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"The Best Songs Came from the Gutters": Tin Pan Alley and the Birth of Manhattan Mass Culture

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Abstract

In the early twentieth century, the publishers of Tin Pan Alley revolutionized American music. Focused on the dissemination of a constantly changing set of attention-grabbing songs, leading companies dramatically expanded the market for popular compositions, generating hits that sold millions of copies of sheet music to customers across the country. While publishers aimed at this continental audience, their output was shaped by the urban context in which their businesses first emerged. During these years, local popularity was crucial to national success. As a result, firms sought to engage with new audiences throughout Manhattan, incorporating a host of social and ethnic groups into the structures of commercial entertainment. Over time, Tin Pan Alley's relationship to these groups—and the distinctive leisure spaces in which they gathered—would define its musical production. It was not simply that publishers molded songs to fit public taste. Rather, the industry and the broader world of commercial entertainment developed together. By exploring this business-influenced process of cultural change, it is possible to gain new perspective on the emergence of American popular song, as well as the consumption-driven dynamics remaking society in the Progressive Era in the United States.

Keywords: music; New York; Tin Pan Alley; cultural history; capitalism

Introduction

"The best songs came from the gutters in those days," recalled Edward Marks unabashedly. "In the '90s, a young publisher had to know his way about the night spots.… In his wanderings, he saw as broad a cross-section of New York as any man—even broader than the wine agents, because the song-plugger hit spots where champagne would have been considered an effeminate affectation."[1] Marks was a leading businessman of Tin Pan Alley, the Manhattan-based publishing industry that revolutionized American music at the turn of the twentieth century. Focused on the dissemination of a constantly changing set of easily accessible songs, the Alley's firms dramatically expanded the market for popular compositions in the United States, generating hits that sold millions of copies of sheet music to customers across the country.[2] "Practically inexhaustible," marveled the *New York Inquirer* in 1900, "is the desire on the part of the public for new popular songs. Never in modern history have so many songs been printed as at the present time."[3]

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To ensure a steady supply of material, publishers like Marks developed innovative compositional processes, creating new musical styles to better fit the needs of mass production.[4] "Writing a popular song is no longer a matter of inspiration," explained the *Los Angeles Times.* "There is about as little of [it] associated with the performance as there is with canning tomatoes."[5] The resulting wave of commercial music reoriented the nation's sonic culture around a new, rapidly-circulating mainstream.[6] "The popular song," explained one article, "is the most pervasive of all things that exist … In palaces and hovels it reigns with equal favor and is played, whistled, and sung with a fervor that knows no lapse until another entrancing tune comes to take its place."[7]

Moving across Manhattan, Marks worked to "plug" the latest compositions released by his firm.[8] He wasn't selling music—he was giving it away, attempting to create interest in songs that would eventually be translated into dollars and cents through the sale of sheet music.[9] Marks's promotional activities followed an intricate choreography crafted to fit the city's social geography.[10] "You had to make them sing it in the late joints … the minor German beer halls on the East Side, the backrooms of saloons like O'Flaherty's Harp," he explained. "You had to make them play it at Terrace Gardens, where the athletic clubs and benevolent associations held their refined balls. You had to make friends with variety stars who would launch your number at Koster and Bial's or Pastor's. Then in time you might rise from New York gutters to the New York first-floor … and the piano trade would be yours."[11] Such songs could then be picked up more broadly, bringing their publishers sales from communities throughout the country.[12] "It is well known," explained Theodore Dreiser in an article for *Metropolitan,* "that if a song can be made popular around New York City, it is sure to be popular throughout the country."[13]

While ultimately aiming at this continental market, the firms of Tin Pan Alley were defined by the urban context in which they operated.[14] Pushed to reach the broadest possible audience by economic necessity, publishers sought out potential customers throughout the city, incorporating a host of new social and ethnic groups into the structures of commercial entertainment. Understanding this process requires an examination of the influence exerted by an array of seemingly unlikely institutions and actors. Bribable orchestra leaders, rowdy claques, or prostitute-friendly bars—any of these could help make or break a composition, a career, or a business.[15] In the aggregate, such details left a decisive imprint on the evolution of American music, one that reflected the social predispositions, class politics, and racializing practices of the environments in which Manhattan's audiences encountered popular songs.[16]

In Marks's autobiography *They All Sang*, the publisher provides a detailed account of the remarkably diverse "cross-section" of New York he traversed while plugging in 1896. Using this journey as the basis for a broader exploration of the relationship between Tin Pan Alley and the city's rapidly-changing nightlife, it is possible to examine how these urban dynamics shaped the industry's approach to production and promotion. Doing so uncovers the processes that generated an era-defining form of mass entertainment, shedding new light on the structures of race, class, and culture embedded in American popular song.[17]

Scholarship focused on the development of the music industry has typically viewed Tin Pan Alley through a framework of rationalization and standardization.[18] Such research connects the processes of for-profit musical creation to broader changes in the organization of production working their way through turn-of-the-century American capitalism.[19] Echoing contemporary criticism, these accounts frequently describe the Alley as a place of commerce first and culture second, with publishers operating "song factories" in which employees churned out commoditized music with little regard for its

