

# Vaudeville and the American Dream

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By Max Vale

Vaudeville was an expressive, innovative, and quirky form of popular entertainment in America that spanned the turn of the twentieth century. Yet, vaudeville was more than mere entertainment for the American mass culture—it was a reflection of the rapidly changing waters of American life. In the era of vaudeville, from the early 1980s to the early 1930s, American enjoyed a time of unparalleled growth and urbanization, increasing diversity, and upward social mobility. These changes were both reflected in and shaped by vaudeville itself. As shown in *Vaudeville*, from the American Masters Series, as America grew, vaudeville became less risqué, showed even greater diversity of performers, and ushered in the age of stardom in entertainment. Vaudeville was a true actualization of the American Dream for the performers, patrons, and society surrounding it.

American vaudeville was performed by a “melting-pot” of entertainers of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Vaudeville had emerged from the minstrel shows of the mid-1800s, in which whites—and after the Civil War, blacks too—would wear blackface as overdramatized caricatures of black people, acting like buffoons to mock black culture. From this tradition, some vaudevillians continued to wear blackface in their acts, such as the preeminent black comedian, Bert Williams (1874-1922). His great successes in vaudeville, however, had strikingly positive effects for racial equality. As he gained wealth and popularity, he pushed racial boundaries, entertaining audiences while challenging racism. Similarly, vaudeville showcased a large immigrant population. Since the 1890s, flocks of Europeans had moved to America to find salvation in the American Dream. Many of these immigrants tried their luck on the vaudeville stage. As a result, many acts showcased foreign themes and diverse cultures. Audiences loved young Molly Picon, daughter of Polish immigrants, as she brought Yiddish theater to the American stage. Through humor and entertainment these shows increased positive exposure to the growing urban immigrant population in the United States, as well as to African Americans. In this way, vaudeville changed cultural perceptions of the “outsiders,” fostering acceptance instead of racism and bigotry.

Vaudeville did not only advance the welfare of minority groups but also acted to define *and* refine the American middle class. While industrialization and urbanization expanded the working class, huge progress in the labor movement began to transform it into a new middle class with time for leisure and money for spending. This population turned to vaudeville theaters for entertainment and social interaction. In response, theater owners like Benjamin Franklin Keith built lavish, opulent, and refined palaces for their variety shows. Keith especially understood that it was important to bridge the gap between “low” and “high” cultures in order to gain the patronage of the new, powerful middle class. At the same time, he sought to create family-friendly entertainment, less crude than that of the burlesque and minstrel shows. To accomplish this, Keith had to “clean up” his performers’ acts, as well as to create and enforce policies for patrons on how to act during shows. Vaudeville shows educated audiences about what behavior was acceptable for the middle class, acting as a vehicle for social progress and hierarchical definition.

At the same time as vaudeville was redefining the American middle class, it opened up new opportunities for a select few to climb up the social ladder. These vaudevillians rose to incredible heights of popularity and fame in the United States due to the success of their variety show acts.

Often starting as the children of low-class immigrants or poor urban youth, these famous few worked their way into the upper class, earning salaries many times greater than that of the average theater patron. And even more importantly, their climb to fame and success was highly visible to the American public, reinforcing the idea of upward social mobility in America. Furthermore, these performers created a culture of stardom that defines popular culture in America today. Where before musicians and entertainers had been treated as second-class citizens, children now vied for an opportunity to perform. Instruction manuals were even created to teach the secrets of how to become a vaudeville success. Vaudeville had opened the doors to Americans seeking fame and popularity.

With the advent of radio and motion picture, vaudeville slowly died, replaced by shows that could be delivered to the home. Yet, vaudeville left its mark on the American landscape. By challenging bigotry, racism, and discrimination, advancing social behavior, and creating a culture of stardom, vaudeville truly embodied the American Dream: equality of man and “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”



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