face of powerful pressures for assimilation.

If so, Show Indians would have been an exception, for popular entertainment in the latter years of the 19th century was, on the whole, an agency of assimilation. Vaudeville, for instance, provided an element of shared culture for people of diverse ethnicity, both on stage and in the audience. Show business during this period also operated on the principle that bigger is better, with shows and venues growing larger and more opulent. And, like other contemporary enterprises, the entertainment industry adopted a strategy of consolidation, often to the disadvantage of the performers. Finally, the rise of mass amusements marked the continuing decline of Victorianism and the notion that leisure activities should not merely amuse but also build character.

Further Information


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