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aesthetic quality.[20] "What they knew least about was music and words," remembered publisher Isidore Witmark, "what they cared least about might be answered by the same phrase. They had discovered that there was money in popular song."[21] Employing a wide variety of promotional approaches to "exploit" compositions, publishers pushed vast audiences to embrace their commercial products.[22] "Making a little song succeed," explained the *New York Times,* "is often a formidable process resembling great economic movements on a systemic scale."[23]

While the paradigm of mass production helps to explain many of the Alley's operations, the comparison to industrialization fails to adequately address the specific dynamics that conditioned the creation of musical commodities.[24] Not simply contained within itself, the value of a song lay in the social relations that surrounded it. Deemed fashionable and on the upswing of popularity, it could produce immense income.[25] Unappreciated—or gone stale—and it was worth nothing. "In the case of any other line," argued songwriter and publisher Charles Harris, "the business can always be turned over and the original investment realized; but a popular song, once dead, is as dead as a doornail.… In the publishing game you start in business every three months."[26]

These dynamics were strengthened by the practices required to develop forms of mass culture prior to mechanically reproduced performances. In the absence of media like radio or film, the publishers of the 1890s were unable to singlehandedly plug a composition to popularity at the national level.[27] Instead, the theater provided Tin Pan Alley with its primary salesforce.[28] In the decades following the Civil War, ambitious managers developed popular forms capable of bringing together cross-class audiences throughout the country.[29] These organizations were built around booking offices, rationalized bureaus capable of effectively connecting theaters and touring companies.[30]

Attracted by this artistic and business power, performers teemed in New York's bars, restaurants, and concert-saloons, gathering in the hopes of finding lucrative and long-lasting work.[31] While the principal firms of Tin Pan Alley only briefly clustered in the blocks that gave the industry its name, their headquarters never strayed far from the city's major theaters—or the booking offices located near them (Figure 1).[32] Physical proximity to the nerve center of American entertainment opened vast new horizons of promotional possibility.[33] If a song was successful within this environment, it could be placed with a traveling performer or production.[34] Taken on tour for months or years, it would then be driven into the consciousness of the vast audiences that lay beyond the city.[35]

As a result, the crowds of Manhattan took on a double character. A target for Tin Pan Alley's compositions in their own right, they were also crucial for any attempt to bring those compositions to a national market.[36] Yet New York was definitively not a microcosm of the nation at large. Not only did it have a distinctive ethnic mixture and urban character, but it also boasted a well-developed tradition of commercial leisure tightly tied to its specific class politics, social aesthetics, and rampant red-light economy.[37] As Manhattan's audiences began to mediate the musical currents of the nation, these characteristics would come to play a crucial role in shaping the industry.

For much of the nineteenth century, public space had been defined by a strict vision of respectability that divided cities into areas where proper women could—or could not—go, a designation that carried with it a host of class-based implications.[38] However, as changes to both the labor force and the household economy pulled increasing numbers of women into public, these lines began to shift.[39] At the same time, the continued expansion of consumer culture enabled new expressions of personal identity among men and women from every social status.[40] The venues in which Tin Pan Alley's pluggers operated were at the forefront of these processes, both within the city and the broader nation.[41]

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Over time, Tin Pan Alley's relationship to these spaces—and the crowds that filled them—would define its cultural production.[42] It was not simply that publishers molded songs to fit public taste. Rather, the industry and the broader world of commercial leisure developed together. Popular music had long been divided between songs performed on the male-dominated stage and those intended for female-driven home consumption.[43] Tin Pan Alley's success in crossing this divide would help shape a new style of American entertainment. By exploring this business-influenced process of cultural evolution, it is possible to gain perspective, not merely on the emergence of American popular song, but into the broader set of social changes that revolutionized life in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.

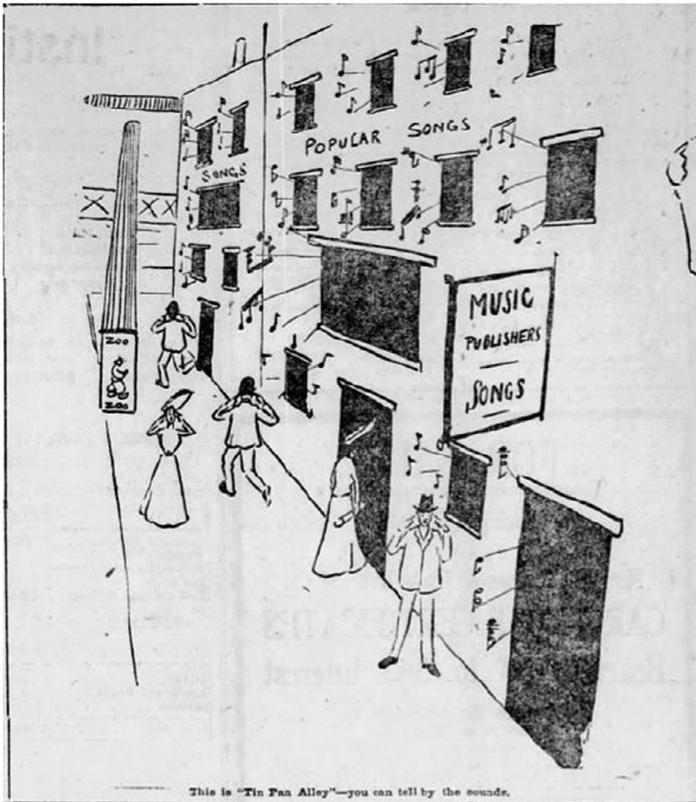

Figure 1. "Tin Pan Alley? Why It's The Place Where Popular Songs Come From," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 10, 1903.

Edward Marks was not much of a musician. He didn't play any instruments, and by his own admission, could carry a tune only a little further than a race horse "could carry the Empire State Building."[44] Born during the mid 1860s in Troy, New York, and raised in Manhattan, Marks started his career selling dry goods as a "notions peddler."[45] In 1890, hungry for the glamor of show business, he approached Frank Harding, a small-time publisher in Manhattan, and informed him that he wanted to "write a lyric."[46] Harding

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was an example of the pre-Tin Pan Alley approach to popular music. “A grand seigneur of jigs and coon songs,” he focused on fulfilling the desires of his local audience and the theatrical community that entertained them, without seeking large-scale distribution.[47] A major hit sold between twenty and thirty thousand copies; not insignificant, but likely not large enough to justify the expense of expansion or sustained advertisement.[48]

Harding connected Marks with Will H. Fox, a skilled pianist best known for his character “Paddywhiskie,” an Irish-themed lampoon of the famed Polish pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski.[49] Working with Fox, Marks produced the minor success “Break the News to Mother Gently” before heading back out on the road as a salesmen, where he began to incorporate Harding’s sheet-music as a sideline.[50] After scoring a more substantial seller with the maudlin “December and May,” the aspiring songwriter decided that “it was nice to write hits, but more profitable to publish them.”[51]

In 1894, while spending the night in Mamaroneck, New York, Marks fell in with Joseph Stern, another young traveling salesmen. Stern “sold neckties, while I pushed my [sewing equipment of] hooks, eyes, and whalebone,” wrote Marks. “Joe could play the piano with one hand and fake with the other like nobody’s business, but he hadn’t fooled around with the music end of the game in the same way I had dabbled with lyrics.”[52] “They got around a piano,” explained Leonard Marks, Edwards’s son, “and they wrote a song called, ‘The Little Lost Child.’”[53] The song, which told the story of a child, her discovery by a policeman who happened to be her long lost father, and the happy reunion of the previously scattered family, was the type of tear-jerking ballad immensely popular during the mid 1890s.[54] It came to the attention of theatrical stars Della Fox and Lottie Gibson, who helped drive enough sales to establish the business the two men named Joseph W. Stern and Co. (Figure 3).[55] Contemporary accounts help explain the song’s popularity. “As a sample of absolute simplicity it has probably few equals,” stated the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. “The music … [is] of that catchy and euphonous order that is really accepted and recognized by the masses.”[56]

For firms in this period, getting started was relatively easy. Overhead was low and there was little barrier to entry besides access to the social networks necessary to place compositions with performers. “We rented an office on Fourteenth street, near Second avenue, basement floor,” wrote Marks. “Our office furniture cost us one dollar and ten cents … [initially] we stored the printed copies of our one song under a bed in my home.”[57] While in many respects the early days of Joseph W. Stern and Co. followed the model of publishers like Harding, there were a few key differences. For one, the owners were composers rather than retailers, and therefore capable of producing the type of music they wanted to sell.[58] More importantly, they had gotten into publishing specifically for the purpose of selling such songs. Rather than serving an existing musical community, they would attempt to create new markets for their goods.[59]

The clearest expression of this approach was the young firm’s dedication to plugging. “Sixty joints a week I used to make,” boasted Marks. “Joe Stern, my partner, covered about forty.”[60] “To sing a song was to start the song on the road to possible fortune,” explained publisher Isidore Witmark, “In 1885 there were no phonographs, no gramophones, no radios, to duplicate simultaneously the singing of the piece. For that matter, long after the invention and commercialization of the phonograph, the singer would remain the great vehicle of publicity.”[61] Such activities fostered local popularity, strengthening both the aesthetic and business connections between Tin Pan Alley and Manhattan’s growing entertainment districts.[62] Providing a stream of material designed to appeal to the city’s audiences, publishers helped stoke the continued expansion of an array of bars, concert

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saloons, and variety halls, tying these venues to the products of a commercially-oriented culture industry.[63]

Tracking Marks as he moved across the city during an evening of plugging in 1897 offers a lens through which to examine these dynamics. Leaving his office on 20th Street around eight o'clock, the publisher headed downtown on the 3rd Avenue Elevated Line, accompanied by "Louis the Whistler," an employee whose role was to push the crowd into excitement whenever one of Marks's songs was sung.[64] Louis and Marks brought with them a stack of "chorus slips," sheets of paper with the words to the chorus of various songs printed on them. If things went well, the two planned to cajole, bribe, or hassle performers into singing one of the songs, and then pass out slips to the audience so that they could sing along. One chorus from the singer, one chorus with the help of Louis, and then, ideally, the crowd would join in on the third. From there the song would be launched permanently into their consciousness.[65]

The duo's first stop was the Atlantic Gardens, an establishment on the corner of the Bowery and Canal Street. The gardens were owned by William Kramer, a well-known businessman who had grown rich catering to a respectable audience of German families.[66] "After passing through the front restaurant on the Bowery, visitors emerged into a long rectangular hall with a high, delicately curved ceiling." There, "long wooden tables … formed sturdy, precise lines running back to front."[67] Challenging middle-class norms of the period, which tended to equate public consumption of alcohol with unchecked masculinity, and therefore rendered drinking spaces decidedly questionable for respectable women, nineteenth-century German-American culture saw little objectionable in mixed-gender groups imbibing together.[68] Indeed, as if to put a point on the differences that separated the Atlantic Gardens from its competitors, Kramer employed a female-only orchestra conducted by "Four-Bar Schmalz," an "old German with a European musical background."[69] While feminine beauty was presumably part of the ensemble's appeal, its meaning was structured by the larger cultural context, allowing the Atlantic Gardens to display a different vision of respectability than the more restrictive ideas held by the Anglo-American middle class.[70] Articulating alternate standards of public interaction and supporting them through success in the market, institutions like the Atlantic Gardens proved influential to the development of new forms of commercial leisure in Manhattan.[71]

Moving onward, Marks and Louis hustled uptown, stopping at three of the principal variety houses strung along the Bowery. While the genre had begun to move toward the style of disciplined respectability that would characterize its rebranding as vaudeville, variety shows still maintained a strong connection to working-class culture.[72] The National, the first of the three, had once been a theater at which respectable German working men and women would come to drink beer and talk politics.[73] By the time that Marks entered, the house had taken on a decidedly more proletarian and demonstrative cast, befitting the increasingly Eastern and Southern European populations settling in the Lower East Side.[74] Wrestling matches were occasionally held, as well as boisterous amateur nights at which aspiring performers strove to satisfy the demanding "gallery gods" of the upper seats, many of whom came well-armed with fruit and eggs.[75] On such nights, reported the *New York Times,* "the audience runs the house, and the manager and ushers are simply the exponents and executors of the public will."[76] Active audience engagement made it a perfect venue for plugging. The *New York Times* described the crowd as "helping out" a singer struggling with a popular ballad. "This is the way the … people manifest their disapproval of a vocal attempt. They simply sing the song themselves as a matter of self-protection."[77]

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Miner's Bowery, the next hall Marks and Louis visited, was part of the entertainment empire founded by Harry Miner, an impresario who owned multiple theaters, published a national dramatic directory, and managed several touring troupes (Figure 2).[78] Older and more established than the National, Miner's Bowery skirted the edge of respectability, making overt gestures aimed at fostering the types of female audiences associated with middle-class attendance.[79] Although a saloon was attached to the playhouse, it was kept separate, with its own entrance.[80] Mixing variety performances with spectacular melodramas, Miner's embraced a full range of working-class tastes without edging into sexual looseness. This policy, combined with the length of his tenure and evident abilities as a manager, made the theater one of New York's foremost variety halls for over two decades.[81] Despite its relative respectability, Miner's audience was far from quiescent. Multiple newspaper reports detail fights breaking out in the upper galleries, including one in which drunken sailors attempted to throw a policeman over the balcony.[82]

Venues such as the National and Miner's helped define an increasingly expansive form of working-class entertainment. Adapting older institutions to the changing demographics of the city, they provided a crucial space for a generation of Jewish and Italian American youths to explore—and define—the boundaries of a new commercial culture.[83]

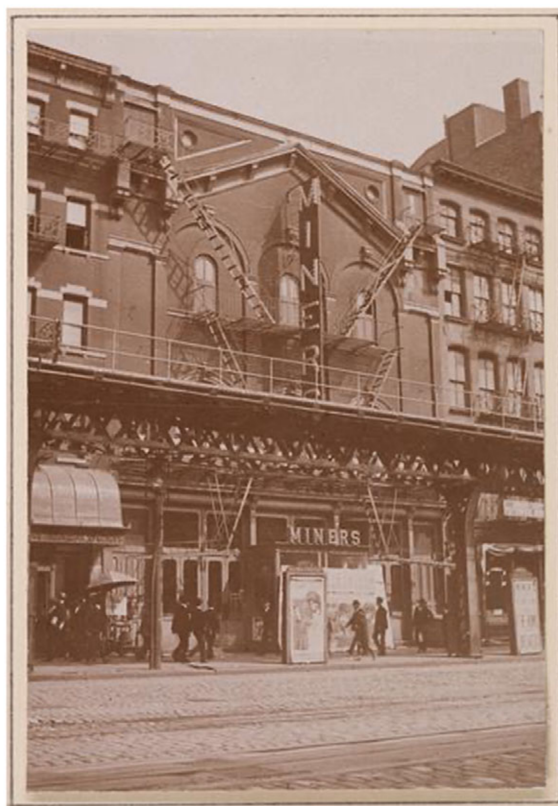

Figure 2. Outside of Miner's Bowery. George F. Arata, May 18, 1902. Museum of the City of New York [43.316.64].

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At all these venues, Marks attempted to gain personal access to the performers, sending cards to acquaintances playing that evening, cozying up to the doormen, and using his connections to get backstage.[84] If successful, he and Louis would then urge the singers to perform their company's music, promising that the compositions would allow them to win over the crowd.[85] On this night, the publisher was pushing "Elsie From Chelsea," a lovesick ditty sourced from England, but heard only hits from his competitors—Paul Dresser's "Banks of the Wabash" or Charlie Lawler's "Sidewalks of New York."[86] This didn't mean Marks was wasting his time. Even if an artist "had too many songs—and most of them [from] our competitors," they still could be reminded to come by the publisher's offices when they needed new material.[87] The relationships developed or maintained through these visits were crucial for the success of the firm. By providing performers with the latest compositions, the publishers offered them a valuable—and potentially career making—service.[88] Over time, such connections created the expectation that local singers would perform a constant stream of commodified material, strengthening the linkage between the commercial leisure of New York and the market-oriented productions of Tin Pan Alley.[89]

After these stops, Marks and Louis made their way uptown to Union Square. In doing so, they moved away from the world of working-class leisure long epitomized by the Bowery and toward the spaces of respectable, cross-class entertainment that surrounded the city's theater district.[90] They first dropped in on Blank's Winter Garden, which Marks described as "a quiet spot in the backwash of bright lit 14th street, where a girl could steer a bloke for a quiet talk. Blank, the owner, called it a family resort, but they were not the first families."[91]

Blank's was distinctive for the fact that it catered to men and women drinking together even when not part of a domestic unit, an activity widely understood to suggest prostitution.[92] In many respects, Blank's was the grey-market counterpart to the Atlantic

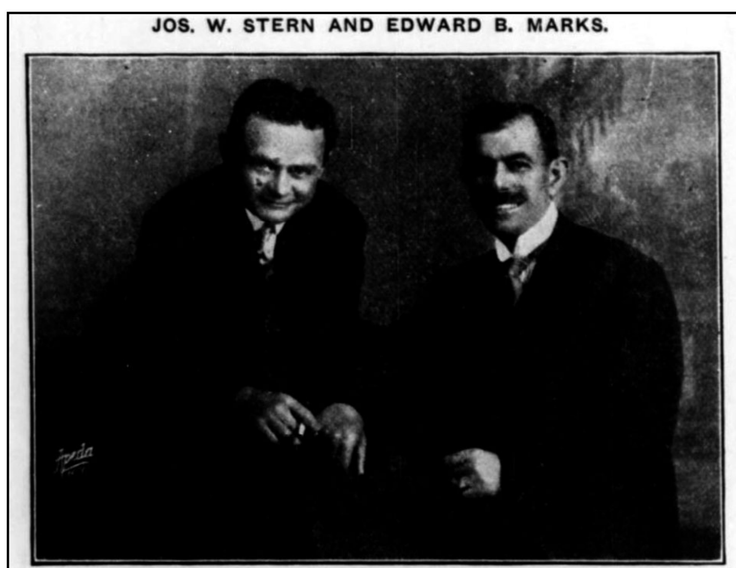

Figure 3. Stern and Marks in 1912. *Billboard Magazine*, April 14, 1912.

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Gardens—their twinned popularity reflects the changes in gender relations developing throughout the city's public spaces. While women were not allowed to enter without an escort and performers did not come down from the stage to flirt with audience members, Marks was correct about it being "a quiet place to steer a bloke."[93] In 1892, the New York *Sun* reported that a woman going by the name of Annie Morris had met a stockbroker, drunk with him at Blank's, and then "gone to a house on 13th street to rush the growler." When he left around 11:30pm, $60 was missing from his coat pocket.[94] It was certainly, as Alexander Williams, a police inspector, put it, of "somewhat mixed" character—"respectable and women of doubtful reputation go there."[95] According to Marks, it was precisely this "mixed" quality that made Blank's a "good plug." Performers, whether veterans or newcomers, knew that they were adjacent to the mainstream of popular entertainment in New York, but that a significant distance still separated them from their goal.[96] "Needing something to help them catch on in big time, they were always ready to try new material."[97] Unfortunately, instead of his compositions, Marks only heard a performance of "After The Ball," Charles Harris's still-reigning hit.

After Blank's, Marks and Louis moved on to Tony Pastor's (Figure 4). Pastor was a legendary figure in New York, and his house was "the song and dance center of the amusement world."[98] Realizing that he could profit by attracting respectable working-class women who might be reluctant to attend other variety halls, Pastor had spent decades rendering his theater safe for female audiences. During the 1880s, he slowly developed an increasingly upscale following, bringing together both working- and middle-class crowds. For Tin Pan Alley, Pastor represented the height of show business, providing direct access to the center of respectable commercial amusement.[99] Coming

Figure 4. 14th Street, showing Tony Pastor's, as well as the array of commercial and political activity surrounding it. Circa 1881. Museum of the City of New York [X2010.11.5291].

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after Blank's, Marks's attempt to plug at Pastor's reflected his confidence in the ability of his songs to cross the boundaries of respectability that structured the era's conceptualization of public space.[100]

Marks then moved across 14th Street to Theiss's Alhambra, another of the many concert saloons and theaters that filled the area. According to Marks, "the Alhambra definitely stood outside the pale of respectability that Blank's straddled." Somewhere between eighty and one hundred women worked the venue—"an average of over two girls a table"—approaching men and attempting to convince them to "treat" with rounds of "drinks or flowers."[101] Such conduct approached the boundaries of prostitution without (usually) crossing it. Maintaining a connection between commercial sex and male-dominated spaces of entertainment that had a lengthy history in New York, Theiss's also provided an example of the new forms of "stranger relationality" between men and women that would provide the basis for urban leisure in the early twentieth century.[102] Given its proximity to the main theatrical drag of 14th Street, Theiss's was frequented by out-of-town guests looking for women—a reflection of how increased linkages between "red light" and "white light" entertainment enabled the expansion of cross-class leisure.[103] According to Marks, "as a consequence, Theiss's was an especially good plug. It meant a lot to have our numbers carried out to the sticks in the subconsciousness of a tipsy country cousin. The train of association whereby 'Annie Rooney' eventually appeared on the piano in a small-town banker's house would have shocked many a fine community."[104]

Marks then headed west to the Tenderloin, a red-light district that lay beyond the confines of polite white society.[105] Nineteenth-century New York boasted a thriving culture of "sports," upper-class men who temporarily abandoned the bourgeois constraints of home and family to enjoy the pleasures of gambling, liquor, and women.[106] The Haymarket, which Marks entered next, was a notorious "resort" that catered to this audience (Figure 5).[107] While different political administrations, alternating between commitments to graft and reform, would either turn a blind eye to the venue or attempt to close it down, the Haymarket's basic identity held for close to three decades.[108] According to a 1903 description, "The dancing floor is small … around the floor are small tables.… Upstairs there are drinking rooms, and on three sides are galleries. At the east end of the hall is a stage where an orchestra plays the dance music, and at the west side is a promenade floor where another orchestra plays between dances. The place is ablaze with lights, and about midnight each night, when it is crowded with well-dressed people, it is a brilliant spectacle."[109]

When Marks visited, the Haymarket was run as a private club, with entrants asked to buy membership to whatever (fake) organization was currently holding its meeting. The venue offered middle-class patrons the thrill of the underworld. Genuine criminals frequented the place, both those working the crowd and others who were merely relaxing. Police raids would occasionally sweep through, arresting bartenders for illegally serving alcohol, and, having separated "the good from the bad women," jail those suspected of prostitution.[110] While accounts do little more than mention that an orchestra played throughout the night, it makes sense that Marks would push his compositions here. Both knowledgeable "sports" and "dead easy marks," as well as a host of working-class patrons, all frequented the establishment, providing the type of entertainment-loving audience that could help drive a song to popularity in a wider context.[111]

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Tenderloin was the center of Manhattan's rapidly growing Black community.[112] During these years, the intersection between "progressive" reform and corrupt policing had begun to push vice into predominantly

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Figure 5. Depiction of the Haymarket in full swing. *Sun* (New York), March 29, 1903.

Black areas, where the authorities turned a blind eye—and an open hand.[113] At the same time as the area's racialized identity helped ensure the survival of venues like the Haymarket, it also meant the proximity of a variety of other vital cultural institutions, from the "dive" saloons that fostered a generation of pianists to Marshall's Hotel, a gathering place for Black artists and intellectuals.[114] As the association between cross-class entertainment, commercial sex, and Black culture grew stronger among white revelers, it would help to generate new types of cross-racial interaction crucial to the commercial success of groundbreaking musical forms like ragtime and, later, jazz.[115]

These Black audiences seem to have existed beyond the ambit of commercial plugging, an exclusion that indicates the limits of Tin Pan Alley's expansive reconfiguration of respectable consumption. Despite a robust set of anti-discrimination laws, Progressive Era New York would see an active campaign to enforce sharp lines of segregation throughout the leisure industry.[116] While not yet in full effect, this hostility to interracial mixing grew alongside an increasing degree of social flexibility among an ethnically heterogeneous white public.[117] Building on the longstanding traditions of minstrelsy, such audiences embraced racialized music—whether it was Blackface-derived white caricature or innovative Afrodiasporic styles like ragtime.[118] As these latter genres gained popularity, Tin Pan Alley found ways to profit from their circulation while replicating discriminatory racial lines within the industry.[119] Although Black artists contributed many of the era's most popular hits, almost all would be restricted from the professional

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practices—and accompanying financial rewards—that were extended to white composers.[120]

Finally, at two or three in the morning, Marks finished his evening at the Abbey, "a gaudy concert hall" with "a colored poster of a women in tights [standing] near the entrance. In gilt letters on the glass is the name of Eugene E. Reilly."[121] Reilly, a "short, stout, red-faced and red-mustached man, with a heavy watch-chain and a big diamond" was an Irish businessman with political connections to the Tammany machine.[122] Songs were performed by female singers on a stage in the bar's "concert hall"—"The girl performers usually had steady admirers, who dropped in every morning at two or three o'clock and lent moral and vocal support to the choruses."[123]

Viewed as whole, Marks's itinerary takes in an extraordinary cross-section of popular entertainment in late nineteenth-century New York. Moving from the respectable German artisans of the Atlantic Gardens, it included immigrant bedlam at the National Theater, respectable working-class variety at Miner's Bowery, the borderline assignations of Blank's, and the show-business glitz of Pastor's. From the heights of respectability, it slid into the prostitute-heavy Alhambra, before traveling west to the crime-soaked Haymarket, ending in the corrupt Irish concert saloon of the after-hours Abbey. In making this journey, Marks was engaged in a style of cultural activity that elicits few comparisons in turn-of-the-century America.[124] No performer, no act, and no theater manager would have moved between such a variety of venues, crossing and re-crossing lines of class, ethnicity, respectability, and legality.

To win popular success, publishers like Marks not only needed to appear in all of these locations, but to do so regularly. Marks knew their doormen and performers, and called orchestra leaders and bartenders by name. He knew what songs might appeal to them. When making the decision to "exploit" a composition, he drew on this body of knowledge to determine whether a song could be successful and, if so, how. Marks wasn't the only one who valued such information. Harry Von Tilzer, a rival publisher, believed that his rise was linked to a mastery of such circuits. "Dunn [his employer] hadn't lived in the theatrical world as I had, didn't understand show people … by going out after the actor and making a friend of him, instead of waiting for him to come to the office, I had introduced a new method and new atmosphere."[125] Julius Witmark, of M. Witmark & Sons, was attributed a similar skill by his brother Isidore. "A public performer acquainted with the taste of the people in all sections of the country, [Julius] developed into that most valuable of men … a hit picker."[126] Through his experience of what made a song go over, Julius shaped the compositions his company published. "He knew exactly how to build a hit song," recalled his son. "I'd hear him say … 'if we just did this, or did that …' and then boom, what was a pedestrian song to begin with turned out to be something unusual and hit like."[127]

Repeated day and night for decades, the requirements of song promotion forced the entrepreneurs who built Tin Pan Alley into a detailed exploration of the ideas and practices of class, gender, consumption, and race at precisely the moment those structures began to shift under the pressures of commercial leisure.[128] In addition to being "the song focus of Gotham," venues like Tony Pastor's also stood at the vanguard of a new form of American entertainment.[129] "The people of New York were indebted to … Pastor," explained one commentator, "for providing a theater where a man could take his wife and family to enjoy a clear and wholesome variety show."[130] As time went on, leisure establishments such as dancehalls and amusement parks expanded these possibilities, enabling looser, more individualistic forms of experience.[131] Organized at the boundaries of Victorian respectability, such spaces provided New York's immigrant workers the

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opportunity to explore the outlines of middle-class culture. In doing so, they began to alter it, as the evident potential of this vast new market pushed entrepreneurs to stretch long-standing cultural modes.[132]

At the same time, middle- and upper-class New Yorkers also developed new avenues to engage with urban society. Led by knowledgeable guides, "slumming parties" began to venture down the island of Manhattan, visiting ethnic enclaves such as little Italy, the Jewish "ghetto" of the lower east side, and Chinatown.[133] By the turn of the twentieth century, the popularity of slumming had generated a set of commercial spaces that catered specifically to such excursions (Figure 6).[134] In Chinatown, this led the Eastern European Jew "N*****" Mike Salter to open the Pelham Café at No. 12 Pell Street, a location blocks away from the Bowery.[135] Founded in 1904, the café soon became a well-known destination, hosting local pickpockets, gangsters, and criminals as well as a constant stream of uptown visitors.[136] Music played a crucial role. "It is long and narrow," wrote a

Figure 6. According to the *Washington Post*, "drunks" and cab drivers singing a song were the best indicator of its popularity. Such accounts reflect the impact of the new popular music on daily life throughout the United States. "The song that the 'Drunk' like to sing is the song that's going to be popular," *Washington Post*, May 12, 1907.

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reporter for *The World*. "The professor sits at the ragtime box in the corner. Tables line the walls, and the centre of the soiled pine floor is reserved for spielers."[137] These "spielers" were the singing waiters Bullhead and Izzy (soon to be Irving) Berlin, who worked to "entertain the patrons of the place with song and recitation" while taking orders and delivering beer.[138] Linking middle-class adventure to both ethnic self-articulation and a nationally-circulating entertainment culture, the Pelham Café—and a host of similar venues throughout the city—lay the groundwork for an era of respectable, cross-class mass entertainment. Following the lead of entrepreneurs like Salter, businessmen gradually created a variety of performance-defined venues—cabarets, rooftop gardens, "lobster palaces," and ballrooms among them—in which patrons could experience this new formulation of public life.[139]

In the attempt to reach audiences wherever they gathered, Tin Pan Alley inserted its products into a remarkable array of urban spaces. Pluggers appeared on the backs of wagons on 14th Street and in Times Square.[140] They sang in "rathskellers" or between silent movie reels.[141] They performed in parks and at football games and race tracks.[142] They took over department store music counters, and their tunes dominated the cafes and cabarets of Manhattan.[143] Music became integral to such environments, helping to define the urban consciousness of the era.[144] "The newcomer," wrote one reporter of Coney Island, "will try in vain to collect his wits as the boisterous strains from a hundred brass bands, the maddening mechanical music of countless merry grounds and the everlasting rag-time of a thousand pianos all join together in one frightful nightmare of discord."[145]

At the same time as it soundtracked such experiences, commercial music was also defined by them. In and around New York, a tight, information-dense loop led from song to audience and back. "Ballads and snatches are made of its own vernacular and, at the same time, make it over in turn," wrote critic Isaac Goldberg. "Tin Pan Alley at once follows the taste of the crowd and creates that taste. The influence … is strangely reciprocal; it is a living circuit in which the interchange is constant."[146]

This system did not last. By the early teens, Tin Pan Alley had grown more centralized, pulling promotional operations away from the streets and into the controlled spaces of publishers' professional offices.[147] While local hits still provided a useful boost, firms began to rely on direct payments to traveling performers, spending tens of thousands of dollars to place their songs with vaudevillians.[148] Such developments detached plugging from the social environments with which it was previously enmeshed, attenuating the relations that had linked songwriting to New York's dynamic urban currents.

Despite the relatively limited span in which the gutters of New York defined the possibilities of popular music, this period left an enduring mark. "Songwriting all depends on the public," Berlin explained in 1910.[149] This musical public was, as much as any composition, a creation of Tin Pan Alley.[150] "The whole art," stated Berlin, "lies … in making it so simple that the artiste can sing it, a baby can sing it, anybody and everybody can sing it. Its appeal is to the masses—not to the classes."[151] Songs had long been pitched to "the masses"—but they had never previously relied on active engagement from such an astonishing array of Americans. Carried throughout the nation by the vast theatrical networks of vaudeville, the resulting New York-stamped music would become the lingua franca of American pop.[152] In its democratic possibilities—and violent racial exclusions—it opened the door to twentieth-century mass culture.

As a generation of songwriters trained in saloons and vaudeville halls worked their way through the industry, they continued to call on the knowledge they had earned during

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their years in these environments.[153] "It is the public singer who introduces a song, who stamps upon it his interpretation, who attaches it to his personality," explained Isaac Goldberg. "It is not to be wondered at, then, that so much of our popular music … should have been written by actors or song and dance men."[154] When former pluggers such as Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, or George Gershwin—as well as performers such as L. Wolfe Gilbert or Harry Von Tilzer—wrote, their output reflected these experiences.[155] "A waiter learns an awful lot about people," Berlin recalled about his days at the Pelham Café. "He gets a course in advanced psychology that it takes a lot of living to get any other way."[156]

Accounts of Tin Pan Alley have often told a sharply bifurcated story: on one side, the mass-produced pablum of "The Little Lost Child"; on the other, the elegantly cultured genius of Jerome Kern or Cole Porter.[157] Examining the networks that linked publishers and composers to the diverse environments of New York highlights a broader array of settings and actors crucial to the development of the American music industry. Including spaces such as the Pelham Café, the the Alhambra, or Blank's Saloon—as well as the crowds that filled them—within this history helps to explain the extraordinarily vitality of the commercial forms produced during this period. Such a move complicates our understanding of the emergence of mass culture more generally, calling into question top-down narratives that privilege managerial innovation as well as consumption- or performance-focused studies that celebrate ground-level creativity. While businesses like Tin Pan Alley functioned by exploiting the social energy circulating around them for profit, they did so by incorporating and then transmitting values, experiences, and meaning shaped by the diverse audiences that served as both customers and collaborators.

Although pluggers focused on such audiences, these activities carried songs—and the social relations embedded within them—far beyond their boundaries. "Through the silent stretches of the sky," wrote the *Washington Post,* "vying with the siren notes of a tugboat or the far off clamor of a fire engine, a female voice and bass accompanying rise … in the touching strains of 'There's A Hot Time in The Old Town To-Night.'[158] Purchased at a music counter and performed in the parlor, the same tunes left an equally distinct impact on the domestic existence. "At evening time you get the assurance that music … is the favorite diversion of nine-tenths of the American people," complained one reporter. "The Pianola, The Aeolian, all the ready-made means of making it … give out their volume of sound from the different stories of innumerable apartment houses."[159]

Such accounts draw our attention to the relationship between the business practices that structured Tin Pan Alley and the wider shifts in experience and identity developing across turn-of-the-century America.[160] The subject of innovative scholarship exploring everything from the corporate reconstruction of capitalism and the shifting aesthetics of mass consumption to the struggles against new racial regimes or the reconfiguration of gender, the historiography of the period has suffered, if anything, from a surfeit of transformative dynamics and explanatory mechanisms.[161] Despite this, without any agreement on a definition of—or even the need for—the concept of American modernity, the insights generated by this work have all too easily remained fragmented. As a result, research is frequently unable to connect (for example) the new forms of working-class identity emerging within cities to the boundary-pushing culture of modernist artists or join the radical economic changes of industrialization to the sonic innovations of ragtime.

Music could offer a fruitful avenue forward. Drawing inspiration from sound studies, a discipline that has been described as necessarily "grounded in a sense of its own partiality," it might be possible to view popular song as a connective tissue capable of enabling accounts that link these seemingly disparate narratives.[162] Played in the White House by William McKinley's daughter or overheard in the street outside a Greenwich

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Village café, a song could also be part of the flurry of brightly colored consumer goods greeting a young woman from a small Midwestern town in the local dry-goods shop—or on her first trip to a Chicago department store.[163] The history of a single composition does not exhaust the dynamics embedded in such moments. It does, however, put them in counterpoint. Developing a granular reconstruction of the business-mediated mechanisms of cultural transmission offers one way to bridge the gap between individual lived experience and large-scale economic, social, and intellectual change in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. By engaging with such analysis, it might be possible to better explain the world that Edward Marks watched coming into being, night after night in the streets of Manhattan.

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